Annual Activity Report 2023

DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR EDUCATION, YOUTH, SPORT AND CULTURE

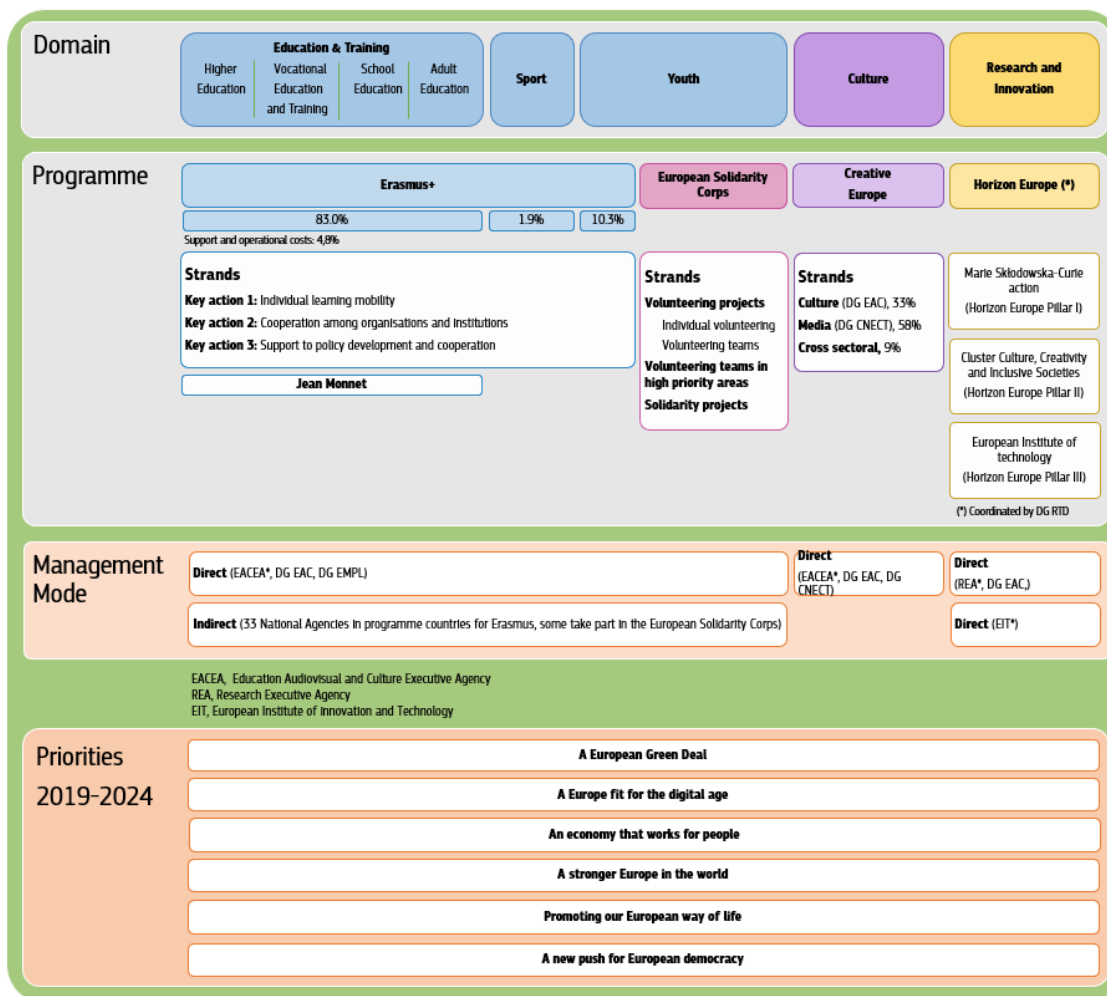# Contents

DG EAC IN BRIEF

In line with the 2020-2024 Strategic Plan setting out the vision for a five-year period, and as highlighted in Commissioner Ivanova's mission letter, **DG Education, Youth, Sport, and Culture** contributes in particular to two general objectives of the European Commission: to *Promoting the European way of life,* in matters relating to education, culture, youth and sport, and to *A Europe fit for a Digital Age,* in matters relating to digital education, research and innovation. In addition, through different initiatives and actions in its portfolio, DG EAC contributes also to all other headline ambitions, including, building on the international dimension of our policies and programmes, to a *Stronger Europe in the World.*

DG EAC **develops policies and actions** in the above-mentioned areas and fosters cooperation with Member States, with the objective of advancing equity, excellence and agility in education systems; promoting culture as a catalyst for European values; stimulating competitive research and innovation; empowering young people to become active citizens in democratic life, developing the European dimension in sport and strengthening international cooperation.

As illustrated below, **DG EAC** furthermore contributes to a **knowledge-based Europe** that reconciles a **competitive economy** and an **inclusive society**, while addressing both the necessary **green transition** and **digital transformation**.

Domain

Education & Training				Sport	Youth	Culture	Research and Innovation
Higher Education	Vocational Education and Training	School Education	Adult Education				

Programme

Erasmus+	European Solidarity Corps	Creative Europe	Horizon Europe (*)
83.0% — 1.9% — 10.3% — Support and operational costs: 4,8%			

Erasmus+ Strands
Key action 1: Individual learning mobility
Key action 2: Cooperation among organisations and institutions
Key action 3: Support to policy development and cooperation
Jean Monnet

European Solidarity Corps Strands
Volunteering projects
 Individual volunteering
 Volunteering teams
Volunteering teams in high priority areas
Solidarity projects

Creative Europe Strands
Culture (DG EAC), 33%
Media (DG CNECT), 58%
Cross sectoral, 9%

Horizon Europe
Marie Skłodowska-Curie action (Horizon Europe Pillar I)
Cluster Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Societies (Horizon Europe Pillar II)
European Institute of technology (Horizon Europe Pillar III)
(*) Coordinated by DG RTD

Management Mode

Erasmus+	European Solidarity Corps	Creative Europe	Horizon Europe
Direct (EACEA*, DG EAC, DG EMPL)		**Direct** (EACEA*, DG EAC, DG CNECT)	**Direct** (REA*, DG EAC,)
Indirect (33 National Agencies in programme countries for Erasmus, some take part in the European Solidarity Corps)			**Direct** (EIT*)

EACEA, Education Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency
REA, Research Executive Agency
EIT, European Institute of Innovation and Technology

Priorities 2019-2024
- A European Green Deal
- A Europe fit for the digital age
- An economy that works for people
- A stronger Europe in the world
- Promoting our European way of life
- A new push for European democracy

DG EAC ensures the strategic implementation of **3 EU flagship programmes – Erasmus+** with an estimated budget of around EUR 26.2 billion ([1]) for the period 2021-2027 complemented by about EUR 2.2 billion from the EU's external instruments, the **European Solidarity Corps** with an estimated budget of EUR 1 billion for the period 2021-2027, and **Creative Europe** with an estimated budget of EUR 2.44 billion ([2]) for the period of 2021-2027 – while also contributing to the implementation of Horizon Europe through the **Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions** with an estimated budget of EUR 6.6 billion for the period 2021-2027 and the **European Institute of Innovation and Technology**, with EUR 3 billion.

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[1] The Erasmus+ programme budget is made of EUR 24.574 billion in current prices as part of the new MFF (2021-2027) and an additional top-up of EUR 1.7 billion in 2018 prices (Art.5 MFF)

[2] The Creative Europe programme budget is made of EUR 1.842 billion in current prices as part of the new MFF (2021-2027) and an additional top-up of EUR 0.6 billion in 2018 prices (Art.5 MFF)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This annual activity report is a management report of the Director-General of DG EAC to the College of Commissioners. Annual activity reports are the main instrument of management accountability within the Commission and constitute the basis on which the College takes political responsibility for the decisions it takes as well as for the coordinating, executive and management functions it exercises, as laid down in the Treaties (³).

A. Key results and progress towards achieving the Commission's general objectives and department's specific objectives

2023 has been the third year of rolling out the numerous initiatives announced in the Commission Communication (⁴) on achieving the **European Education Area (EEA) by 2025.** 'Realising the European Education Area by 2025' expresses the vision to improve national education systems and facilitate cooperation and mobility across national borders.

2023 saw the adoption of the Council Recommendations on the enabling factors for digital education and on improving the provision of digital skills in education and training based on the Commission's proposal of April 2023.

2023 was also the year of the **EEA midterm review process** including listening, dialogue and joint reflection with Member States, EU institutions, the education community, social partners, and civil society. A report containing key messages for future action, which also fed the discussions at the 6th Education Summit in November, has concluded this process. At the same time, it provides an important contribution to the **interim evaluation of the EEA** launched in 2023 which has as aim to take stock of the progress made towards the ambitions of the European Education Area.

The **EEA governance** was further strengthened through intensified work of the High-Level Group Coordination Board. The EU Education Solidarity Group for Ukraine continued supporting the education of refugees from Ukraine through peer learning.

The Commission also tabled a proposal for a Council Recommendation **'Europe on the Move** – learning mobility opportunities for everyone, as part of the Talent Mobility package. It aims to make learning mobility an integral part of all education and training pathways, to boost the share of people in the EU benefiting from a learning period abroad, and to increase the share of people with fewer opportunities in learning mobility. It also helps to promote the attractiveness of the EU as a learning destination to talents from third countries.

(³) Article 17(1) of the Treaty on European Union.
(⁴) COM(2020) 625 final

In the field of **higher education**, the implementation of the **European strategy for universities** and the Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation intensified by bringing transnational cooperation in higher education to a new level. This was done inter alia through the further roll-out of the **European Universities initiative** and the **Erasmus+ pilot projects testing a joint European degree (label)** and a possible European legal status for alliances of higher education institutions.

The European Year of Youth 2022 came to an end on 9 May 2023. **'Voice your Vision'** was the slogan for a Year that aimed to give young people **positive prospects**, to **boost their participation in democratic life**, and to give them **a stronger voice in EU policymaking**. On 9 May 2023, the Year's activity page on the European Youth Portal featured over **13 000 activities** organised by more than **2 700 stakeholders** across the EU and beyond. Among them were EU institutions, EU Member States, organisations working with and for young people, and young people themselves. Some 300 young people took part in youth policy dialogues with European Commissioners, the last one organised in February 2023.

The European Commission started the preparations for the Year's legacy in 2023. The European Commission launched targeted consultations to gather feedback from institutions, stakeholders and young people. In total, four separate assessments were conducted: three surveys and one call for evidence. This feedback was taken into account in the Communication on the European Year of Youth, proposing future follow-up actions in the field of youth and in the Staff Working Document reporting on the Year's activities and achievements. Both documents were adopted on 10 January 2024.

In 2023, Erasmus+ kept mobilising and providing continuous **support to Ukraine** in projects in Education and Training sectors. The 2023 budget included EUR 100 million appropriations being frontloaded from Erasmus+ 2027 budget, which helped to reinforce the programme support to those affected by the war in Ukraine. The **Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions** (MSCA) also continued to provide support for displaced researchers from Ukraine through the MSCA4Ukraine scheme providing 125 fellowships to doctoral candidates and post-doctoral researchers from Ukraine to pursue their research in EU Member States and Associated Countries in 2023.

The **mid-term evaluation of Erasmus+ 2021-2027 and the final evaluation of the previous programme 2014-2020** as well as the **mid-term evaluation of the 2021-2027 European Solidarity Corps programme and the final evaluation of the previous programme 2018-2020** kicked off in spring 2023, with many consultation activities (including a public consultation and a number of targeted consultations) and data collection exercises conducted during the years. The work will be ongoing throughout 2024.

On the **cultural policy** side, the implementation of the **EU Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026** started in 2023 and actions were implemented together with the Member States (both at the policy and the expert level) and with the Presidencies of the Council covering topical issues such as the working conditions of artists and cultural professionals, at-risk

and displaced artists, international cultural relations, culture for health, the green transition of the cultural and creative sectors, and the role of libraries in society. The Commission set up a specific expert group to deal with the safeguarding of cultural heritage in the Ukraine. Further areas for EU policy cooperation in 2023 included the collaboration with the art market to address illicit trafficking of cultural goods and the implementation of the Music Moves Europe initiative. At a more strategic level, the role of 'culture as a global public good' was highlighted in several international and European settings, with the input from the Commission (UNESCO, G7, Culture Ministers), and in addition, with a view to the future, reflections started on a possible new EU strategic framework for culture.

In 2023, the EIT has monitored the education, research and business support activities of the Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs), assessed the outcome of the pilot action which aims to make higher education institution more innovative and decided to continue it given the excellent results achieved, continued the implementation of the Deep Tech Talent initiative which is part of the New European Innovation Agenda and aims to skill one million people within deep tech fields by the end of 2025, continued its work on the future Memoranda of Cooperation with the oldest KICs whose partnership agreements will come to an end in 2024, and contributed to EU industrial policy by taking on the implementation of the future Solar Academy alongside the Battery Academy which has already trained 50 000 learners since its start.

Regarding the reliability of the performance information for EU programmes under the remit of DG EAC, the department worked intensively towards the development of an improved, more standardised, and reliable MFF performance reporting framework. Indicative elements of this framework included the integration of programme monitoring and analysis features, the development of advanced analytics in exploitation of results, as well as the support to in-depth insights as part of the programmes' evaluations.

In 2023, DG EAC's Data Management Committee further ensured high-quality data and metadata, based on the revised EAC data inventory and glossary, providing assurance for key performance indicators for all EAC programmes, with a reinforced mandate. DG EAC uses its own IT infrastructure, including data analytics, which is used by entrusted stakeholders [e.g., National Agencies (NAs)] that implement the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programme (indirect management). In this regard, DG EAC has the overall control over the performance reporting procedure and manages to ensure data reliability to the maximum possible extent. As an example, DG EAC provided several recorded webinars on data extraction and analysis, including key performance indicators, to NAs. Through these training sessions, regular monitoring took place and allowed DG EAC to identify and solve potential reliability issues. DG EAC also carried out minimum quality checks of the IT tools used to collect data from NAs and provided them with the necessary guidance to encode data. Finally, DG EAC continued its seamless cooperation with EACEA and RTD in the data analytics sphere, enabling a fully integrated data and performance perspective on its programmes, regardless of the implementation mode.
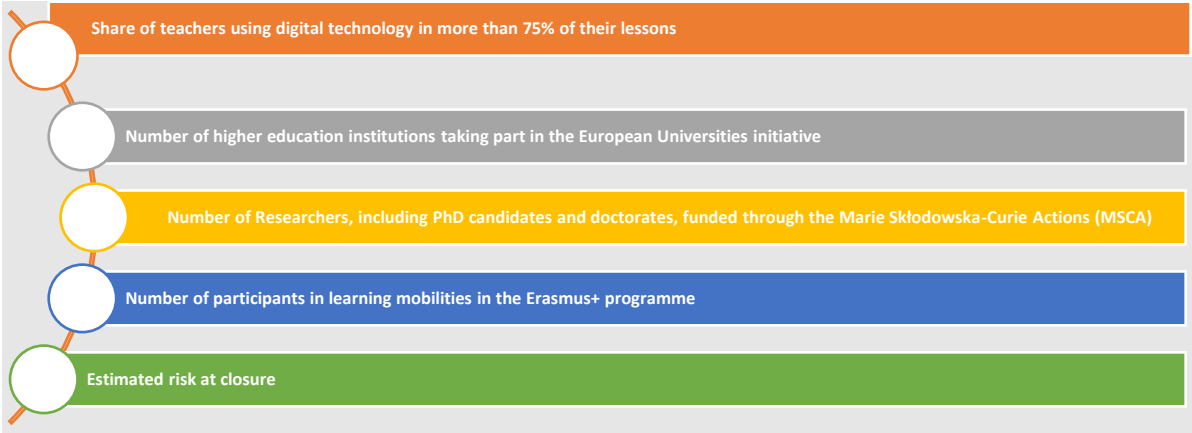
In 2023, DG EAC's external communication actions covered all its policy areas and programmes and contributed to implementing the Commission's political priorities, especially the ones related to 'Promoting our European way of life' on matters concerning

education, culture, youth, and sport, and to 'A Europe fit for the digital age' on matters relating to research and innovation. The communication efforts also gave special attention to four horizontal communication priorities: Inclusiveness, Green, Digital and Democratic participation.
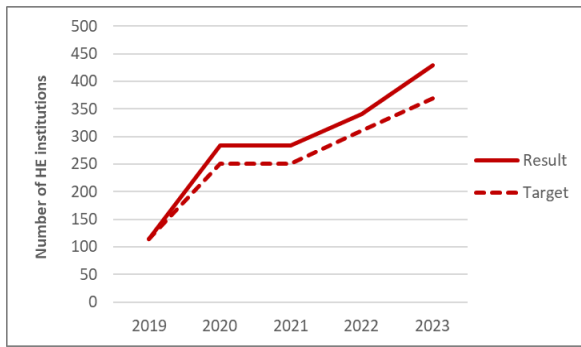
The new communication campaign promoting the European Education Area (EEA) was launched through social media as well as the dedicated [European Education Area portal](#). At the end of November 2023, DG EAC organised its annual flagship event of the EEA, the 'European Education Summit', bringing together policy-makers from EU institutions and beyond, and the European education and training communities. Together with DG COMM, DG EAC communicated around the Citizens' Panel on Learning Mobility, through various channels and products, including videos and testimonies of participants. Other external communication activities included the promotion of the Erasmus+, European Solidarity Corps and Creative Europe programmes, as well as the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. DG EAC supported and amplified the messages of the corporate campaign *NextGenEU*, i.e. by promoting project examples showcasing the "on the ground" benefits of EU funding for a more resilient, digital and greener economy. The Annex 2 Performance Tables contains a detailed description of some of the most important external communication actions which DG EAC implemented in 2023.
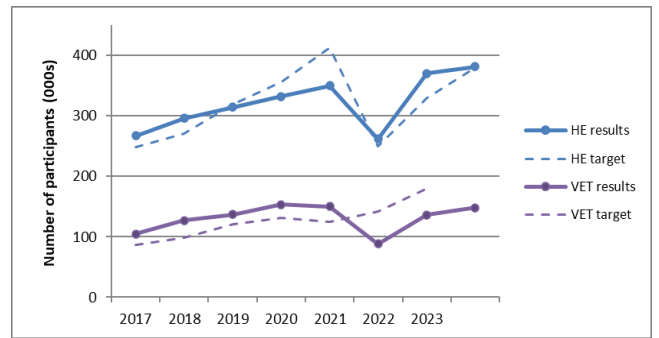
B. Key performance indicators

The following five performance indicators present the key performance indicators of DG EAC:

- **Share of teachers using digital technology in more than 75% of their lessons**
- **Number of higher education institutions taking part in the European Universities initiative**
- **Number of Researchers, including PhD candidates and doctorates, funded through the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA)**
- **Number of participants in learning mobilities in the Erasmus+ programme**
- **Estimated risk at closure**

Number of higher education institutions taking part in European Universities
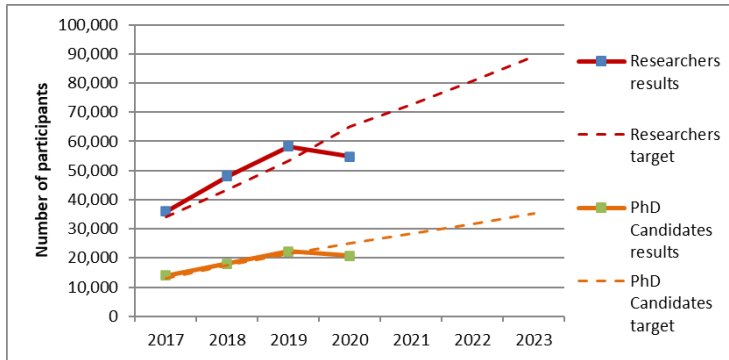

Number of participants in learning mobilities in the Erasmus+ programme

Actual trends started becoming visible in 2023 and will continue in 2024 when the final reports of projects (selected after 2022) will be submitted.

Number of Researchers, including PhD candidates and doctorates, funded through the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA)

Yearly estimation based on the budget available for the calls launched on a given year. The final results will be known once the projects selected end.

The estimated risk at closure is 1.17%

C. Key conclusions on internal control and financial management

In line with the Commission's Internal Control Framework, DG EAC **has assessed its internal control systems during the reporting year and has concluded** that it is effective, and the components and principles are present and functioning well overall, but some improvements are needed as minor deficiencies were identified related to some Internal Control Principles.

In addition, DG EAC has **systematically examined the available control results and indicators**, including those from supervising entities to which it has entrusted budget implementation tasks, as well as the observations and recommendations issued by the internal auditor and the European Court of Auditors. These elements have been assessed to determine their impact on management's assurance regarding the achievement of the control objectives. Please refer to Section 2 for further details.

In conclusion, management has reasonable assurance that, overall, suitable controls are in place and working as intended; risks are being appropriately monitored and mitigated. Improvements are necessary concerning Internal Control principles 13 (data protection), Internal Control Principle 8 (assess fraud risk) and Internal Control Principle 11 (selecting and developing general control activities over technology). The following actions are/will be taken in this respect: for Internal Control Principle 13: as soon the formal confirmation will be received from EDPS, the annexes on data-protection to the Contribution agreements with Turkey, Serbia and North Macedonia will be updated; for Internal Control Principle 8, updates of the DG EAC action plan of the Anti-Fraud Strategy will be updated in 2024 and further improvements will be performed by DG EAC to increase the overall IT security posture of all its IT modules. Please refer to annual activity report section 2.3 for further details.

The Director General, in her capacity as Authorising Officer by Delegation, has signed the Declaration of Assurance.

D. Provision of information to the Commissioner

In the context of the regular meetings during the year between DG EAC and the Commissioner on management matters, the main elements of this report and assurance declaration have been brought to the attention of Commissioner Iliana Ivanova, responsible for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth.

1. KEY RESULTS AND PROGRESS TOWARDS ACHIEVING THE COMMISSION'S GENERAL OBJECTIVES AND SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES OF THE DG

General Objective 1 – A European Green Deal

Specific Objective 1.1 - Promote behavioural changes and support education, towards a sustainable economy

Good progress has been achieved in supporting the green transition as a key dimension of the work towards the achievement of the European Education Area and the European Research Area, and on the greening of the Erasmus+ programme.

In 2023, **the Education for Climate Coalition** continued to create a sustainable community at the heart of European climate education action. EU-27 country groups were opened, supporting the Coalition's reach and ensuring inclusiveness by allowing education practitioners to contribute in their own language. The **3rd Education for Climate Days** in autumn 2023 brought together community members and stakeholders to share experiences and challenges to develop innovative learning projects on sustainability. Community members grew by over 20% during the year, to 7 300. DG EAC set up a dedicated **Community of Practice around GreenComp** within the platform, building on the European sustainability competence framework and in the context of the Council Recommendation on Learning for the Green Transition and Sustainable Development (2022)

The thematic **green SALTO Resource Centre** became fully operational in the first half of 2023. Together with the Commission, the green SALTO began working on a fully-fledged strategy on green priorities, covering all fields of the Erasmus+ programme and the European Solidarity Corps.

The **New European Bauhaus Route** being added to DiscoverEU travel route suggestions in 2023 gives young people the chance to explore forward-thinking cities. In 2023, DiscoverEU participants in Brussels joined forces to plant 1 600 trees, aligning with the **Green Deal**'s ambitious **Three Billion Trees** initiative.

In 2023, volunteering activities of the **European Solidarity Corps** (ESC) received financial support from the Horizon Europe Missions (EUR 16.53 million), the funding contributes to further mobilising young citizens to be active players and vectors of change in climate, environmental and health issues.

2023 was dedicated to the promotion and monitoring of the implementation of the **Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions' (MSCA) Green Charter**. Beyond this, the MSCA support continued to contribute to over 250 projects in all five **Horizon Europe Missions** (Climate adaptation, Oceans, Smart cities, Cancer, and Healthy soil).

In 2023, the **European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) and its Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs)** continued accelerating the green transition through innovation, education and business support activities, for example through the European Battery Alliance Academy (EBA), which aims at training 100 000 learners directly and 700 000 learners indirectly in the batteries supply chain by 2025.

Regarding **the contribution of culture and cultural policies to a behavioural shift** towards a more sustainable economy, DG EAC facilitated the work of a civil society working group of experts in September 2023. It also published a report on the challenges for the cultural and creative sectors and industries with a focus on the energy crisis.

General Objective 2 – Europe fit for the digital age

A – Digital Education Action Plan

Specific objective 2.1 - Promote the development of a high-performing digital education ecosystem in Europe

As part of the Digital Education Action Plan, the Commission proposed **two Council Recommendations** in April 2023, one on the key enabling factors for successful digital education and training, and another on improving the provision of digital skills and competences in education and training. The Education Council adopted them on 23 November 2023.

Regarding the regulatory environment of cultural and creative sectors, DG EAC contributed to the Recommendation on combatting online piracy of live events (adopted in May 2023), as well as other work-streams relating to policy assessments and reports (e.g., third report on the promotion of European works by audio-visual media services) and evidence gathering on new challenges (e.g. launch of new study on the role of copyright and digital collections of libraries and other cultural institutions).

DG EAC continued to progressively widen the implementation of the **European Student Card initiative**, an initiative to help students and higher education institutions on Erasmus+ exchanges by simplifying administrative processes and enhancing digitalisation.

The **European Universities alliances** further mainstreamed activities to equip learners and staff with the digital skills they need for the future and by establishing digital inter-university campuses. cl

The activities of the thematic **Digital SALTO Resource Centre** included the organisation of Digital Dialogues and the Digital Contact points meeting in Helsinki (23-25 May), dissemination of best practices, analysis of project results to assess overall impact. In 2023, the Digital SALTO worked with DG EAC on the development of new Digital Strategy for a qualitative implementation of the digital priority in the two programmes.

In June 2023, a **Higher Education Interoperability** workgroup was established within the European Digital Education Hub with the aim to exchange good practices, develop a framework for seamless Higher Education data and content exchange, and to produce practical implementation guidelines.

In 2023, the **SELFIE tool** crossed the 5.5 million users. Further improvements to the user interface of the **SELFIE for Teachers** and work began on an Early Childhood Education and Care version.

Specific objective 2.2 – Enhance digital skills and competences for the digital transformation for all

Supporting **European Education Technology (**EdTech) was a theme under the Erasmus+ 2023 forward looking projects call promoting evidence-based quality assurance of EdTech solutions and fostering effective public-private partnerships. 25 project proposals were received out of which four projects were awarded.

The EIT supported the upscaling of the **Girls Go Circular** programme to 8 new Member States. The **European Digital Education Hub** continued to expand its activities and membership, reaching 4 000 members.

In November 2023, EIT Digital launched the **EIT Digital Academy**, a platform bringing together experts from industry, education, and research to develop modular learning programmes on topics from cybersecurity to data analytics and machine learning.

The **Digital Education Hackathon** held its fourth edition in November 2023 on the theme 'Putting people in the center of digital age'. 39 grass-root local hackathons took place across 22 countries in the EU and globally, engaging almost 1 700 participants across different ages and backgrounds.

Work has kicked off in developing a model of efficient practices on how to best promote **digital well-being in digital education environments** through a dedicated study with the JRC launched in May 2023.

Among the travel route suggestions for **DiscoverEU,** published on the European Youth Portal, the **Digital Route** shows a map of digitally savvy European cities that could be visited, leading the way on digital technologies.

B – Contribution to Research and Innovation

In 2023, DG EAC contributed to the **implementation of the Horizon Europe Work Programme 2023-2024**, and co-chaired **Cluster 2 titled "Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society"**, contributing to each area of intervention – democracy, cultural heritage, and social and economic transformations.

Within the action on "**Cultural Heritage**", DG EAC closely followed the implementation of **three music research projects** covering topical issues relating to online distribution,

data, algorithms, and streaming, which kicked-off in early 2023. DG EAC also contributed to the launch and deployment of the European Collaborative Cloud for Cultural Heritage.

DG EAC assisted with the **preparation of the draft Horizon Europe Strategic Plan 2025-27**, including two candidate European partnerships: Resilient Cultural Heritage, and Social Transformations and Resilience.

Specific objective 2.3 – Through Horizon Europe, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions promote excellence in research, generate innovation and strengthen skills, training and career development for researchers, notably through an excellent international doctoral network

In 2023, the **Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions** (MSCA) contributed to the overall achievement of the Horizon Europe objectives with regards to Research and Innovation, enhancing Europe's competitiveness and ability to lead in the transition to a climate-neutral economy and the new digital age.

During the third year of implementation of Horizon Europe, **six MSCA calls** were launched for Doctoral Networks, Postdoctoral Fellowships, Staff Exchanges, COFUND, MSCA and Citizens, and Feedback to Policy. 1 066 proposals were submitted under Doctoral Networks; and the Postdoctoral Fellowships call attracted 8 039 proposals. In 2023, **more than 1 600 MSCA Seals of Excellence** were awarded to outstanding researchers.

Science is Wonderful! returned in March 2023 as a physical exhibition in Brussels, enabling over 3 700 primary and secondary school pupils from across Belgium to engage with 110 leading scientists from 18 countries and to discover the wonders of science as well as career pathways in this field.

The **European Researchers' Night** event took place in September 2023 in 26 countries across Europe and beyond and attracted 1.65 million visitors. The Researchers at Schools initiative continued for the second year to bring researchers to schools. The projects reached a total of 323 566 pupils in 2022-23, well above the target of 224 000 pupils.

The **2023 annual MSCA conference** took place under the Spanish Presidency of the Council in November 2023 in Toledo. A mid-term review of the MSCA lump sum and unit contributions was carried out in 2023 with the aim of ensuring that they remain sufficiently competitive and attractive to excellent researchers and institutions following the recent high inflation.

The European Institute of Innovation and Technology

Specific objective 2.4 – As part of Horizon Europe, the EIT will further foster the integration of education, research and business, strengthen innovation ecosystems that help to tackle global challenges and deliver concrete solutions aimed at mitigating the effects of the crisis and contributing to the recovery.

The EIT, in cooperation with the KICs and the Commission, continued to implement the **EIT HEI pilot initiative** to support entrepreneurship and innovation in higher education and to create synergies between industry and HEIs. The third call, with a focus on the Deep Tech Talent initiative, closed in February 2023, funding 16 projects, involving 100 HEIs and 79 non-academic organisations from 34 countries. In the first half 2023, the EIT and DG EAC worked closely to design a framework under which the EIT can continue cooperating with KICs beyond the 15 years term of their partnership agreements. In 2023, DG EAC also kicked off the work on its ex-ante analysis on the continued relevance of a **possible new KIC on Water, Marine and Maritime Sectors and Ecosystems**. To this end, DG EAC commissioned an independent study.

The EIT monitored the implementation of the **Deep Tech Talent initiative** to skill one million people within deep tech fields by the end of 2025. At the end of 2023, more than 110 partners had already committed to train almost 770 000 learners.

On 25 August 2023, the Commission adopted an **Opinion on the draft Single Programming Document (SPD) 2024-2026**. The Final SPD 2024-2026 was adopted by the EIT Governing Board in December 2023. The Commission signed in December 2023 a contribution agreement with the EIT to set up the **European Solar Academy**.

General Objective 3 – An economy that works for people

Specific objective 3.1 - Ensure effective and efficient European cooperation and develop optimised strategic investments for modernised, high-quality education and training systems fostering EU social cohesion and economic welfare

The **Recovery and Resilience Facility** (RRF) provides substantial funding to education and skills related reforms and investments in Member States, amounting to approximately EUR 75.3 billion ([5]). In addition, about EUR 11.6 billion([6]) is devoted to culture and creative sectors. Support to digital education and skills will make up a considerable share of

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([5])The figures are based on the pillar tagging methodology for the Recovery and Resilience Scoreboard and correspond to the measures allocated to the respective policy area ' early childhood education and care', 'general, vocational and higher education', 'adult learning, including vocational education and training', and 'human capital in digitalisation' as primary or secondary policy areas. Note that the figures are approximations and are subject to change.

([6]) The figures are based on the pillar tagging methodology for the Recovery and Resilience Scoreboard and correspond to the measures allocated to the respective policy area 'cultural sector' as primary or secondary policy areas. Note that the figures are approximations and are subject to change.

education spending under the **Recovery and Resilience Facility** (RRF) amounting to approximately EUR 29 billion ([7]). In 2023, out of the 617 milestones related to reforms or investments in education and 195 in culture and creative sectors, 91 milestones were fulfilled in the field of education and 31 in the field of culture.

DG EAC actively contributed to the **2023 EU Semester process**, as well as to the Joint Employment Report in the Autumn package. Education and skills retained their key role, with education priorities widely reflected in the country reports and an annex outlining Member States' challenges in the field of education and training. In total, 9 Member States received country specific recommendations on education and skills (AT, BE, DE, FR, HU, FI, LU, NL, SE), with quality and equity in education being the most prominent topic addressed. In addition, a horizontal CSR on green skills and competences was issued for all Member States.

The first full year of the **Learning Lab on Investing in Quality Education and Training** was successful, with two online general capacity building events on education policy evaluation, three tailored courses on the same topic to three Member States, the first public Learning Lab event, and the first meeting of the Community of Practice on education impact evaluation. Finally, three Horizon Europe calls to support education policy evaluation were published, as well as three analytical reports on trends in education investment, the impact on COVID-19 school closures on students' performance, and the effect of bullying at school on reading proficiency.

DG EAC continued to contribute through its **equality mainstreaming Work Plan 2021-2025** to the implementation of the cross-cutting priority on a Union of Equality. The first results of the implementation and activities planned for 2023 were reflected in the Annual Report on Gender Equality in the EU([8]) and the Progress Report on the Implementation of the LGBTIQ strategy 2020-2025([9]). In addition, DG EAC contributed to the Assessment report of the Member States' national Roma strategic frameworks([10]) and the 2023 report on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities([11]). Other outputs are delivered through the cooperation projects with the Council of Europe and UNESCO, supported by the Erasmus + programme. ([12])

To continue **monitoring the evolution of investment in education** in the EU, DG EAC published its annual "Investing in Education 2023" report. The report showed that national investment in education did not fully keep pace with the strong economic rebound that EU economies experienced after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

([7])   The figures are based on the pillar tagging methodology for the Recovery and Resilience Scoreboard and correspond to the measures allocated to the respective policy area 'human capital in digitalisation' as primary or secondary policy areas. Note that the figures are approximations and are subject to change.

([8])   Annual report on gender equality in the EU 2023 | EURAXESS (europa.eu)

([9])   LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025 (europa.eu)

([10]) Assessment report of the Member States' national Roma strategic frameworks (full package) (europa.eu)

([11]) Combined second and third reports submitted by the European Union under article 35 of the Convention. Cf. https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8230-2023-INIT/en/pdf.

([12]) In particular, the INSCHOOL project "Inclusive schools : making a difference for Roma children" and a new project with UNESCO on addressing antisemitism through education in Europe.

General Objective 4 – A stronger Europe in the world

Specific objective 4.1 – Promote and strengthen international cooperation in the fields of education, training, youth, sport, culture, and research and innovation

A – Education, Training and Youth Sport

In 2023, DG EAC cooperated closely with DG NEAR on the screening process and enlargement reports of the **Neighbourhood East** countries, in particular of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine. Furthermore, the Commission signed an arrangement for Cooperation on Education with the Ministry of Education and Science of **Ukraine** which allows Ukrainian authorities to participate in the Working Groups and peer learning activities of the European Education Area's Strategic Framework.

In line with the goals of the **Western Balkans** Agenda on innovation, research, education, culture, youth and sport, DG EAC, together with DG RTD and JRC, co-organised three meetings of the Steering Platforms on Education & Training and Research & Innovation to monitor the progress in these areas.

In the **Southern Neighbourhood** region, DG EAC cooperated with the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in launching a public consultation focused on key areas of common interest for cooperation (e.g., higher education governance, internationalisation, digital education, inclusion and gender issues, etc.).

In **Sub-Saharan Africa**, DG EAC launched the third phase of the 'Harmonisation, Quality Assurance and Accreditation' initiative (HAQAA3) to improve the quality and harmonisation of African higher education and support students' employability and mobility across the continent. In addition, the first Africa Erasmus+ week was organised in Johannesburg, in October, gathering the 36 appointed African E+ National Focal Points.

The two **EU-United States** Summits of 2023 mandated to increase the number of people-to-people transatlantic mobilities. DG EAC responded by committing to increase Erasmus+ mobilities with North America and contributing to double the EU support to the Fulbright-Schuman programme.

Erasmus+ International

Within the network of **Erasmus+ National Focal Points**, four regional seminars for Africa, Middle East, Latin America-Caribbean and Asia-Pacific were organised during the second half of 2023.

Regarding **International Credit Mobility,** in 2023, National Agencies received approximately 1 300 applications (1 200 in 2022) amounting to a total requested budget of EUR 732 million (670 million in 2022).

As regards **Erasmus Mundus** actions, overall, 240 proposals were submitted in February 2023: 94 proposals for the Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters (+62% compared to 2022) and 146 for the Erasmus Mundus Design Measures (+20% compared to 2022).

2023 also marked an increasing interest in **Capacity Building actions,** with 790 proposals submitted in February under Capacity Building in Higher Education, 162 proposals under Capacity Building VET, 292 proposals under Capacity Building Youth and 63 applications under Capacity Building Sport.

In 2023, two dedicated **EU-Africa Higher Education Networks**, with the purpose of promoting academic discussion on EU-Africa relations and European affairs in Africa, as well as four international Higher Education Networks on "Values and Democracy", were selected in the framework of the Jean Monnet network call.

In 2023, Erasmus+ continued to support projects aiming at addressing the consequences of the Russian war of aggression against **Ukraine** in the Education and Training sectors. In particular, the budget 2023 benefitted from EUR 100 million being frontloaded from the Erasmus+ financial programming from 2027. Close to 800 projects involving Ukrainian organisations were contracted in 2023. In the same period, over 2 500 mobilities – flagged as involving Ukrainian participants fleeing the war – took place. Furthermore, DG EAC in cooperation with OP provided 500 000 textbooks for fifth grade learners in the Ukrainian language.

Further efforts were undertaken to expand and further reinforce cooperation with strategic partners in the **Western Balkans** and **Eastern neighbours**: The **Erasmus+ European Universities call** was opened to all Western Balkans. 7 higher education institutions from the Western Balkans became part of a selected European University Alliances. In June 2023, it was announced that the Erasmus+ actions for **Capacity Building in the fields of Youth and Sport** will be open to organisations from Eastern neighbourhood countries. Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine received financial support under Erasmus+ to set up a **Eurydice** National Unit in their country. European Universities Alliances continued joining forces with third countries, including also with strategic partners in the **Neighbourhood** and **Africa**.

European Solidarity Corps

The **European Solidarity Corps programme** was fully mobilised for projects within the EU and in countries associated to the programme to provide support to the people of Ukraine fleeing Russia's invasion. To increase the participation of young Ukrainians in the programme, the requirement to have a support/sending organisation before starting a volunteering activity has been lifted. A special annual priority was established under the 2023 Work Programme to bring relief for persons fleeing armed conflicts and other victims of natural or man-made disasters. Out of 18 awarded projects in 2023, 10 projects aim to support the people displaced by the war in Ukraine.

The first volunteers under the **European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps** were deployed in 2023. By the end of the year the total number reached 173.

B – Sport

The Cooperation partnerships and the small-scale partnerships continued promoting external cooperation with partner countries. The "Capacity Building in sport" programme for the countries of the Western Balkans was continued and extended to welcome Ukrainian organisations.

C – Culture

The Open Method of Coordination group (OMC) on the governance of international cultural relations met 3 times in 2023 to develop a report with policy recommendations. The Commission also set-up an expert sub-group dedicated to the safeguarding of cultural heritage in Ukraine. The 26 international experts met twice in June and September 2023 with the aim to identify recommendations for possible EU funding.

DG EAC also contributed to the UNESCO regional consultation on culture and arts education (in January) and to the UNESCO Multi-stakeholder dialogue on culture and arts education (in May). These consultations provided a platform to discuss and to formulate recommendations on the UNESCO Global Framework for Culture and Arts Education.

Moreover, DG EAC worked further on strengthening cooperation with the Western Balkans in the field of culture, with the implementation of the IPA-funded project 'Culture and Creativity for the Western Balkans' (CC4WBs), to foster dialogue in the Western Balkans. Several calls for proposals for organisations and individuals were launched in the region. DG EAC also coordinated the EU contribution to the G20 culture strand.

D – Contribution to Research and Innovation

Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions

Under the **MSCA4Ukraine scheme**, in 2023, 125 fellowships were awarded to doctoral candidates and post-doctoral researchers from Ukraine to pursue their research in 21 EU Member States and Associated Countries. With a total budget of EUR 25 million, this scheme enables them to continue their work in Europe, to safeguard Ukraine's research and innovation system.

The **Preparatory Action for a European fellowship and scheme for researchers at risk**, was launched by REA with a EUR 6 million budget for 2023 to test the feasibility of a fellowship scheme for researchers at risk at European level.

The European Institute of Innovation and Technology

Following the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, EIT provided immediate support and channelled more than EUR 2 million to Ukraine between 2022 and 2023 through

different EIT Community initiatives. In 2023, 40 Ukrainian partners participated in the EIT HEI initiative. During the 2022-2023 span, a total of almost 900 Ukrainians girls in secondary school were trained focusing on digital and entrepreneurial skills related to the circular economy through the Girls Go Circular initiative. Furthermore, the "**EIT Jumpstarter" Programme"** gave the chance to Ukrainian innovators to bring their ideas to the market. Another initiative supported by the EIT Jumpstarter programme is "**Red Kalyna**", an award that recognises Ukrainian female entrepreneurs. Lastly, on 20 December the EIT launched, together with the Horizon Europe Office, the "**EIT Community RIS Hub**" in Kiev. It serves as a one-stop shop for local stakeholders to access the EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs).

Launched in 2023, the **EIT InfraBooster** is a modular training programme for scientific organisations that own research infrastructures. In its first year, 10 Western Balkans scientific organisations, mainly Higher Education Institutions (HEI) received EUR 150 000 in support under the EIT InfraBooster. To help drive a place-based approach to supporting innovation locally, the EIT Community started with a pilot Hub in North Macedonia which was officially inaugurated in June 2023.

General Objective 5 – Promoting our European way of life

A – Education and Training

2023 was the midpoint of the first period 2021-2025 set for realising the ambitions of the **European Education Area (EEA)**. The **midterm review** of the EEA was carried out in 2023 with the EU Member States, EU institutions, the education and training community, social partners and civil society on progress. The key messages, including the dedicated event organised jointly with European Parliament in October 2023, were summarised in a Report published by the Commission in November 2023 and fed into the discussions at the **European Education Summit** in November 2023. Hosted by Commissioner Ivanova, the Summit had more than 500 onsite participants, over 24 000 views online, and reached nearly 600 000 people through social media.

The launch of the **EEA interim evaluation,** meant to prepare for the next cycle 2026-2030, included the set-up of the Inter-Service Group in May 2023, a call for evidence between June and September 2023 and the signature of the evaluation support contract in December 2023. The **2023 Education and Training Monitor** reported on progress towards reaching jointly agreed EU-level targets and included the 27 country reports assessing the performance of Member States against EU level targets. This edition zoomed in on teacher shortages in Europe and the various efforts to raise the attractiveness of the profession.

All governance levels of the EEA continued to be mobilised in the framework of the **EU Solidarity Group for Ukraine,** supporting the education of refugees from Ukraine through policy analysis and guidance, online platforms, and funding. In cooperation with the Spanish Presidency, the Commission launched a pilot survey among Member States

concerning the inclusion of displaced children from Ukraine in MS education systems. DG EAC published a report entitled 'Resilience of education systems: what lessons can be learned from Ukraine?'.

DG EAC continued strengthening its analysis and knowledge capacity regarding education and training systems through **studies, evaluations and impact assessments**. In 2023, DG EAC successfully completed an open procurement procedure and launched a multiple framework contract on studies.

DG EAC finalised **a foresight study** on scenarios for the future of school education in the EU until 2040, of which the outcomes will be used to inform education policy and discussions with EU Member States and other stakeholders on education policy reforms and evaluation.

Findings of a comparative analytical report on the EU results of the Progress in **International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2021** on reading competence and well-being of primary school children, produced in 2023, contributed to build knowledge capacity in DG EAC in the area of basic skills and well-being at school.

B – European Education Area

In 2023, the reinforced **EEA strategic framework governance** continued to steer progress towards realising the EEA. The High-Level Group Coordination Board and the High-Level Group (HLG) meetings provided important input to the "Council Resolution on the European Education Area: Looking to 2025 and beyond" adopted in May 2023 and to the "Council conclusions on the contribution of education and training to strengthening common **European values and democratic citizenship**" adopted in November 2023.

The **EEA strategic framework Working Groups** continued to promote mutual learning on policy reforms of national education and training systems. Their **Periodic Report** published in June provided an overview of their activities and main deliverables from November 2021 to March 2023.

DG EAC monitored and reported on **progress towards the EEA** by, inter alia, working on new **EU-level indicators** in the areas of equity in education, the teaching profession, learning for sustainability and learning mobility in higher education.

Specific objective 5.1 – Make the European Education Area a reality, removing barriers to learning, improving access to quality education and making it easier for learners to move between countries

Actions and initiatives to establish the European Education Area (EEA) fall under the following priority areas for European cooperation and national reform:

1. Quality, Equity, Inclusion and Gender Equality

In 2023, **the Working Group on Equality and Values in Education and Training** focused on addressing different forms of discrimination in education and training, citizenship education, and on quality, inclusive and accessible education. The Working Group published two issue papers **on tackling different forms of discrimination in and through education and training** and **on citizenship education**.

The **Working Group on Schools, Pathways to School Success** focussed on two topics: 'assessment of learners' competences – policies and practices to promote inclusive education' and 'targeted support for learners at risk'. In January 2023, it published a [Thematic report 'Blended learning for inclusion: exploring challenges and enabling factors'](#) and October 2023 it produced a [Thematic report on Assessing learners' competences – Policies and practices to support successful and inclusive education](#),

DG EAC continued its work through the **Working Group on early childhood education and care** (ECEC) to support member states to improve their ECEC systems, to make sure ECEC is inclusive and of high quality. In collaboration with the NESET network, DG EAC published a report with Guidelines to improve professional development of ECEC professionals working with multilingual families.

In March 2023, an expert group to develop proposals on strategies for creating supportive learning environments for groups at risk of underachievement and for supporting well-being at school was launched for a period of 15 months. DG EAC contributed to the Commission Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health (June 2023).

In the field of **multilingualism**, the 2023 edition of the Eurydice report Key data on teaching languages at school in Europe was published in March. The new Eurydice report on "**Promoting diversity and inclusion in schools in Europe**" was published in October.

In its third year, Jean Monnet for other levels of education and training continued to promote the quality of EU education at school and vocational training level, with 10 teacher trainings and 44 Learning EU initiatives selected under Erasmus+ Call 2023.

2. Green and Digital Transitions

In 2023, the **Working Group on Schools, Learning for Sustainability** continued its work in relation to education and sustainability[13]. During the year, studies on teacher education for sustainability [14] and student well-being and sustainability [15] were published. Two new studies were also commissioned on the green and digital transition in school education and on sustainable learning environments.

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[13] https://wikis.ec.europa.eu/display/EAC/Learning+for+Sustainability
[14] https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/17ee0858-c79a-11ed-a05c-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-search
[15] https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/421538d0-6683-11ee-9220-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-294160100

Together with the Joint Research Centre, DG EAC organised follow-up activities on GreenComp, the European sustainability competence framework ([16]), including on a series of case studies.

The **Education for Climate Coalition** was further rolled out in 2023, enabling students, teachers and education stakeholders at EU, national and local level, to connect with peers to learn and discuss about green transition and sustainable development.

As part of the outcomes of the Structured Dialogue on **digital education and skills** conducted with Member States and implementation of the Digital Education Action Plan, DG EAC prepared two Proposals for a Council Recommendation in the area of digital education and skills.[17] Both proposals were adopted, by the Commission in April 2023 and the Education Council in November.

In 2023, the meetings of the **Digital Education: Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA) Working Group** focused on, inter alia, digital pedagogy and digital capacity of educational institutions, as well as the role of emerging technologies including AI in the present and future of education, while specific focus was given to AI systems in education.

3. Teachers and Trainers

Under Erasmus+ Teacher Academies, 16 new projects were selected with the foreseen budget of 2022 (EUR 22.5 million). A total of 27 Erasmus+ Teacher Academies were supported through 2023, exceeding the target set out within the EEA.

Following up on the European guidance to Member States for the development of national career frameworks, DG EAC organised a webinar in January 2023 to present the key results of this project and introduced the guide "Teachers and school leaders: How to create a profession that is attractive, motivating and fulfilling".

4. Higher Education

The implementation of the **European strategy for universities** continued full speed in 2023. The 2023 Erasmus+ calls also supported 100 000 traineeships for higher education students. Cooperation with DG GROW and EMPL has been set-up to engage with SMEs and companies to promote such traineeships. 2023 Erasmus+ calls also supported new innovative approaches to learning and teaching, including living labs, student incubators, green and digital skills, and innovators at school.

The European Universities initiative was scaled up. Following the evaluation of the 2023 Erasmus+ call, there are 50 European Universities alliances, involving more than 430 higher education institutions from all parts of Europe. Two novelties were introduced: 7 higher education institutions from Western Balkan countries not associated to the

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[16] https://education-for-climate.ec.europa.eu/community/GreenCompCommunity
[17] Enabling digital education and providing digital skills (europa.eu)

Erasmus+ programme participate as full partners, and 6 alliances received a Seal of Excellence.

EAC facilitated the cooperation between the European Universities alliances and the Coalition of the Willing to present, at the 2nd European education and Innovation summit in June 2023, their roadmap of activities.

In 2023, DG EAC started the preparation for the following three initiatives in the context of **the higher education package**:

- A blueprint to a joint European degree: European policy experimentation projects to pilot a joint European degree label and a legal status for alliances of universities: 90 universities and 17 ministries are involved.
- A proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System.
- A proposal for a Council Recommendation on European framework for attractive and sustainable academic careers.

Implementation of the **European Student Card initiative** continued to gather pace in 2023 with regular activities organised with Erasmus+ National Agencies, digital officers in national authorities and experts from higher education institutions. In 2023 EAC successfully launched the Erasmus Without Paper (EWP) Champions, higher education institutions across Europe ready to support their peers to implement EWP.

In February 2023, DG EAC published a report to the Council on the implementation of the Council Recommendation on promoting **automatic mutual recognition** of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and outcomes of learning periods abroad. The Council responded through the adoption in May 2023 of Council Conclusions on further steps to make automatic mutual recognition in education and training a reality. In October 2023, a panel discussion on achieving automatic recognition took place as part of the EEA mid-term review event.

17 countries participating in a second pilot phase of the **Eurograduate tracking surveys** finalised their data collection in Q1/2023, with a view towards a European-wide implementation of graduate tracking.

5. Lifelong learning and mobility

During 2023, the Commission drafted a **proposal for a Council Recommendation "'Europe on the move' – learning mobility for everyone,** adopted by the College on 15 November as part of the Talent Mobility package. The recommendation builds on the evidence gathered from over 1 000 inputs in response to the call for evidence, the public consultation and dedicated stakeholder consultations, as well as the 21 recommendations of a European Citizen's panel and a dedicated study.

EAC contracted a study with OECD to provide technical assistance to Member States in implementing the **Council Recommendation on micro-credentials for lifelong**

learning and employability. A guidance paper on micro-credentials and a self-assessment for Member states were published in December 2023. The 2024 Erasmus+ policy experimentation call, launched in November 2023, supports projects on micro-credentials eco-systems and micro-credentials for the digital and green transitions.

6. Geopolitical Dimension

In 2023, DG EAC implemented several international initiatives and activities with the aim to strengthen the geopolitical dimension of the EEA. DG EAC continued to promote the advancement of the European Higher Education Area and the key **Bologna commitments**, also in cooperation with third countries. DG EAC's international activities primarily focussed on expanding and further reinforcing cooperation with the following regions of the world: Western Balkans, East and South neighbouring countries, Sub Saharan Africa. DG EAC also continued its work to strengthen Europe's global leadership in the context of multilateral forums or vis-a-vis industrialised countries, particularly through a close follow-up of the activities of the G20, G7 and ASEM.

Specific objective 5.2 – With the support of the Erasmus+ programme, promote learning mobility of individuals, as well as cooperation, inclusion, excellence, creativity and innovation at the level of organisations and policies in the field of education and training

The Erasmus+ **Monitoring and Evaluation Framework** was adopted by the Commission as a Delegated Act on 13 September 2023 and published on 5 December. This Delegated Act supplements the Programme Regulation with an additional set of indicators, to allow a more accurate measurement of its different dimensions.

Work on the **mid-term evaluation of Erasmus+ 2021-2027 and the final evaluation of the previous programme 2014-2020** started in March and reached full speed in the second half of 2023. The public consultation closed in December, collecting more than 1 200 contributions and many position papers from citizens and organisations. In parallel, other targeted consultations and data collection exercises were conducted in autumn.

The **annual work programme for 2024** was adopted in September 2023. The **General call for 2024 was published in November**, together with the Programme guide and a review of some of the programme funding rules, namely introducing a greater incentive for green travel and raising grant level support to mobility with a view to alleviating the effects of inflation.

The **European Universities alliances** have in 2023 continued their work towards joint transnational campuses, where students can enjoy seamless and embedded mobility.

In 2023, in relation to the call for accreditation for the **Erasmus Charter for Higher Education** (ECHE), 294 applications were evaluated and 236 were awarded a Charter. The new ECHE monitoring guide for Erasmus+ national agencies was published in February.

Over 3 000 higher education institutions involved in the **European Student Card initiative** are connected to the **Erasmus Without Paper Network**, and over 2.3 million active **European Student Cards** issued by December 2023. The **Erasmus+ App** registered over 218 000 downloads. A record increase of digital exchanges between higher education institutions was also recorded in 2023.

Regarding the integrated and harmonised **European School Education Platform (ESEP)**, several new or improved functionalities were rolled out all along the year. In 2023, the eTwinning annual theme 'innovation and education' inspired eTwinning projects and was the focus of the eTwinning publication and annual conference.

EPALE, the European Platform for Adult Learning celebrated the European Year of Skills. The 2023 Community conference highlighted the potential of Adult Learning and Education to empower people to successfully navigate through labour market changes, engage citizens in society and democracy, and include everyone in learning.

In the field of VET, in 2023, demand for learner mobility grew very fast compared to previous years. This was foreseen in the targets, however, it could not be supported by sufficient budget increase to meet the demand.

The 25 **Erasmus+ Alliances for Innovation** projects from the 2022 Call all began in 2023. As part of the actions under the New European Innovation Agenda, the 2023 call for Alliances for Innovation had deep-tech skills development as one of its priorities. 32 projects were selected.

The action "**Fostering Talent for Innovation: An Education and Innovation Practice Community (EIPC)**" continued to be implemented in partnership with the OECD. In 2023, the first of three work strands was completed.

In June 2023, the **2nd Education and Innovation Summit** gathered 211 participants onsite and 805 online. The Summit explored how innovation and education can work closer together to effectively tackle the significant contemporary challenges faced by European and global societies. A 2.0 version of **HEInnovate** was launched at this occasion.

Work on HESS (**Higher Education in Smart Specialisation**) IV was concluded at the end of 2023. HESS IV further explored how HEIs, through partnerships with regional authorities and other innovation stakeholders contribute to transformative place-based innovation.

The **study "Assessment of the Instruments, Deliverables, Results and Impact of University Business Cooperation"** began in 2023. The kick-off meeting was held in May and the interim report was delivered in November.

Specific objective 5.3 – With the support of the Erasmus+ programme, promote non-formal learning mobility and active participation among young people, as well as cooperation, inclusion, creativity and innovation at the level of organisations and policies in the field of youth

Erasmus+ programme – Youth

Mainstreaming the youth perspective across EU policy fields was a key objective of the European Year of Youth 2022, achieved through a vast mobilisation across the Commission, resulting in over 130 policy initiatives, many developed in cooperation with young people. The Year's core objectives of greater youth participation and incorporating the youth perspective across the policy spectrum were clearly achieved.

The Swedish Council Presidency and the Commission hosted the **EYY Legacy event on mainstreaming youth policy** in Brussels on 19 June 2023. Participants reflected on the lessons learned during the Year. Member State and Commission experts from climate, monitoring and evaluation, the labour market, and mental health shared their knowledge and perspectives from other fields.

The **EU Youth Conference (EUYC)** in March 2023 in Växjö concluded the 9th cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue which focusses on the European Youth Goals Inclusive Societies and Green and Sustainable Europe. The EUYC also began the 10th cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue focusing on youth goal #3 "Inclusive Societies" in July 2023 under the Spanish Presidency.

Two application rounds took place for **DiscoverEU** in 2023; 289 695 young people applied for a travel pass, and 71 642 were selected. During the two rounds of the Inclusion Action in 2023, a total of 238 projects were submitted to the Erasmus+ National Agencies.

The cultural dimension of DiscoverEU has been strengthened thanks to the launch of the New European Bauhaus Route, to inspire young participants to explore forward-thinking cities during their DiscoverEU adventure. The Learning Cycle, organised by the Erasmus+ National Agencies, has included a total of 56 DiscoverEU Meet-ups across Europe, offering young people a programme of activities with an emphasis on European Cultural Heritage.

The European Youth Portal totalled 10 132 367 visits in 2023 and remained in the top 10 of europa.eu most visited websites in 2023.

European Solidarity Corps

Specific objective 5.4 – With the support of the European Solidarity Corps, enhance the engagement of young people and organisations in accessible and high-quality solidarity activities as a means to contribute to strengthening cohesion, solidarity and democracy in the Union and abroad, addressing societal and humanitarian challenges on the ground, with particular effort to promote social inclusion

The volunteering projects awarded in 2023 had a high focus on inclusion and diversity with 978 awarded projects, and 705 projects addressing participation in democratic life. Calls in 2023 resulted in receiving over 4 500 applications for volunteering and solidarity projects, with 2 401 projects awarded.

For **Volunteering activities**, two rounds were organised, through which over 1 200 projects were selected, involving almost 17 500 estimated participants. For **Solidarity activities**, there were three rounds through which around 6 400 participants were awarded around 1 000 projects.

The European Solidarity Corps (ESC) mobilised to support Ukrainian participants and organisations in these extremely challenging times. Prospective applicants were encouraged to include activities linked to the integration of Ukrainian refugees in project proposals.

As Europe, especially Slovenia, has been hit hard by extreme weather events and natural disasters in the form of floods, the ESC programme in 2023 supported National Agencies by exploring the possibility of complementing the focus and scope of activities of certain ongoing projects in the 2023 call.

The earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria in February 2023 significantly affected ESC projects. National Agencies invoked force majeure, allowing affected beneficiaries to promptly notify the agency, seek grant suspension, and modify planned activities in affected areas, without beneficiaries being penalised for unmet objectives.

C – Sport

Specific objective 5.5 – With the support of the Erasmus+ programme, promote learning mobility of sport coaches and staff, as well as cooperation, inclusion, creativity and innovation at the level of sport organisations and sport policies

In 2023, sport actions continued to give visibility to and support for the role of sport in contemporary society for health and wellbeing, cohesive communities and social inclusion, and to its contribution to the economy and to the green transition.

In 2023, a new "Learning Mobility of Sport staff" was launched, enabling sports staff, coaches and volunteers to benefit from a placement in a sport club in another country to enhance their skills and develop new competencies.

Further actions included:

- The conclusion of two expert groups delivering reports in the fields of Green Sport and recovery and resilience of the sport sector and aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The first EU Sport and Innovation Summit, highlighting the potential of new technologies and models in developing performance and participation in sport.
- The 2022 #Beinclusive EU sport awards ceremony took place in May 2023 to recognise sport organisations working with ethnic minorities, refugees, people with disabilities, youth groups at risk, or other groups that face challenging social circumstances.
- The 2023 EU Sport Forum took place in Stockholm, bringing together more than 400 stakeholders from the European sport movement, with keynotes from Euro 2024 on the role of football and major events in the European Sport Model.
- The #BeActive campaign was launched in June, and the European Week of Sport was held, as usual, in the last week of September. On 29 November, the #BeActive Awards Gala took place.
- The Commission also held extensive stakeholder publications ahead of its report on the implementation of the EU Work Plan for Sport 2021-24 and the drafting of the new Work Plan under the Belgian Presidency in 2024.
- Following on from the successful HealthyLifestyle4All initiative, which garnered more than 100 pledges to boost healthy lifestyles, the Commission launched work on the Share 2.0 initiative. This notably builds on the community-led approach taken in HealthyLifestyle4All and broadens the mission of SHARE beyond regional development, linking sport with innovation, sustainability and healthy lifestyles more broadly.

D – Culture

Specific objective 5.6 – With the support of the Creative Europe programme, promote European cooperation on cultural and linguistic diversity

DG EAC represented the Commission in the preparatory works in the formal and informal Council structures leading to the adoption of Council conclusions on at-risk and displaced artists (Swedish Presidency), a Ministerial Declaration promoting culture as a global public good (Cáceres Declaration), Council conclusions on the cultural and creative dimension of the European video games sector (Spanish Presidency). DG EAC also facilitated several actions, including the preparations for **four new Open Method of Coordination Member States' expert groups**. The OMC group on the governance of international cultural relations already started its work in 2023. For three other groups (role of libraries in society, culture and health, green transition of the cultural and creative sectors) mandates were prepared by DG EAC for the endorsement by the Council's Cultural Affairs Committee. In addition, a new Commission-led **expert sub-group on safeguarding cultural heritage in Ukraine** met twice in 2023. Reflections on possible options for a new **EU strategic framework for culture** initiative started in 2023.

An OMC group composed of experts from EU Member States' ministries of culture and employment/social affairs, facilitated by the Commission (DG EAC), issued its report on working conditions of artists and cultural professionals in July 2023. On 21 November 2023, the **European Parliament** adopted an INL (own initiative legislative) resolution with recommendations to the Commission on an 'EU framework for the social and professional situation of artists and workers in the cultural and creative sectors.

A series of 3 high-level Roundtables took place between February and June 2023 with the objective to strengthen the **ecosystem of cultural and creative sectors and industries** (CCSI) and to enhance communication between the Commission and stakeholders in these sectors ([18]).

In 2023, DG EAC also coordinated the Commission's replies to several **reports from the European Parliament in the field of culture** and to the consultations and follow-up on the **Committee of the Regions Opinion** "**Promoting cultural policies in rural areas within the framework of development and territorial cohesion strategies and the 2030 Agenda**".

In the context of the Commission's **Music Moves Europe initiative** (MME), DG EAC launched the new MME dialogue in early 2023. Moreover, the 3-year (EU funded) Preparatory action on music came to an end. In January 2023, DG EAC also released an independent report "The Health and Wellbeing of Professional Musicians and Music Creators in the EU – insights from research for policy and practice".

DG EAC also continued its close work relations and dialogue with external stakeholders, including in structured formats via the **Voices of Culture dialogue** and the **Cultural Heritage Expert Group** that kept meeting regularly in 2023.

Creative Europe programme

During the reporting period, DG EAC has:

- – Organised the first edition of the Day of European Authors to connect young people with the richness of the European literature and promote reading in schools
- – Selected 3 EU-Ukraine led consortia through the special call "support to the Ukrainian refuges and the Ukrainian cultural and creative sectors". These consortia redistribute EU funding to support the artists in Ukraine and help with the integration of the displaced population.
- – Supported 138 cooperation projects involving at least 3 partners from 3 different countries of the programme.
- – Funded 41 projects in the framework of the call for the European circulation of literary work.

([18]) https://culture.ec.europa.eu/news/commissioner-gabriel-hosts-first-roundtable-with-representatives-of-the-cultural-and-creative-sectors and after the 3rd roundtable: https://culture.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-wraps-up-roundtable-meetings-with-cultural-and-creative-sectors

- – Continued working with its European Capitals of Culture (ECOC) with three cities sharing the spotlight in 2023: Elefsina, Vezsprem and Timisoara.
- – Supported four cultural EU prizes in the field of music, literature, architecture and cultural heritage, putting a spotlight on the diversity and innovation of the European culture but also on its contribution to European identity and values.
- – Successfully implemented the new mobility scheme, Culture Moves Europe (CME) which funded the mobility of 1 802 artists in 2023 covering all the sectors and countries participating to the programme.

General Objective 6 – A new push for European democracy

Specific objective 6.1 – Provide European young people opportunities to participate in civic society and democratic life

In 2023, the Working Group on Equality and Values in Education and Training published the **Issue paper on citizenship education** with an overview of the key relevant concepts, EU and international initiatives, different learning approaches and content of citizenship education, ongoing research and inspiring practices.

DG EAC contributed to the Defence of Democracy package, put forward in December 2023, the Commission Communication "**No place for hate: a Europe united against hatred**" adopted in December 2023, and the **Council conclusions on the contribution of education and training to strengthening common European values and democratic citizenship**, adopted in November 2023, inviting the Commission to prioritize democratic citizenship education and training in the European Education Area strategic framework working groups.

All three Jean Monnet actions in other fields of education and training ('**Jean Monnet for Schools'**), included in the Erasmus+ call 2023, continued promoting the teaching and learning about the EU in schools and vocational education and training institutions. In 2023, 2 school networks were selected, 10 teacher training proposals were granted, and along with 44 'Learning EU' initiatives were selected.

In June 2023, DG EAC published the report "Culture and Democracy: the evidence. How citizens' participation in cultural activities enhances civic engagement, democracy and social cohesion – lessons from international research".

Youth

One of the main takeaways of the European Year of Youth 2022 was that **young people have a strong interest in society** and want to be involved. In Q2 2023, intensive work started to draft a Commission Communication with a set of actions that focus on how the Commission can give young people a say in the decisions that affect them. The 10th cycle of the **EU Youth Dialogue**, which is the biggest participatory process for young people in the EU, started in July 2023.

In 2023, the budget for **Youth participation activities** was reinforced, involving more than 18 400 young people. DG EAC embarked on the **preparations for the European Youth Week 2024 (EYW)** which, given the proximity of the European elections, will focus on fostering active citizenship and democratic participation among the youth.

The **European Youth Portal** played a pivotal role in the preparations by creating a 'Map of Activities', a platform where activities labelled under the EYW 2024 can be highlighted.

The independent EU study entitled "The importance of citizens' participation in cultural activities for civic engagement and democracy – policy lessons from international research", released in March 2023, summarises existing knowledge and evidence on this topic, distils key policy lessons and highlight examples of successful actions from EU Member States.

Traineeships Office

Implementation of action points **of the Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Strategy** for the Blue Book Traineeship Programme was ongoing for the March and October 2023 sessions. In September 2023, the Traineeships Office was transferred to the Directorate-General for Human Resources and Security (DG HR).

2. INTERNAL CONTROL AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Assurance is provided on the basis of information on the efficiency and effectiveness of internal control systems and governance processes. The management monitors the functioning of the internal control systems on a continuous basis and carries out an objective examination with internal and external auditors. The results are explicitly documented and reported to the Director-General. The reports / documentation that have been considered are the following: the ADOD reports; the reports on exceptions and non-compliance events; the reports on control results from entrusted entities in indirect management as well as the result of the Commission supervisory controls on the activities of these bodies; the contribution of the Director in charge of Risk Management and Internal Control including the results of internal control monitoring at the DG level; the reports of the ex-post supervision or audits; the limited conclusion of the Internal Audit Service on the state of control, and its observations and recommendations; the observations and the recommendations reported by the European Court of Auditors (ECA). Further information on the key sources used is provided in Annex 7.

The systematic analysis of the available evidence **provides sufficient guarantees as to the completeness and reliability of the information reported and results in the full coverage** of the budget delegated to the Director-General of DG EAC.

This section covers the control results and other relevant elements that support management's assurance. It is structured into 2.1. Control results, 2.2. Audit observations and recommendations, 2.3. Effectiveness of internal control systems and resulting in 2.4. Conclusions on the assurance.

2.1. Control results

This section reports on the control results used by management to support the assurance on the achievement of the internal control objectives (ICO) ([19]). DG EAC's assurance building and materiality criteria are outlined in annual activity report annex 5. The annual activity report annex 6 outlines the main risks together with the control processes to mitigate them and the indicators used to measure the performance of the relevant control systems. Annex 7 provides further details.

The table below shows an analysis of the payments made in 2023. It does not include the appropriations managed on DG EAC's behalf by the executive agencies **EACEA and REA.**

([19]) 1) Effectiveness, efficiency and economy of operations; 2) reliability of reporting; 3) safeguarding of assets and information; 4) prevention, detection, correction and follow-up of fraud and irregularities; and 5) adequate management of the risks relating to the legality and regularity of the underlying transactions, taking into account the multiannual character of programmes as well as the nature of the payments (FR Art 36.2). The 2nd and/or 3rd Internal Control Objective(s) (ICO) only when applicable, given the DG's activities.

In 2023, a total amount of payments of EUR 1 030 million was implemented by EACEA, and EUR 873 million by REA.

DG EAC and EACEA also managed a small proportion of payments from **the European Development Fund (EDF).** No EDF budget was committed in 2023 due to the phaseout of the instrument and its integration in NDICI. EUR 1.4 million in EDF funds was paid in 2023.

Payments 2023	Direct	Indirect	Other	Total	%
EACEA			65,015,918.00	65,015,918.00	1.63%
EIT		375,166,987.69		375,166,987.69	9.41%
Erasmus+ direct and handled by National Agencies and other bodies	53,909,086.63	3,341,648,411.64		3,395,557,498.27	85.17%
European Solidarity Corps direct and handled by National Agencies	2,858,642.16	105,664,332.27		108,522,974.43	2.72%
Creative Europe	8,759,811.13	9,470,000.00		18,229,811.13	0.46%
Traineeships	4,408,680.51			4,408,680.51	0.11%
MSCA	1,917,569.55			1,917,569.55	0.05%
Pilot projects and preparatory actions	7,307,426.01			7,307,426.01	0.18%
Other	10,547,335.78			10,547,335.78	0.26%
Total (includes EFTA, third country contributions (RO), etc.)	**89,708,551.77**	**3,831,949,731.60**	**65,015,918.00**	**3,986,674,201.37**	100.00%
Payments 2023	**Direct**	**Indirect**	**Other**	**Total**	
EDF	1,418,359.30			1,418,359.30	

In line with the 2018 Financial Regulation, DG EAC's assessment for the new reporting requirement is as follows:

- Cases of "confirmation of instructions" (FR art 92.3): None
- Cases of financing not linked to costs (FR art 125.3): European Capitals of Culture (ECOC) Melina Mercouri Prize – Procedures EAC/P02/2023 and EAC/P03/2023
- Financial Framework Partnerships >4 years (FR art 130.4): None
- Cases of flat-rates >7% for indirect costs (FR art 181.6): None

- Derogations from the principle of non-retroactivity pursuant to Article 193 of the Financial Regulation: 12 grants.

2.1.1. Effectiveness of controls

a) Legality and regularity of the transactions

DG EAC uses internal control processes to ensure sound management of risks relating to the legality and regularity of the underlying transactions it is responsible for, taking into account the multiannual character of programmes and the nature of the payments concerned.

1) Control objective

DG EAC implements its budget through different implementation modes which have different risk profiles and their own control and supervision arrangements. The general objective is to have a residual error rate below 2% of the budget for a specific implementation mode during the multiannual period (see further details in annex 5).

2) Assessment of the control results

National Agencies (Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps)

The management information reported by the National Authorities and National Agencies for 2022, and received in 2023, is sufficient for the relevant AOSD to draw reasonable assurance conclusions, with some exceptions relating to the National Agencies in North Macedonia and Germany (the one responsible for youth) where weaknesses have been identified and are expected to be rectified in 2024. For more details, see Annex 7.

Most of relevant reported expenditure for 2023 is still related to the 2014-20 programmes. Given the high number of recurring beneficiaries and the continuity of the programme design and underlying control system, the same low inherent risks apply to the new programme.

The aggregate 2014-2020 residual error rate for the implementation through NAs is estimated to be 0.41% (the 0.78% reported in AAR 2022 has been adjusted based on the additional controls completed in 2023 and a more precise calculation due to a new reporting tool.)

Error rate information on a multi-annual basis from a variety of sources is used. This evidence shows an error rate between 0.5% and 1% (see Annex 9), and therefore a global 1% is used to estimate the amount at risk.

As this is **below the 2% threshold**, there is no need to make a reservation for this management mode.

The estimated future corrections for Erasmus Indirect are rated at 0.0146% in line with the Historic Average rate of Recoveries and Corrections.

Direct management by DG EAC

Authorising Officers by sub-delegation reported no issues putting in doubt the reasonable assurance on this management mode; DG EAC has closely followed up non-compliances and exceptions during 2023.

As no issues have been identified which are material with respect to the budget as a whole, it is considered that **DG EAC has reasonable assurance on direct management managed by DG EAC for 2023.**

For direct management an error rate of 1% is used. Future corrections are expected to be 0, as they are negligibly small amounts and, historically, corrections were very rarely seen.

EACEA and EIT

For EACEA an error rate of 0% ([20]) is used; for EIT the error rate used is 2% to take into account the higher risk environment of Horizon. Future corrections are expected to be 0, as they are negligibly small amounts and, historically, corrections were very rarely seen.

3) Supervision/Coordination of EU bodies (EACEA, REA, EIT (21) and EIF)

DG EAC as the main parent DG of EACEA considers that its supervision of the EACEA has been effective and sufficient in 2023.

The reports foreseen in the Memorandum of Understanding between EACEA and its parent DGs, as well as the EACEA performance dashboard, have enabled DG EAC to closely monitor the implementation of Erasmus+ and Creative Europe by this Executive Agency. Further details are included in Annex 7 and on the follow-up of audits in Annex 8.

DG EAC considers that its supervision of REA has been effective and sufficient in 2023.

Based on reporting from REA and the results of controls as presented in REA's AAR, DG EAC considers that it has reasonable assurance regarding Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions.

In view of the positive declaration of assurance from the European Court of Auditors on the entirety of its budget, no assurance issues are noted regarding the EIT.

([20]) Considered error-free type of expenditure (considering the actual payment transaction from DG EAC to EACEA).

([21]) The European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT) is an independent body of the European Union. As part of Horizon Europe, it fosters the integration of education, research and business, strengthen innovation ecosystems that help to tackle global challenges.

Other main sources of assurance for 2023 are the CAAR of the EIT, the declaration of assurance from the European Court of Auditors on the entirety of its budget and the supervision mechanisms in place as defined int the relevant regulations and in the Memorandum of Understanding. Further details are included in Annex 7 and on the follow-up of audits in Annex 8.

Based on the management declaration and the report of the Independent Audit Body as regards the **Erasmus+ Student Loan Guarantee Fund** (now managed as legacy), DG EAC does **not consider there is any significant reasonable assurance risk for EIF relating to 2023.** For further information see Annex 7.

4) Overview of DG EAC's risk profile

DG EAC's portfolio consists of segments with a relatively low error rate.

This is, respectively, thanks to the inherent risk profile of having recurring beneficiaries, particularly in higher education; simplified entitlement-based funding modalities; **and the performance of the related control systems** as implemented by National Agencies under indirect management. DG EAC closely follows up the independent audit opinions, supervisory visits and audits and the resulting recommendations to ensure that mitigating actions are implemented promptly.

5) Table: Estimated risk at payment and at closure

In the context of the protection of the EU budget, the DG's estimated overall risk at payment, estimated future corrections and risk at closure are consolidated at Commission level. **For DG EAC, the situation has remained stable.**

Information on a multi-annual basis from a variety of sources shows **an error rate between 0.5% and 1%** (see Annex 9). Therefore, a global conservative 1% is used to estimate the amount at risk at payment for programmes outside EIT.

For EIT itself, the most recent reported residual error rate is 0.62% ([22]). **A conservative rate of 2% is chosen for the amount at risk** considering the higher error rates observed in the Horizon Europe environment.

The **EDF** (see table below) has a risk at closure of EUR 0.08 million in 2023.

Based on all the above, DG EAC presents in the following Table "Estimated risk at payment ad at closure" an estimation of the risk at payment and risk at closure for the expenditure managed during the reporting year. The full detailed version of the table is provided in annex 9.

([22])   CAAR 2022 EIT

Table: Estimated risk at payment and at closure (amounts in EUR million)

DG EAC	Payments made m.EUR	Relevant expenditure m.EUR	Estimated risk (error rate %) at payment m.EUR	%	Estimated future corrections and deductions m.EUR	%	Estimated risk (error rate %) at closure m.EUR	%
Erasmus Indirect	3 341.65	1809.00	18.09	1.00%	0.26	0.01%	17.83	0.99%
Erasmus Direct	53.91	60.17	0.60	1.00%	0.00	0.00%	0.60	1.00%
European Solidarity Corps Indirect	105.66	27.44	0.27	1.00%	0.00	0.00%	0.27	1.00%
European Solidarity Corps Direct	2.86	2.87	0.03	1.00%	0.00	0.00%	0.03	1.00%
Creative Europe Indirect	9.47	0.40	0.00	1.00%	0.00	0.00%	0.00	1.00%
Creative Europe Direct	8.76	7.71	0.08	1.00%	0.00	0.00%	0.08	1.00%
Other Direct	24.18	26.06	0.26	1.00%	0.00	0.00%	0.26	1.00%
EIT	375.17	432.11	8.64	2.00%	0.00	0.00%	8.64	2.00%
EDF - European Development Fund	1.42	4.00	0.08	2.00%	0.00	0.00%	0.08	2.00%
Total direct contribution to EAC operating	3 923.08	2 369.74	28.06	1.18%	0.26	0.01%	27.79	1.17%
EACEA	65.02	57.59	0.00	0.00%	0.00	0.00%	0.00	0.00%
Sub-total contributions (if more than one)	65.02	57.59	0.00	0.00%	0.00	0.00%	0.00	0.00%
Total DG (with contributions to EAs)	**3 988.09**	**2 427.33**						

Additional information to be provided by the DGs managing EDF and contributing to and/or managing EUTF (amount

DG EAC	Payments made m.EUR	Relevant expenditure m.EUR	Estimated risk (error rate %) at payment m.EUR	%	Estimated future corrections and deductions m.EUR	%	Estimated risk (error rate %) at closure m.EUR	%
Total EDF	1.42	4.00	0.08	2.00%	0.00	0.00%	0.08	2.00%

The estimated overall risk at payment for 2023 expenditure, 1.18% (EUR 28.06 million), is the AOD's [23] best conservative estimate of the amount of relevant expenditure during the year, not in conformity with the contractual and regulatory provisions applicable at the time the payment was made. This expenditure will subsequently be subject to ex-post controls and a proportion of the underlying errors will be detected and corrected in subsequent years, corresponding to the **conservatively estimated future corrections for 2023 expenditure, 0.014% ([24]) (EUR 0.26 million).**

The difference between those two, results in the estimated overall risk at closure [25], 1.17% (EUR 27.79 million). This is a decrease compared to 2022 (−0.05%). There is no significant change compared to 2022.

For an overview at Commission level, the departments' estimated overall risk at payment, estimated future corrections and risk at closure are consolidated in the AMPR.

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[23] Authorising Officer by Delegation
[24] This is estimated in line with the Historic Average rate of Recoveries and Corrections of 0.0146220%.
[25] This is the AOD's best, conservative estimation of the expenditure authorised during the year that would remain not in conformity of applicable regulatory and contractual provisions by the end of implementation of the programme.

6) Preventive and corrective measures

As regards the corrections carried out in 2023, **DG EAC has in place an effective mechanism for correcting errors, through ex-ante and ex-post controls, resulting in preventive and corrective measures, amounting to EUR 0.46 million and EUR 0.35 million respectively.** This is similar to last year with EUR 0.76 million and EUR 0.06 million respectively. This represents respectively a decrease of EUR 0.30 million and an increase of EUR 0.29 million compared to N-1 which is negligible.

National Agencies that implement the Erasmus+ and ESC programmes through indirect management contribute to this corrective mechanism, with EUR 16.2 million for preventive measures and EUR 2.3 million for corrective measures ([26]).

b) Fraud prevention, detection and correction

DG EAC has developed and implemented its **anti-fraud strategy** since 2015, based on the methodology provided by OLAF. It is updated every 2 – 3 years and was last updated in December 2020 following a fraud risk assessment. Its implementation is being monitored and reported to the management twice a year (in the context of the AAR and MTR) and whenever else needed. All necessary actions have been implemented except "the fraud awareness survey (Action Point 8)". The implementation of this action will be reviewed in the context of the revision to the action plan foreseen in 2024. The Commission's overall Anti-Fraud Strategy was not updated in 2023, but the Action Plan was revised. DG EAC will update its own Action Plan in 2024 in line with the Commission Anti-Fraud Strategy Action Plan.

DG EAC also contributed to the revised Commission anti-fraud strategy Action Plan of July 2023 ([27]).

DG EAC **followed up OLAF's financial recommendations** with the following results: 28% (2 out of 7) of the recommendations were fully implemented, 1 observation was partly implemented, 73% (4 out of 7) are still being implemented.

The results achieved during the year thanks to the anti-fraud measures in place can be summarised as follows:

DG EAC contributed to the Commission anti-fraud strategy, ensured alignment of legal and guidance documents with the updated central guidance, and ran awareness raising exercises for entrusted bodies, with discussion of recent fraud cases. In 2023 DG EAC started developing functionalities in the project management tools for NAs to share information and organisations, to ensure compliance with the exclusion pillar of the Financial Regulation. The measures in the revised Control Strategy reinforced the identification and handling of high-risk beneficiaries, as well as issues such as double

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([26]) Source: DG EAC IT systems.
([27])   COM(2023) 405 final

funding and conflict of interest. DG EAC also developed its use of EDES, which it hopes to build on in 2024.

Suspected irregularities or fraud and ongoing investigations of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) and the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) were taken into account in assessing the reasonable assurance assigned to the NAs over the reporting period.

On the basis of the available information **DG EAC has reasonable assurance that the anti-fraud measures in place are effective** overall. However, the action plan of EAC's Anti-fraud Strategy due for update in 2023, was not possible because of additional analysis, required on issues related to dominant actors and supporting organisations where measures were also taken in design of the overall call for proposals. Once this analysis is complete the Anti-Fraud Action Plan will be updated in 2024 and related anti-fraud actions will be implemented throughout the year.

c) *Safeguarding of assets and information (if applicable)*

Not applicable for DG EAC.

d) *Reliability of reporting (if applicable)*

EIF

For the 2014-2020 MFF, DG EAC entrusted management of funds related to the **Student Loan Guarantee Fund Financial Instrument to the European Investment Fund (EIF)**,

EIF itself has undergone the EU's 'Pillar Assessment' and is thus compliant with good standard practice and has an efficient internal control system. Furthermore, a monitoring framework with Agreed Upon Procedures' was set up to provide reassurance on the regularity of SLGF operations. No irregularities were noted in the "Agreed Upon Procedures" by the external auditor or adequate remedial actions were implemented by the financial intermediary.

Accounting controls

DG EAC has established a work programme for accounting controls in 2023, based on the risk assessment carried out at the beginning of the year. In 2023 DG EAC paid particular attention to the data quality controls having an impact for the transfer of data to Summa. The controls carried out in 2023 do not show significant or systematic errors, which confirm the accuracy of the work done by the central financial cell.

Cross-sub delegations

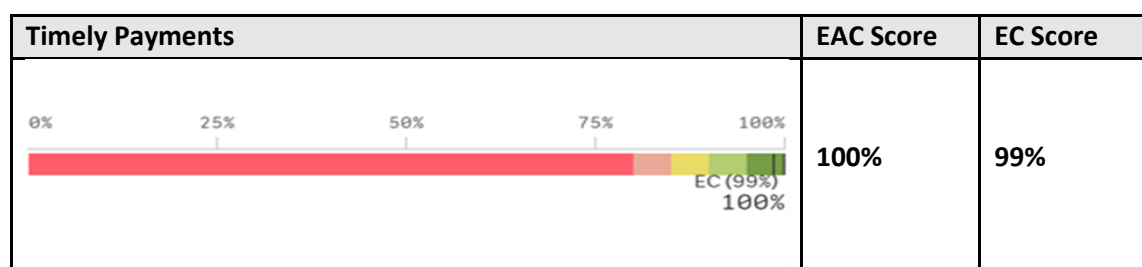No new cross-sub delegations were received in 2023.

2.1.2. Efficiency of controls

Reporting on time-to-pay, time-to-inform and time-to-grant

In terms of the efficiency indicators time-to-inform and time-to-grant (Art 194.2 FR), it is to be noted that 2 call for proposals have been launched in 2023, which are still under evaluation in early 2024.

Financial management in DG EAC was excellent in 2023. The DG managed to keep all the key performance indicators in green throughout the whole year. At the end of 2023 the DG managed to consume all the available C1 credits both in commitments and payments, including additional credits received from DG BUDG in the last week of the year.

As in previous years following the treatment of the Yearly Reports received from the National Agencies in 2023 DG EAC was able to recover an important amount (+/- EUR 237 million). This money will be reinjected in next year programmes activities.

Timely Payments	EAC Score	EC Score
	100%	99%

As illustrated in Annex 4 and included in the table below, only EUR 4.2 million of all the payments made (EUR 3 983 million) were paid late in 2023:

	2023			2022			Increase 2022/2023	
	Total payments	Payments on time	% of payments on time	Total payments	Payments on time	% of payments on time	YoY% Total payments	YoY% Payments on time
Number of payments	12.552	12.480	99%	12.140	12.097	100%	3%	3%
Amount of payments	3.983.143.499,65	3.978.904.970	100%	3.630.696.052,00	3.613.373.432,00	100%	10%	10%

These late payments have generated in 2023 late interest for a total of EUR 4 393.02.

In 2023, DG EAC registered 2 379 invoices (2 176 in 2022) out of these 83 invoices were registered late (3.5%) this being well within the set target for this KPI (10%).

The following initiatives have been taken during 2023 to (further) improve controls efficiency in financial management:

- Further development of the reporting tools and investment in data quality to facilitate the monitoring of operations with national agencies (Annex II to Data Store Produce, Clearings Data Production, E+ Link Dynamic Reports, ABAC Data Explorer, Daily Trackers),

- Further development of tools for the follow-up of DG EAC financial transactions (Late Payments & Invoices Tracker, Transactions Plan vs Actual, Workflow Risk Analysis, ABAC Data Explorer),
- The procedures monitoring indicators in the monthly strategic dashboard are available (overview of procedures not started/on-going/closed, overview of on-going procedures per stage 1/2/3 and overview of delayed procedures).

Budget execution

Halfway through the current MFF, 2023 should be remembered as a remarkable budgetary year. DG EAC programmes have reached the cruising speed, implementing actions faster than first years of this MFF, and even able to absorb additional credits.

DG EAC successfully applied a robust budget approach characterised by prudence, adaptability and strategic foresight Also, in relation to National Agencies and Executive agencies. DG EAC together with Executive agencies (EACEA and REA) managed to close the year with outstanding budgetary performance in EU budget reaching a full (100%) budget execution both in commitment and payment appropriations, including a reinforcement of EUR 160 million in payments received during the Global exercise as well as additional unused credits from other DGs during the last days of the year.

2.1.3. Economy of controls

Where indirect management is concerned, the cost of controls borne by the Commission, the Member States and the Entrusted Entities ([28]) needs to be reported separately. The sources of these figures and how they were estimated are to be reported together with the assessment of their completeness and reliability.

The global total of DG EAC's estimated cost of controls at Commission level is 1.40% (see Annex 7). For the Erasmus+ and ESC Relevant Control System, the cost of control is 1.51% (incl. all other direct management and management of EACEA[29]). For the EIT Relevant Control System, the cost of control is 0.36%. When considering the additional costs of control incurred at the level of National Agencies responsible for implementing Erasmus+ and ESC, the overall cost of control is estimated to be 7.97%.

DG EAC's control environment and control strategy remained stable during 2023, the conclusion on the cost-effectiveness of controls is unchanged from last year.

([28]) For indirect management with Entrusted Entities: any types of management, administrative or other remuneration fees paid to them by the Commission (even though it is acknowledged that those contributions cover broader elements than only control costs in the strict sense) are to be reported separately from the DG's supervision or monitoring costs. (Fees 'paid' can also be a % withheld on the gross amount of funds transferred.)

[29] Direct management payments represent below 5% of the total payments. Therefore, the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps payments contain indirect and direct management payments including the contribution payments to the running costs of EACEA. A separate calculation would insignificantly change the final result.

DG EAC concludes that the structures in place are considered to be cost effective on a multi-annual basis.

2.1.4. Conclusion on the cost-effectiveness of controls

The global total of DG EAC's estimated cost of controls at Commission level is 1.40%.

Based on the most relevant key indicators and control results as outlined in Annex 7, **DG EAC has assessed the effectiveness, efficiency and economy of its control system and reached a positive conclusion on the cost-effectiveness of the controls for which it is responsible.**

2.2. Audit observations and recommendations

This section sets out the observations, opinions and conclusions reported by auditors – including the limited conclusion of the Internal Auditor on the state of internal control. Summaries of the management measures taken in response to the audit recommendations are also included, together with an assessment of the likely material impact of the findings on the achievement of the internal control objectives, and therefore on management's assurance.

Audits by the Internal Audit Service (IAS)

In 2023, DG EAC had one audit on IT security management, leading to one very important recommendation related to 'Data Classification'. An action plan was sent to and agreed with IAS.

The IAS audit 'Effectiveness of the protection of personal data of beneficiaries of and participants in the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes still has a very important open recommendation. It is expected to be completed in Q1 2024. More details are provided in Annex 8.

Limited conclusion of the IAS on the state of internal Control

The limited conclusion of the IAS on the state of internal control is that the internal control systems put in place in DG EAC for the audited processes are effective, except for the observations giving rise to the 'very important' recommendations of the Audit on IT security management (Recommendation N° 1: data classification and IT security Plan) and of the Audit on the effectiveness of the protection of personal data of beneficiaries and participants of programmes under the responsibility of DG EAC (Recommendation N° 5: transfer of personal data to third countries).

Audits by the Court of Auditors

In ECA's annual report, for Chapter 5, main covering Horizon Europe, the estimated level of error communicated by the Court is 2,7%. The Erasmus+, ESC and Creative Europe programmes are included under chapter 6. As it has been in previous years, Erasmus+ is among the low-risk expenditure programmes and the ECA conclude that the estimate level of error is below the materiality threshold of 2,0%.

No recommendations were raised by the ECA to DG EAC in its Annual report on the implementation of the EU budget for the 2022 financial year. More details are provided in Annex 8.

2.3. Assessment of the effectiveness of internal control systems

The Commission has adopted an Internal Control Framework based on international good practice, to ensure the achievement of its policy and management objectives. Compliance with the internal control framework is a compulsory requirement.

DG EAC uses the organisational structure and the internal control systems suited to achieving its policy and internal control objectives in accordance with the internal control principles and has due regard to the risks associated with the environment in which it operates.

DG EAC has assessed its internal control system during the reporting year and, as outlined in Annex 8**, has concluded that** it is effective and the components and principles are present and functioning well overall, but some improvements are needed as minor deficiencies were identified related to Internal Control principles 13 (data protection), Internal Control Principle 8 (assess fraud risk) and Internal Control Principle 11 (selecting and developing general control activities over technology).

The following actions are/will be taken in this respect: for Internal Control Principle 13: once EDPS formally allows it, the annexes on data-protection to the Contribution agreements with Turkey, Serbia and North Macedonia will be updated; for Internal Control Principle 8, the DG EAC action plan of Anti-Fraud Strategy will be updated and further improvements will be made to increase the overall IT security posture of all EAC IT modules.

2.4. Conclusions on the assurance

This section reviews the assessment of the elements already reported above (in Sections 2.1, 2.2, 2.3.), and the sub-conclusions already reached. It draws an overall conclusion to support the declaration of assurance and whether it should be qualified with reservations.

The information reported in Section 2 is comprehensive and complete as regards the coverage of the budget delegated to the AOD, and information has been reported for all significant budget areas. The reliability of the information is supported by the building blocks of assurance as described in Annex 7 and 8.

The true and fair view is supported by the supervisory verification of the error rates calculated by entrusted bodies. The regular reporting on all aspects of the programmes ensures that resources are used for the intended purpose. The programme design, its rules, and its implementation ensure sound financial management, legality and regularity, non-omission of significant information, as well as the other internal control objectives.

In conclusion, based on the elements reported above, management has reasonable assurance that, overall, suitable controls are in place and working as intended; risks are being appropriately monitored and mitigated; and necessary improvements and reinforcements are being implemented. The Director-General, in her capacity as Authorising Officer by Delegation has signed the Declaration of Assurance.

2.5. Declaration of Assurance

Declaration of Assurance

I, the undersigned,

Director-General of the Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture.

In my capacity as authorising officer by delegation

Declare that the information contained in this report gives a true and fair view [30].

State that I have reasonable assurance that the resources assigned to the activities described in this report have been used for their intended purpose and in accordance with the principles of sound financial management, and that the control procedures put in place give the necessary guarantees concerning the legality and regularity of the underlying transactions.

This reasonable assurance is based on my own judgement and on the information at my disposal, such as the results of the self-assessment, ex-post controls, the work of the Internal Audit Service, and the lessons learnt from the reports of the Court of Auditors for years prior to the year of this declaration.

Confirm that I am not aware of anything not reported here which could harm the interests of the institution.

Brussels, 21 March 2024

(Signed)

Pia Ahrenkilde Hansen

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[30] True and fair in this context means a reliable, complete and correct view on the state of affairs in the DG/Executive Agency.

3. MODERNISING THE ADMINISTRATION

3.1. Human resource management

In 2023, the HR Correspondent (HRC) continued delivering quality HR services within the DG, supporting the Director-General in optimally allocating the shrinking resources, in order to mitigate the growing workload, including by resorting to temporary reinforcements and the use of a limited DG pool of colleagues available to fill medium-term staff gaps.

The HRC and the internal communication function completed the actions devised following the 2021 Staff opinion survey. The main focus was on strengthening informal contacts between colleagues (e.g., coffees with random colleagues, videos to present teams and their work, or "EAC's got talent" to discover colleagues' hidden talents), visibility of senior management (e.g. launch of "rapid-fire challenge" with senior managers or informal coffees with the Director-General) and supporting the uptake of collaborative working methods (promotion of M365 for staff and management).

As the corporate approach to Learning and Development (L&D) management evolved, the HRC adapted its own processes and procedures to support DG EAC teams, and to optimise the budget use. Team-events featured importantly in the L&D activities, supporting the objective of the actions to reconnect teams; the HRC guided managers to organise, where possible, cost-free or cost-effective events.

HR issues (including Ethics) were addressed in two Internal Control meetings with middle-managers in order to ensure adherence to the internal control principles.

The HR function continued to be an active member of EAC Equality network, sharing experiences and good practices on HR issues and following the developments in this area.

To reap the benefits of staff rotation, the HRC continued welcome events for newcomers and trainees, and put in place a new system to monitoring the provision of handover files, increasing substantially the delivery rate.

3.2. Digital transformation and information management

In 2023, DG EAC supported the implementation of the Erasmus+, European Solidarity Corps, and Creative Europe programs by improving and completing IT modules in the EAC IT Landscape effectively mitigating the delays that had accumulated since 2021. Importantly, the synchronization of IT delivery with the programmes' lifecycles has been achieved. Focus had been with the Beneficiary Module which allows beneficiaries and National agencies to manage mobilities and their reporting. Issues with performance, stability, data quality, scope, and user experience were all addressed during 2023 (action plan) resulting in a 66% drop in the number of open support tickets since end-2021. DG EAC actively collaborated with DIGIT to enhance our security posture and optimise the use of corporate infrastructures. A set of IT Legacy systems have been decommissioned or closed during

2023. DG EAC had 0% unsupported IT systems (hosted in the corporate datacentre) by 13/11/2023.

Facts and figures – IT Modules (most important) of EAC IT Landscape

	Status Jan 2023	Status Dec 2023
EESCP	01/01/2021 until 31/01/2023 1.913.116 unique visitors	01/01/2021 until 31/12/2023 2.775.817 unique visitors
AM	74.659 projects assessed	137.420 projects & 18.577 final reports assessed
AF	60.000 applications (all rounds call 2022) Grant requests 3.2 billion €	82.000 Applications (all rounds call 2023) Grant Requests ~5.1 billion €
BM	36.000 Projects 389.000 Mobilities 36.000 Beneficiaries 156.000 Participants Reports 9.000 Final Reports	94.908 Projects 1.504.391 Mobilities 95.036 Beneficiaries 1.256.709 Participants Reports 39.458 Final Reports
PMM	since 2021 1.150 unique auth. users 548.727 processes	since 2021 1.713 unique auth. users 1.068.543 processes

Highlighting the much-improved performance of the EAC IT Landscape's IT Modules, one noteworthy example is the European Solidarity Corps and Youth Portal (EYP). Boasting over 10.67 million registered visitors, EYP supported the very successful DiscoverEU travel pass competitions. EYP secured the 10th position among the most visited EU/EC websites for 2023. Furthermore, initiatives associated with the European Year of Youth 2022, including activities in solidarity with Ukraine, received recognition. Efforts were nominated for the European Ombudsman's Award for Good Administration in the category of "Excellence in citizen-oriented delivery" in 2023.

The European Solidarity Corps and Youth Portal (EYP) has been seamlessly transitioned to cloud hosting.

The **Traineeship Office** received in 2023 a fully modernised platform (new **Stages IT System**) to recruit and manage the trainees of the European Commission. DG EAC Business entities have been transferred to DG HR (new System Owner) in September 2023. DIGIT will replace DG EAC as supplier in Q1 2024.

DG EAC notably fully embraced the **Dual Pillar Approach "Reuse, Buy, Build"** for the EAC IT Landscape. Also, the re-used DIGIT solution (IMT) and Stages are based on SaaS solutions.

DG EAC continued following in 2023 for all its EAC supplied IT developments the **Digital Solutions Modernisation Plan,** along the lines of the 11 principles of the Digital Strategy. Following the guidelines of **Green, resilient and secure infrastructure and Digital Culture** during 2023, DG EAC increased its overall IT security posture of all its IT modules. DG EAC has created an action plan based on the **IT Security Strategy** 2023-2024 and the findings of the recent IAS Audit on the management of information technology security in DG EAC.

In 2023, DG EAC recognised the need for a replacement for the IMT ticketing system (Issue Management Tool). As a solution, a new (Jira-based), EAC Service Portal (EACSP) was introduced. This ensures that DG EAC stays adaptable and considers alternative solutions based on evolving technology and support offerings.

A follow-up on the **WELCOME migration activities** for all EAC staff was done.

In line with EAC IT governance practices, DG EAC has in 2023 regularly updated the IT **Portfolio management** systems (**GovIS 2**) in terms of business/technical capacity data, IT security/Data Protection, investments of already established or new IS systems/projects.

3.3.   Sound environmental management

DG EAC has carried out in 2023 various activities in order to raise awareness among its staff and develop a "green mindset", focused on specific and time-relevant topics: Green transportation, Green public procurement, More efficient use of resources, Waste management.

Regarding green public procurement, it should be noted that DG EAC is using only "contracts" which have been put at its disposal by central services (e.g., OIB). DG EAC informed all concerned EAC staff that they should prefer the "green" option in the office supplies' catalogue.
Next to the above, DG EAC also supported the process of increasing awareness in general environmental matters (ex. in 2023, DG EAC has participated in one biodiversity awareness activity, it was a Tree planting event , Climate and sustainability education: EAC at COP28) as well as specific topics like the more efficient use of resources (ex. EMAS paperless working tips!, EMAS tips on energy and water consumption, Keen to go green?) and reducing and management of waste (ex. Posting coffee capsules recycling near all bins and coffee machines, Less waste, more action together). More details about the articles can be found in the Internal control action plan 2023.

3.4.   Examples of economy and efficiency

DG EAC continued consolidating the simplification measures already introduced and will further automate its internal and external financial management processes:

-       DG EAC looked for in-house IT solutions to financially manage its business portfolio under indirect management with National Agencies and the so-called non-procurement-non grant activities; hence it was in contact with DG INTPA for the eventual use of the Light Contract Management Tool developed for the RELEX family.

-       DG EAC further improved financial reporting to provide more detailed statistics and analysis to operational units, monitor level of activity and adjust needed resources more actively as well as better align and integrate financial reporting within DG BUDG financial performance scorecard.

The Commission received several inquiries raised by the media and the European Parliament during 2023 regarding the adherence to the EU values by recipients of Erasmus+ funds from the National Agencies operating in indirect management. In response to these inquiries, a series of strategic measures were implemented, such as a strengthened narrative on Eu values in annual work programmes, the addition of a dimension under award criteria for assessing how relevant the project is for the respect and promotion of shared EU values or the addition a self-declaration that the applicant complies with EU values in the application form used by the National Agencies working in indirect management.

Regarding the revision of the Financial Regulation started in 2022, DG EAC supported the Commission's proposal to further strengthen the protection of the financial interest of the Union against acts and entities that are not compliant with EU values by strengthening the Commission's Early-detection and Exclusion System (EDES).

DG EAC reinforced data governance for performance data and intensified the efforts already deployed in delivering accountability of funding programmes through enhanced internal and external performance reporting. In addition, analytical tools deployed to National Agencies were refined to improve further the effectiveness in addressing risks of double funding and meet the highest standards of budgetary and financial management. The key data assets inventory of DG EAC was updated at the end of 2023. An assessment of the corporate data governance principles implementation for these data assets resulted in an 80% score. This score is based on the implementation of the four key principles [31] for each data asset.

The mid-term evaluations of DG EAC's programmes that started in 2023 presented an opportunity to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the programmes, and gather the relevant data needed to enable potential improvements over the remaining programming period and identifying potential issues in terms of its intervention logic.

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[31] 1. Identification of data stewards, 2. Metadata sharing on data.europa.eu, 3. Documentation of data capture and 4. Regular changes and adaptations of underlying IT systems.