

“Dare and care to invest in the future”

COMECE contribution to the consultation on EU's next long-term budget (MFF) - EU funding for cross-border education, training and solidarity, youth, media, culture, and creative sectors, values, and civil society

In May 2025, COMECE Secretariat submitted the following contribution to the [open public consultations on the EU's next long-term budget](#) (Multiannual Financial Framework - MFF), as part of its mission of dialogue in the context of [Art. 17 TFEU](#), in the thematic areas of culture, education, training and youth. The content of this contribution is based on the input received by the members of the COMECE [Commission on Culture and Education](#) and the [COMECE Youth Platform](#). The contribution was updated in the context of the [July 2025 Commission's proposal of the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034](#), in particular of the proposed budget for Culture and Education.

1. The importance of supporting EU programmes and increasing funding in Culture, Education and Youth

The current challenges faced by the European Union, together with the rise of concurrent global powers, require readiness to assume a role of leadership in the world. However, a narrative of growth, competitiveness and employability alone risks excluding an important aspect of education and training: such as, the **integral development of the person**. More than ever, policies and programmes concerning Education, Youth and Culture must aim at the integral development of each human being, addressing all dimensions of life and all sorts of skills and competences.

Europe's key educational and cultural programmes - such as *Erasmus+*, *Horizon Europe*, *Creative Europe*, and the *European Solidarity Corps* - have become essential **pillars of European cooperation, identity, and innovation**. They do more than promoting schemes of mobility or cultural exchange: they actively support the EU's strategic priorities of competitiveness, democracy and security. At a time when European values such as dignity of all people and the rule of law are being called into question

by several Member States, standing up for these values becomes even more important. However, if education and culture programmes face an uncertain future due to persistent underfunding, strengthening financial support and commitment cannot be delayed any longer. For instance, currently, only 0.2% of the 2021-2027 EU budget is allocated to culture. This minimal share stands in stark contrast to the **central role that cultural exchange plays in building inclusive societies, fostering civic participation, and preparing Europe's youth for the challenges of a rapidly evolving world**. The recently proposed 2028-2034 MFF has increased this amount, foreseeing the creation of a new programme, AgoraEU, worth €8.6 bn, which would entail merging the *Creative Europe* programme (€2.44 bn in current MFF) and *Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme - CERV* (currently €1.5 bn). Although the proposed budget witnesses an increase, civil society and cultural organisations have underlined that it is the minimum to sustain the European cultural sector, calling for the institutions to strengthen the budget in next months' negotiations, and ensuring the **autonomy of a separate and defined budget line dedicated to culture**.

Feedback gathered from the Commission on Culture and Education and the COMECE Youth Platform underscores this concern. Participants identified **urgent investment needs** in study and training mobility, youth and sport exchanges, researcher mobility, cross-border collaboration among educational institutions and businesses, and greater support for teachers and trainers, including programmes aimed at adults, e.g. Erasmus+ Adult Education. These are not secondary priorities - they are essential tools for strengthening Europe's social fabric and ensuring future generations can thrive and contribute meaningfully to the Common Good. The recent proposal for a new 2028-2034 Erasmus+, despite its **slight budget increase of 50%** (from €26 bn to €41 bn), may **fall short of expectations** in the sector and for the Union's policy goals. Although the Commission has not significantly changed the structure of the programme, taking into account **increased participation, inflation and new programme actions**, as well as the **merge between the programme and the *European Solidarity Corps***, the projected budget is significantly reduced. In addition, the latest [evaluation of the programme](#), recommends expanding Erasmus+'s reach, thereby ensuring it supports greater inclusiveness, and making it more flexible and sustainable. Erasmus+ beneficiaries and education institutions fear that the **role of the EU Council to revise MFF allocations downwards** might have an impact on the actual increase of funds granted to Erasmus+ in the near future. As we enter the MFF negotiations, in order to secure Europe's strategic goals, continued and stronger EU investment in education, mobility, and cross-border cooperation is not optional - it is essential.

2. More investments for a stronger support of EU Member States

EU investment in education, mobility, and cross-border cooperation remains **crucial for addressing the challenges** highlighted in the consultation and for ensuring tangible progress across Member States. Targeted funding in these areas directly supports the development of skills, enhances institutional capacity, and increases **access to quality learning opportunities, especially in isolated regions with fewer resources**.

EU financial support plays a critical role in **complementing national and local efforts**. It enables educational institutions and networks to expand the reach of their programmes, improve service quality, and engage a more diverse range of participants. In particular, **cross-border cooperation** benefits significantly from EU-level coordination and funding, as national budgets often lack the flexibility or scope to cover international participation equitably. Without this support, participation tends to skew toward better-resourced countries, reducing the representativeness and effectiveness of such initiatives. Moreover, EU funding helps **align national education strategies with broader EU goals**, particularly in areas like **digital transformation, inclusion, sustainability and innovation**. Where certain priorities may not receive sufficient attention at the local level, EU programmes can serve both as a financial and a strategic lever to ensure consistency and long-term impact. By investing in these areas, the EU strengthens the **overall cohesion and prosperity of the Union**, while **promoting equal access to opportunities across its diverse regions**.

3. What priorities for the next MFF in Culture, Education and Youth?

Negotiations on the 2028-2034 MFF represent an opportunity to invest in culture, education and youth and thereby improve the lives of all citizens. Initiatives that would improve cooperation and mobility in the areas of **education and training** should focus on **learners' and teachers' mobility, non-formal education** through volunteering and solidarity processes, professional development of teachers and, in higher education, **alliances of European universities** and joint master's degrees. Persistent issues of **education disparities and underachievement** in certain EU regions underscore the importance of funding for education and training in programmes and instruments (e.g. the European Social Fund+ and the European Regional Development Fund). As an example, Southern regions in Italy still experience challenges of underachievement: 42% of pupils lack sufficient reading skills and 53% underachieve in numerical skills, against 30% and 38% at national level – a gap mainly caused by early school leaving and dropouts. A **higher share of funding and budget dedicated to underachievement** and its socio-economic causes would be beneficial for closing the education gap between developed and

underdeveloped regions in Member States. In this context, **non-formal education providers** (among them, many Church organisations), which work for the education of adults, oftentimes from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, should be better formally and financially recognised.

In the areas of **culture and the creative sector**, forward-looking actions are linked to European cooperation projects involving cultural and creative organisations from different countries, especially on heritage protection, the creation of pan-European networks of culture and creative organisations and cross-border collaboration in media content creation, development and production. In the broader area of information and media, the **creation of more spaces for effective public debate**, as well as the setup of **tangible actions against disinformation** should be enhanced, aiming to foster citizens' access to quality content. This also applies to information about religions and is exemplified by an education project about disinformation in the media space conducted by the Catholic University of Croatia, addressing the [*Critical Analysis of Disinformation on Religious Topics*](#). The project has been jointly implemented by the Catholic University of Croatia, the Croatian Catholic Radio and the Croatian Society of Catholic Journalists since September 2023. Considering the increasing polarisation of some parts of our societies, **more accessible funding for programmes targeting religious literacy** should be boosted. Along the same line, funding for social cohesion should be strengthened, for instance in the case of minority groups such as Roma people. The "Roma Educational Community", for example, is an initiative with Roma children, familiarising children to Roma history, identity, tradition and culture, as well as to peers from other Roma ethnic and linguistic groups in Croatia. This increases healthy self-awareness and lifestyles, introducing them to religious education and catechetical work and motivating them to accept school obligations and education.

Stronger support to local grassroots organisations and entities – such as **parishes, Church associations and communities** – would enhance the protection and promotion of EU values in broader communities and civil society. **Exchanges of good practices and mutual learning** are still considered to be one of the best ways to face common challenges and make change happen on the ground. In some Member States, **EU programmes' support would work best if tailored to the current challenges faced at the regional or local level**, for instance, that of [*migrants' integration*](#): more programmes facilitating the integration of migrant workers and their families into society – e.g., training and language learning courses – could foster social cohesion and spur tangible results. Building on the vision of a European community through cross-border education and training, as well as enlarging cross-border collaboration in research programs and empowering youth is of utmost importance. Allowing youth

to strengthen existing initiatives and create new cross-border ones, even by **working intergenerationally**, would result in a huge benefit for cultural and creative assets, as towards empowering the mental health and resilience of young Europeans.

4. A more efficient and flexible budget

The new MFF should reinforce the action of Member States in the cultural, education and youth areas, becoming more effective and efficient, for instance, by applying common rules, timelines and eligibility criteria to all relevant EU funds, prioritising projects with high EU added value, all the while simplifying access to beneficiaries and applicants, e.g. **simplification of Erasmus+** in reporting timelines and shorter application forms for both small organisations and consortia, especially for short projects. This latter aspect is particularly important for organisations applying for EU programmes, as different and often complex fund-specific and compliance rules discourage many of them to apply, often decreasing the number of new organisations taking part in EU programmes and benefitting from them. In particular, **youth organisations** active at the local, regional and national level, already dealing with small budgets and staff shortages – usually because of their volunteering nature – **struggle to apply for funding**. If administrative burdens increase, it would be to the detriment of the young people such organisations are working for and with. An additional concern is the **insufficient alignment of EU funding programmes with national policies**, which risks creating imbalances between EU and national actions on the policy areas of education, culture and youth. Flexibility is a pivotal dimension for better budget allocations in times of crises and urgency. Although the new MFF proposes indeed more flexibility in the National and Regional Partnership plans, it fails to specify the framework for such flexible allocations. **Flexibility should not come to the detriment of long-term and forward-looking investments** in the educational, youth and cultural sectors, for the sake of sustainable projects and a foreseeable future for organisations and stakeholders.

5. Investing in the future

Especially in the next steps of the overall negotiations until 2027, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the EU are called to dare to take investments in Education, Culture and Youth to the next level, ensuring the Union can provide a **favourable and socially cohesive environment for all its citizens** to learn, train, create, innovate and become individuals aware of their identity, culture and indispensable role for the Common Good.