

In this briefing sheet, additional detail is provided on the role and responsibilities of experts involved in assessing **Final Reports for KA2 Strategic Partnerships** with a focus on tasks, criteria and scoring mechanisms.

Introduction

A large part of the **Erasmus+** Programme follows a decentralised model of implementation, meaning that Erasmus+ National Agencies (NAs) in the 33 Programme Countries take responsibility for the management of decentralised funds. For some actions, NAs contract independent (external) experts to assist them, most notably for assessment activities taking place either at the point of project selection, or with a view to assessing mid-term progress or final project delivery. At the final report stage, KA2 Strategic Partnerships having a grant of more than €60,000 are required, in all cases, to involve at least one external expert. Where there are lower levels of funding involved, NAs can choose whether to involve external or internal experts (NA staff) in final report assessment.

Expert Appointment, Code of Conduct and Conflict of Interest

As an expert, you are appointed on the basis of your existing knowledge, skills and experience in the field(s) of education and training and youth for which you have been asked to undertake assessment. There are also a number of operational principles which experts need to follow, such as:

- the need to perform assessments to the highest professional standards and to operate within deadlines set by the NA;
- the need to abide by a code of conduct - usually this is detailed in an appointment letter or contract;
- the need to ensure the confidentiality of information accessed during the assessment process, with experts required not to disclose information about the report(s) or product(s) being assessed and/or the results of the assessment process to others;

You are also required to confirm that there is no “conflict of interest” in relation to the report(s) or product(s) for which you have requested to give your opinion.

« ...a conflict of interests exists where the impartial and objective exercise of the functions of a financial actor or other person... is compromised for reasons involving family, emotional life, political or national affinity, economic interest or any other shared interest with a recipient» - Financial Regulation Art. 57(2)

To ensure this, all experts are required to sign a declaration that no such conflict (of interest) exists at the time of appointment, confirming that they will inform the NA of both the existence and nature of any such conflict should this subsequently become known. The same declaration binds experts to confidentiality. The NA will then decide on the required course of action (e.g. exclusion, re-assignment) where a conflict of interest is declared.

In all cases, to ensure independence, expert names are not made public.



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Quality Assessment by Individual Experts

Before final report assessment begins, experts are briefed by NA staff on the programme and action under assessment, as well as on the final report assessment process and associated scoring procedures.

Experts are provided with briefing documents and guidance materials and are given access to the Online Expert Evaluation Tool (**OEET**) in which the results of the assessment must be entered using pre-defined quality assessment forms. Experts can choose to initially work offline (e.g. through use of a template) and to subsequently enter their data in OEET.

Before starting the assessment of applications, experts must have:

- sound knowledge of the Erasmus+ Programme Guide, which provides information to potential applicants on the Erasmus+ programme, in general, and on specific funding actions under which they might apply for a grant;
- in-depth knowledge of the action concerned, its objectives, and the policy priorities that apply to the targeted action and field(s);
- a sound understanding of the assessment criteria applied during project selection and final report assessment;
- familiarity with the content and structure of the relevant final report form;
- familiarity with all briefing/guidance documents associated with final report assessment, as provided by the NA;
- basic competence in the use of the OEET, based on a technical briefing provided by the NA.

Additionally, to enable the necessary comparative assessment to take place, experts must review and reflect on a number of important documents before completing their final report assessment - these include (but are not limited to):

- the initial grant application;
- expert feedback provided by those assessing the original application;
- documentation relating to any formal amendment contractual amendment(s) as agreed by the NA;
- the final report and all related annexes (excluding annexes of a purely financial nature);
- all products on VALOR - the Erasmus+ Project Results Platform (<http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/>).

In order to ensure coherency in final report assessment, **standard quality assessment criteria** have been established by the European Commission and are to be used in all Programme Countries, and by all experts. In all cases, experts must work independently, providing scores and comments for each assessment criterion and summarising their assessment using the language specified by the NA. On completion, experts should validate their assessment in the OEET, thereby confirming that they have no conflict of interest with respect to the allocated assessment.

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Assessment Criteria

As an expert, you are required to assess final reports using pre-defined assessment criteria.

For KA2 Strategic Partnership projects there are four assessment criteria. Each of the four assessment criteria - *Relevance*; *Quality of Project Implementation*; *Quality of Cooperation*; *Impact and Dissemination* - comprises several elements which must be taken into account when analysing and assessing an application. These elements form an exhaustive list of points to be considered, by individual experts, prior to awarding a score for the given criterion. It is important, however, not to score each of these sub-elements separately, instead providing an single score for **each of the four assessment criteria**. Additional detail is given in the *briefing sheets* developed for those assessing final reports for KA2 Strategic Partnerships.

When assessing final reports against the four core assessment criteria, experts should:

- make a judgement on the extent to which the final report (and all associated outputs and outcomes) meets the defined criteria: in most cases, judgements should be based on information provided in the application and the final report with the only exception being where an expert is asked to reflect on how project results (for example, intellectual outputs) contribute to change and improvement within existing landscapes (i.e. in the field or sector being addressed by the project);
- be aware that information for a specific award criterion might appear in different parts of the final report and should make an effort take all relevant information into account when awarding scores under individual assessment criteria [see also the “Where to Look” *briefing sheet* for final report assessment ;
- consider the type of project, the scale of activities and the amount of funding awarded: strategic partnerships vary widely in terms of size, complexity and process or product-orientation; in fact, from 2015, two types of Strategic Partnerships were able to be financed, with notably different ambitions in terms of exchanging best practices and/or developing innovative products and services (further detail on funding types is provided in the Erasmus+ Programme Guide); in this respect, experts should integrate the *proportionality principle* into final report assessment, as was the case for experts assessing applications for funding.

PROPORTIONALITY PRINCIPLE

In EU terms, the principle of proportionality regulates the exercise of powers by the European Union, limiting intervention to that which is necessary to achieve the objectives of the various European Treaties. In other words, the content and form of a particular action or project must be in line with the broader aim that is being pursued. From an assessment perspective, the idea of proportionality is also extremely important, enabling (often high-level) assessment criteria to be applied to projects of differing sizes and ambitions. In this respect, it is important to consider the suitability and appropriateness of different actions and activities in relation to broader project goals. As an example, whilst larger-scale partnerships might be expected to impact on education and training systems and processes at one or more levels (institutional, regional, national, European), smaller partnerships, targeting the exchange of best practices, would probably centre on the potential for impact on participating staff, learners and institutions. This does not mean, however, that smaller partnerships (such as those involving just two or three schools) might not have more significant ambitions for change and improvement, including through the joint development of one or more intellectual outputs.

Assessment Scoring

At both the application stage and the final report stage, assessments are scored out of a maximum of 100 points.

Table 1 provides a comparison of the different scoring structures, at each of these important assessment stages, confirming a different - yet no less important - focus during final report assessment.

Table 1: Overview of KA2 Strategic Partnerships Assessment Scores at Key Stages (Application and Final Report)

ASSESSMENT CRITERION	APPLICATION STAGE	FINAL REPORT STAGE	NOTABLE CHANGES
Relevance	30	20	This criterion attracts fewer points at the final report assessment stage, with a greater focus on the relevance of project results - to the selected field, sector, user groups, stakeholder audiences and priority areas - than on the relevance of the original concept or idea.
Quality of Project Design / Implementation	20	25	This criterion scores more highly at the final report assessment stage, with a focus on project delivery and the quality of activities undertaken and products/outputs produced, rather than on merits or weaknesses in the original project design.
Quality of Project Team / Cooperation Arrangements	20	15	This criterion attracts fewer points at the final report assessment stage, with a distinct focus on the level of partner contributions and on mechanisms put in place to facilitate this, rather than on the nature of individual partners and/or the overall make-up of the partnership or consortium.
Impact and Dissemination	30	40	This criterion scores more highly at the final report assessment stage, attracting up to 40% of the overall score, and having a focus on the impact of the project (at individual, institutional and systemic levels), on efforts made to market and promote the end project results to new audiences and on the potential for sustained impact and delivery.
TOTAL	100	100	

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Whilst the scoring of a project application will potentially determine whether it is to be financed or not, scoring during final report assessment is equally important as it can determine the final amount of grant funding that a project will receive, with beneficiaries required to score **at least 50 points** during the quality assessment of their final report to enable their grant to be paid in full (NB: this does not take into account the eligibility of costs which is addressed during a separate financial assessment). In Table 2, an overview is given of the different scoring categories that apply during final report assessment, with definitions provided alongside the associated “scoring range”.

Table 2: Minimum and Maximum Scores for Different Qualitative Assessment Definitions

	VERY GOOD - BEST PRACTICE	GOOD - SATISFACTORY	WEAK
Scoring Categories and Definitions	<p>The project is considered from very good to excellent in terms of qualitative and quantitative results and these are worthy of disseminating more widely.</p> <p>Projects in this category should be highlighted to the NA as examples of good practice.</p>	<p>The project is considered from average to good. Overall objectives have been met and activities and outputs are of a satisfactory standard. There may have been some problems, issues or deviations and, although some justification might be provided, aspects of the final report might not be explained as clearly or as fully as would be expected. There are no major concerns regarding overall project implementation yet there might be some recommendations and/or areas for improvement.</p>	<p>There are serious concerns regarding the quality of project implementation and the organisation of activities. Overall objectives have not been met and/or there are significant concerns regarding the quality of the activities or outputs compared with that which was originally approved. There is little or no explanation and/or the explanation that is provided is not satisfactory.</p>
Scoring Range	76-100 points	50-75 points	0-49 points

Where a final report is assessed as **Weak**, scoring less than 50 points overall, the final grant amount can be reduced by the NA as a consequence of poor, partial or delayed project implementation, even where all of the reported activities were eligible. Projects should only be scored as Weak in **exceptional circumstances**, however, with all such cases discussed with the NA prior to finalising a final report assessment. Where a score of 50 is awarded, deductions can be made according to the following scale: grant **reduction of 25%** where scored between 41 and 49 points; grant **reduction of 50%** where scored between 26 and 40 points; grant **reduction of 75%** where scored between 0 and 25 points.

Experts should not use half-points or decimals during individual assessment.

Assessment Comments

In addition to scoring, experts are required to provide comments on each award criterion and to refer explicitly to those elements being assessed. In all cases, expert comments must be consistent with and reflect the score that is given. Additional detail on specific assessment criteria (and related sub-elements) is provided in related **briefing sheets**.

Regardless of the score being awarded, experts must assess the final report in full, providing comments under each of the four assessment criteria. Additionally, experts must prepare comments on the application as a whole, providing a summative analysis of the final report and highlighting strengths and weaknesses associated with overall project delivery.

Expert comments will be used to provide feedback to applicants therefore experts must ensure clarity, consistency and an appropriate level of detail in their comments. Expert comments will be quality checked by NAs to ensure these requirements are met: where this is not the case, experts may be required to revise their assessment comments to ensure that the required quality standards are met. Examples of assessment comments are provided in a related *briefing sheet*.

Financial Assessment

Experts are not required to undertake a detailed financial review as a part of their assessment. NA staff are responsible for implementing a separate financial assessment and for checking the reported financial data against supporting documentation. Whilst the level of documentation might differ from project to project, all Strategic Partnership projects will be subject to some form of financial assessment - resulting in a calculation of the final grant amount for the project.

As a part of their assessment, however, experts are required to consider at what level the planned actions, activities, outputs and outcomes have been delivered and whether those activities that have been implemented meet with minimum eligibility criteria. Where there are significant deviations, it is important to record this during final report assessment so that those undertaking financial assessment can consider whether this has an impact on the final grant amount. In addition to commenting on specific areas of underachievement under the four core assessment criteria, further reflecting this in the individual scores, experts should also add a short comment in the section entitled **Budget Comments to NA** highlighting those actions and activities worthy of additional review during financial assessment. In all cases, the NA will make the final decision as to the required reductions.

Consolidation and Final Scores

In cases where there are two experts involved in the assessment of a final report, one expert will be asked to prepare and submit a consolidated version of the two individual (expert) assessments in the OEET. Where this is required, the expert that is involved will be informed by the NA of the required consolidation and data-entry process.

Schools-only Strategic Partnerships

For “Schools-only Strategic Partnerships” there are two distinct approaches to final report assessment.

For the **coordinating country** (i.e. the country that approved the Strategic Partnership application and which has signed a mono-beneficiary grant agreement with the school that has coordinator status) the **standard approach** applies to final report assessment, following the same steps and principles that are described in this briefing sheet, with external experts also involved in the final report assessment process. There may be additional documents to review, however, as a result of reduced assessment taking place in the different partner countries (see “for partner countries” below).

For **partner countries** (i.e. countries which have signed a mono-beneficiary grant agreement with one or more schools having partner status) a **reduced approach** is adopted during final report assessment. This reduced approach involves an assessment of the eligibility of activities (based on a short narrative report provided by the partner schools) and an assessment of expenses (based on financial statements provided by the partner schools). NAs in the partner countries are also responsible for informing partner schools of the overall assessment score - as awarded during final report assessment in the coordinating country - as well as the final grant amount that an individual partner school will receive. Reduced assessment, in partner countries, will normally pre-date standard assessment with NAs sharing (reduced assessment) results with the NA in the coordinating country. Reduced assessment will normally be undertaken by NA staff.

Problems and Doubts

In no situation should an expert make contact with beneficiaries (or partners) directly. If documentation is missing or problems arise during final report assessment, experts should, in all cases, contact the NA whereupon a decision will be taken as to whether the beneficiary should be asked to provide additional information or clarification, or whether the final report should be assessed as presented.

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