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Recommendations on the simplification of the application forms for youth worker mobilities in Key Action 1 in Erasmus+

Youth work is a challenging task. In addition to the main activity of working with young people, youth workers face numerous bureaucratic demands regarding cooperation with public funding. The more extensive these requirements become, the less time is left for the actual work. We evaluated a large number of feed-backs from applicants working in the Youth field and examined the content of the application form for youth worker mobilities in Key Action 1 in Erasmus+ Youth in Action. Our findings are that there are many possibilities for simplification and for reducing redundancies in the questions asked. By simplifying the application documents, Erasmus+ could increase the time the professionals have available and strengthen youth work.

The following recommendations provide a detailed picture of how a thorough simplification of the application form for youth worker mobilities in KA 1 in Erasmus+ Youth in Action could be achieved.

I General recommendations

The following recommendations apply to the entire application form.

1. Technical difficulties

In the last 12 months, there were considerable technical difficulties before the application deadlines were reached which led inter alia to data losses. Two times the application deadlines had to be extended for a short time as an emergency solution.

This led to significant delays in application evaluation and approval. This scenario occurred, for example, around the application deadline of October 2018. Despite the official start of the project on 1st of January 2019, beneficiaries did not receive their funding commitments until the 7th of January 2019.

Recommendation: The technical issues have to be resolved by the European Commission.

2. Application processing between the partner organisations

Projects for youth worker mobilities need to have at least two partner organisations from two different countries. This should also be taken into account with regard to the application procedure. So far, there are only limited possibilities to work on the application at the same time or via several accesses. Therefore, applicants are forced to find creative solutions and to invest a lot of time and effort to coordinate the texts among their partners.

Recommendation: Technical solutions should be fostered to allow for applicants and their partners to work in parallel from different desktops on the same application form and to allow to visibly track the changes.

3. Consistency of language

The application form is currently not completely available in the respective MS language. If applicants select for example "German" from the language settings, a form will be displayed that mixes questions in German and English.

Recommendation: Provide for application forms which are fully available in one specific language. Application forms should be available in all official EU languages.

4. Numbering of questions

The application form contains many questions. Unfortunately, the questions are currently not numbered. Therefore, users lose overview very quickly.

Recommendation: We recommend to number all questions and to indicate the different sections "Participating institutions", "Project description", "Preparation" etc.

5. Availability of application forms

We usually recommend to start preparing applications as early as possible. The fact that application forms are often only provided close to the application deadline represents a serious obstacle to timely preparations. Youth workers wishing to apply in April should ideally begin processing the application form as early as December. Due to the short notice long-term preparation is currently not possible.

Recommendation: The publication of the program guide marks the annual start of the program. At that time the application forms should ideally be published for all three application deadlines of the whole program year.

6. Definitions

Many questions in the application form use terms such as "impact", "result", "project", "activity" or "project management", which have their own meaning in the context of the program.

The definitions of these terms vary very much according to the user's fields of work. The funding body should provide definitions to clarify the meaning of the terms in the specific contexts.

Recommendation: The application documents should contain a glossary with clear definitions of key terms.

7. Easy Resubmission of applications

Since the refusal rates are high, it is often the case that applications are resubmitted in the next application round. The online forms require to re-type the whole text in the new application form even if only the answers to a few questions need to be re-formulated.

Recommendation: The technical systems should allow for the duplication of the refused application and for adjusting it.

II Special recommendations

The following recommendations refer to individual questions or sections of the application form. With the intention of avoiding duplication or ambiguity we would like to demonstrate which questions in the application form could be reformulated or merged. Many of the questions in the document are only visible when actual processing is in progress and input is provided by the user. In the blank form, the application forms provide the impression of being very brief.

1. Sections on "Project description" and "Participating institutions"

The section "Project Description" consists of three questions. Question 3 reads as follows:

„Please provide further information specifically on the activities and youth work done by your organisation and the partner organisations involved in Youth Worker's mobility (What are the target groups? Which methods are used? Etc.). Please describe how the project meets the needs and objectives of both your organization and your partners."

In the section "Participating Institutions", the organisation writing the application has to be presented. Question 2 reads as follows:

"What are the activities and experience of the organisation in the areas relevant for this application?"

This question overlaps in substance with Question 3 from the section "Project description".

Recommendation: Question 2 from the section "Participating bodies" is also included in Question 3 in the section "Project description". We therefore recommend deleting Question 2 of the section "Participating bodies".

2. Section on "Preparation"

The section on preparation encompasses three questions:

1. "How will the practical and logistic matters of each planned activity be addressed (e.g. travel, accommodation, insurance, safety and protection of participants, visa, social security, mentoring and support, preparatory meetings with partners etc.)? Please also specify how the tasks will be shared among partners."
2. How will you address quality and management issues (e.g. setting up of agreements with partners, learning agreements with participants, etc.)?
3. "How do you intend to cooperate and communicate with your project partners and other relevant stakeholders?"

A detailed examination of these questions and an evaluation of practical experiences in the preparation of applications reveal that the three questions require answers of similar or identical content.

Recommendation: We recommend to merge these three questions into one question. The answer should be a maximum of 5000 characters.

3. Section on "Participants"

The first two questions in this section read as follows:

1. "Please describe the profile of the participants that will be involved in the activity and how the participants have been or will be selected."
2. "Please provide information on the involvement of participants from the country of the receiving organization even if no funding is requested for them?"

Recommendation: Question 2 of the section "Participants" should be deleted as there should be no distinction between the participants of the sending and hosting organizations in the selection and involvement in the project. The answer to Question 1 is therefore already contained in the answer to Question 2. A new, separate query is not necessary.

4. Sections on "Participants" and "Impact"

The section on "Participants" contains the following question:

1. Which learning out-comes or competences (i.e. knowledge, skills and attitudes/behaviors) are to be acquired/improved by participants in the activity? Please particularly describe the skills and competence applicable to youth work practice.

The section "Impact" begins with the following questions:

2. What is the expected impact on the participants, participating organisation(s) and other target groups?
3. "Please precise the impact of the youth workers on the participants' daily work with young people."

For the applicants the terms "learning outcomes" and "impact" are not clearly distinguishable. Already in the section "Project description" there is a question on the "objectives" of the project. The terms "learning outcomes", "impact" and "objectives" can have very different or identical meanings. Without further definition a clear distinction is difficult. Questions 1 and 3 overlap in content.

Recommendation: We strongly recommend to provide clear and precise definitions of the terms "objectives", "impact" and "outcomes". (see general recommendation no. 6)

Question 3 should be deleted due to the overlapping content with Question 1.

5. Section "Summary"

Erasmus+ applications always end with the summary of the main content. In the application documents for 2019, three texts with a maximum of 5,000 characters each are requested for the summary.

Recommendation: We recommend to request one single text of 5000 characters' maximum which should suffice here.