

Léargas Strategy Statement 2015-2017



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INTRODUCTION

This strategic plan sets out what Léargas intends to achieve in addressing the vision and objectives of Erasmus+, set within the context of the key national concerns and priorities of Irish systems and practice in relation to the school education, further and adult education, vocational education and training (VET), and youth work fields.

This foreword provides an overview of Léargas, the external contexts within which it works and a summary of its internal environment. These set the scene for the development of our three-year strategy from the beginning of 2015 through to the end of 2017.

LÉARGAS

In 1986, Léargas was established as the Youth Exchange Bureau by the Minister for Youth and Sport in the Department of Education. The Léargas brief was to support and develop international exchange and collaboration in the youth sector, mainly through the medium of European Commission-funded education and training programmes.

In the succeeding years, Léargas managed a number of generations of these programmes, initially through sector-specific programmes in Initial VET and Language Learning (PETRA and LINGUA), and also in youth work and formal education (for example, Youth for Europe, the Teachers' Exchange Programme, Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci). More recently, the process at European level has been one of rationalisation and integration through the Lifelong Learning and Youth in Action programmes and now culminating in Erasmus+, which brings together seven predecessor programmes. These programmes have been funded by the EU Directorate General for Education and Culture (DGEAC) and an earlier Directorate, DG12. Along the way Léargas also successfully managed European Social Fund (ESF) programmes ('Community Initiatives') in Human Resource Development and national programmes such as the Education Equality Initiative and the WorldWise development education programme.

In its 28 years of programme management, Léargas has built a national and international reputation for effectiveness in the transparent management and distribution of significant levels of European funding to support international collaboration and exchange. We have also built a reputation for a friendly and supportive approach to programme applicants and beneficiaries, making a particular effort to clarify and—where possible—simplify what can be challenging application, administrative and reporting procedures.

EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

Erasmus+

Léargas has developed this strategic plan close to one year after the introduction of Erasmus+. During this period, we have had an opportunity to get to know the programme well and to manage all phases of the programme lifecycle. We have also examined closely the operational challenges that the programme presents.

Erasmus+ represents a significant development by the Commission in its support of participating countries addressing economic and social challenges through education, training, youth work and adult education. The programme emphasises the need for strategic responses to practical challenges as well as the need for innovative educational and training systems in the European Learning Area. In this sense the programme is a key part of the Commission's response to European objectives as set out in key policy statements such as Europe 2020 and Education and Training 2020.

Erasmus+ brings some new challenges to the national agencies tasked with its implementation. The very significant increase (40%) in the programme's budget is welcome but brings with it an expectation of increased levels of participation, which must be stimulated and managed by those agencies. There is an increased emphasis on dissemination and exploitation of the results of the projects funded by the programme and a welcome but challenging requirement for evidence-based measurement of the programme's impact.

Lastly, with the introduction of Erasmus+, the Commission has provided a suite of nine new or upgraded interactive management tools. These present a significant learning challenge for agency staff, coupled with implementation problems that arise with the introduction of any new technologies.

National Priorities

The Department of Education and Skills has set out its priorities in its 2014 publication "Ireland's Education and Training Sector – Overview of Service Delivery and Reform" under four broad themes: Learning for Life; Improving Quality and Accountability; Supporting Inclusion and Diversity; and Building the Right Systems and Infrastructure. These priorities overlap with and are complementary to the European objectives referred to above. Each of these themes has a number of sub-themes or areas of action which provide an interesting agenda for possible collaborative work by institutions in the context of Erasmus +.

In the youth sphere, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs has developed its National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014–2020. This provides a framework for the development of more detailed strategies including a new youth strategy. This is being developed with the assistance of the National Youth Work Advisory Committee and should provide more coherence, connectivity and coordination of policy and provision for young people aged 10-24. The Department is emphasising quality service delivery through the development of quality standards and has piloted a set of best-practice standards for volunteer-led youth clubs and groups.

In the formal education sector, significant developments in the last two years include:

- the establishment of Education and Training Boards, involving the rationalisation of the previous VEC structures into 16 new ETBs with additional functions
- the creation of a new Further Education and Training Authority, SOLAS
- the introduction of Junior Cycle reforms at second level

In the non-formal sector, challenges have arisen for practitioners due to cuts in funding coupled with increasing needs for the services they offer. Voluntary organisations in both adult education and the youth sectors have experienced very significant financial cuts leading, in many cases, to staff redundancies and reductions in services to their client

groups. The very significant growth in long-term unemployment, for adults and young people alike, has led to a shift in emphasis by national policy makers, towards upskilling for employment rather than the more educational and developmental focus that has been the focus of many provider organisations.

While ongoing reforms in our education system present challenges to all who operate within it, they also provide a context for international exchange and collaboration between education practitioners.

Legacy of the Economic Crisis

The financial challenges of the last six years have had a notable impact on the entire public and voluntary sectors. Many voluntary and community organisations have seen their budgets drastically reduced with a consequent reduction of service delivery and impact on morale. As a body under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills, and also funded in part by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Léargas has experienced budgetary cut backs and has been subject to the national moratorium on staffing. These have had a consequent impact on the organisation's ability to respond to changing and increasing demands: Léargas faces into the seven-year implementation of a new programme with a staff body reduced by 20%.

INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

Reputation

Léargas has earned a reputation as a flexible and reliable programme management agency which brings a strong client focus to its work, and which is fully transparent in its management of grant distribution on behalf of its national sponsoring departments¹ and the European Commission.

Team

Léargas has an excellent, committed, experienced and skilled staff team. In response to the introduction of Erasmus+, the internal structure of Léargas has been re-organised to respond in a more cohesive and flexible way to the demands of a more integrated programme.

An Operations and Finance Unit now manages the application, contractualisation and reporting phases of project life-cycles.

Two Client Service Units manage the relationships with programme applicants and beneficiaries, and work with them to ensure quality applications and quality outcomes from funded projects.

A Communications Unit promotes programme opportunities; encourages and supports dissemination by funded projects; and communicates to our stakeholders, policy influencers and interested public, the outcomes and impact of Erasmus+ activity.

¹ Department of Education and Skills and Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Governance

Léargas—as a Limited Company, registered charity, and a body under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills—complies with the requirements of the Companies Acts, the Charities Act and the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies. In addition, its internal procedures are consistent with the requirements of the Guide for National Agencies published by the European Commission to standardise the management of the Erasmus+ programme.

Léargas has a long-established Finance and Audit Committee which oversees the Internal Audit plan and risk management process.

VISION

Supporting quality outcomes in learning and development through our management of international exchange and cooperation programmes.

MISSION

In effectively managing international programmes on behalf of the European Commission and the Irish Government, Léargas:

- communicates the value of international cooperation and exchange in education, training and youth work
- makes international cooperation and exchange accessible to a wide range of people
- contributes to the development of policy and practice in the education, training and youth fields

GOALS

Goal 1 Programme Management - Manage all programmes effectively and in compliance with regulations, systems and procedures established for National Agencies by the European Commission and the National Authorities.

Goal 2 Supporting Beneficiaries - Support beneficiaries in meeting project and programme objectives and all contractual requirements.

Goal 3 Profile and Communication - Communicate the work of Léargas so that we improve our profile and increase the reach of our programmes.

Goal 4 Value of International Collaboration - Build awareness amongst stakeholders of the value of international collaboration and the advantages of implementing an international strategy in their organisations

Goal 5 Supporting Policy and Practice Development - Contribute to relevant practice and policy development through effective communication of project activity, outcomes and impact at local, national and European level.

Goal 6 Organisational Effectiveness and Governance - Develop Léargas governance and organisation structures, processes, skills and competencies to ensure the achievement of our vision and mission.

GOAL 1 PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT

Manage all programmes effectively and in compliance with regulations, systems and procedures established for National Agencies by the European Commission and the National Authorities.

We will deliver on this goal through the following planned outcomes:

Planned Outcome 1.1 Erasmus+ is recognised as being accessible to all

To achieve this we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a supportive model for participants with fewer opportunities 	Q4, 2015 and ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a wide range of monitoring and support activities before and during the project lifecycle 	Q4, 2015 and ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor participation rates (based on geography, socio-economic constraints etc.) 	Q4, 2015 and ongoing

Planned Outcome 1.2 Erasmus+ is delivered more efficiently due to improved methodology

To achieve this we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and implement effective and efficient work practices 	Q1, 2015 and ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in staff training and development 	PMDS schedule
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review programme delivery regularly 	Q4 annually
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plan for future programme/resource requirements 	Q4 annually
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborate with colleagues in other National Agencies 	4x per annum nationally; ongoing within Europe
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Influence the development of programme systems 	Ongoing, via input to scheduled Programme Committee meetings and attendance at National Agency meetings

Planned Outcome 1.3 Léargas is actively engaged in a stakeholder consultation with a view to achieving success in implementing Léargas programmes

To achieve this we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage key individuals and organisations who are motivated and experienced to network with the priorities and objectives of Léargas programmes (within and across fields) 	[started in mid-2014] Ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a menu of effective networking instruments and frameworks for these networks to operate 	Q1 2015, and ongoing

Planned Outcome 1.4 Project outcomes are of high quality

To achieve this we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a range of supports to enable quality outcomes 	Q4, 2015 and ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage and explore recognition of participation and project outcomes 	ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide indicators for quality management 	Q2, 2016

Planned Outcome 1.5 The European Commission objectives for Erasmus+ are being met in Ireland

To achieve this we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> foster participation in learning mobilities to improve the level of key competences and skills 	ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> foster the cross-sectoral dimension of transnational and international co-operation between organisations, the co-operation between the world of education, training and youth sector and the world of work, as well as quality improvement, co-operation, innovation and internationalisation at the level of educational institutions and in youth work 	ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> enhance the international dimension of education, training and 	ongoing

Do this:	By:
youth activities and the role of youth workers and organisations as support structures for young people by encouraging mobility and co-operation projects with Partner Countries	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • foster participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities in the programme 	ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • foster improvement of the teaching and learning of languages, promotion of the Union’s broad linguistic diversity and intellectual awareness 	ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • complement policy reforms at local, regional and national level and support the development of knowledge and evidence-based youth policy as well as the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, notably through enhanced policy co-operation 	ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide efficient, effective and compliant programme management 	ongoing

GOAL 2 SUPPORTING BENEFICIARIES

Support beneficiaries in meeting project and programme objectives and all contractual requirements.

We will deliver on this goal through the following planned outcomes:

Planned Outcome 2.1 Léargas has analysed barriers to effective participation and is implementing strategies to overcome them

To achieve this we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify non-participants and analyse the barriers to their participation 	Q1 2015, and annually
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop strategies to highlight barriers and alleviate those within our control 	Q3 2015 and ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluate the impact of our work in reducing the barriers 	annually

Planned Outcome 2.2 All beneficiaries receive appropriate support in meeting contractual requirements

To achieve this we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bring a supportive approach to all beneficiaries with a particular focus on newcomers and the less experienced 	ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement appropriate training strategies and provide materials and tools to support quality project management 	Q4, 2015 and annually
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide beneficiaries with clear lines of contact and support throughout the project lifecycle 	Q1 2015 and ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assist beneficiaries to measure project impact and utilise the results in national evaluation of programme impact 	Q4 annually

GOAL 3 PROFILE AND COMMUNICATION

Communicate the work of Léargas so that we improve our profile and increase the reach of our programmes.

We will deliver on this goal through the following planned outcomes:

Planned Outcome 3.1 Léargas is recognised as an expert organisation in European and international exchange and cooperation

To achieve this, we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> develop a clear communication strategy for the organisation 	Q1 2015
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> use communication methods effectively to reach our diverse audiences 	ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> provide appropriate networking instruments and frameworks 	Q1 2015 and ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> provide clear, concise information on Léargas, on our programmes and on international exchange and cooperation 	Q1 2015 and ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> communicate our role in effective programme management to relevant national authorities and the European Commission 	Q1 2015 and annually

Planned Outcome 3.2 Léargas has strong strategic relationships within relevant networks

To achieve this, we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Léargas staff will build relationships within existing stakeholder network 	Ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> work with stakeholders to ensure their engagement with the priorities and objectives of Léargas programmes 	Q4 annually

Planned Outcome 3.3 Erasmus+ is perceived as an accessible and useful programme by our stakeholders

To achieve this, we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• promote Erasmus+ effectively	ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• provide clear and concise information on Erasmus+ in a timely and effective way	ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• provide resources to support stakeholders throughout the project lifecycle	ongoing

GOAL 4 VALUE OF INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

Build awareness amongst stakeholders of the value of international collaboration and the advantages of implementing an international strategy in their organisations.

We will deliver on this goal through the following planned outcomes:

Planned Outcome 4.1 The value and benefits of international collaboration are clearly understood and appreciated by stakeholders

To achieve this we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and communicate the value and benefits for each target group 	ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide exemplars of successful participation 	Q1 2015 and ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote international work to key stakeholders 	ongoing

Planned Outcome 4.2 International work is embedded in the practice of organisations

To achieve this we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide support on developing internationalisation strategies 	Ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with stakeholders to identify good practice 	Ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with relevant national bodies to recognise the value of international work 	Ongoing

GOAL 5 SUPPORTING POLICY AND PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

Contribute to relevant practice and policy development through effective communication of project activity, outcomes and impact at local, national and European level.

We will deliver on this goal through the following planned outcomes:

Planned Outcome 5.1 Project activity in Erasmus + in Ireland relates to national and European priorities

To achieve this we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be familiar with the relationship between Erasmus+ and national and European priorities and communicate these to stakeholders 	Q3 annually
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support applicants and beneficiaries to develop and implement projects reflecting these priorities 	Q4 annually

Planned Outcome 5.2 Key state agencies have made applications under Erasmus+ Key Action 3

To achieve this we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inform relevant government departments and key agencies of opportunities presented by Key Action 3 	[Q4 2014 and] annually
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When requested, provide an appropriate level of advice to organisations making applications 	Based on calls
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure active Irish participants in KA3 projects are included in Léargas networking activities 	Q4 annually

Planned Outcome 5.3 Outcomes and impact of the Erasmus + programme are tracked at project, field and national level

To achieve this we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide support at appropriate stages in the programme cycle to projects to develop clear objectives and performance indicators for their projects 	Q4 annually
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support projects to develop their dissemination strategies from project conception 	Q4 annually
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide mechanisms for projects to share outcomes and impact 	ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop an overall performance framework for the programme in Ireland 	Q1 2016
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review performance against the framework on a regular basis 	Annually (>Q1 2016)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage and support evidence-based research in regard to the programme and its outcomes 	Q4 annually

Planned Outcome 5.4 Relevant influencers of policy and/or practice are aware of the impact of Erasmus+

To achieve this we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage beneficiaries to make clear the links between Erasmus+ and national and European priorities in their dissemination activities 	Q4 annually
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review the outcomes and impact of projects funded in the programme 	Q1 annually
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review the potential for developments in policies and or practice arising from the above 	Q1 annually
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicate outcomes to relevant stakeholders 	4x annually; Q4 annually

Planned Outcome 5.5 Léargas is recognised as a valuable support in developing and implementing evidence-based policy and decision making

To achieve this we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourage stakeholders to advocate International work among their networks	Ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Highlight the impact (on practice and policy) of projects supported through Léargas programmes	Q1 and ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support the ongoing sharing and exchange of good practice by project beneficiaries	Q4 annually and ongoing

GOAL 6 ORGANISATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND GOVERNANCE

Develop Léargas governance and organisation structures, processes, skills and competencies to ensure the achievement of our vision and mission.

We will deliver on this goal through the following planned outcomes:

Planned Outcome 6.1 Our organisational structure and processes support collaboration in the effective delivery of Erasmus+ and organisational objectives

To achieve this we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consolidate the new unit structure in the organisation 	Q1 2015
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve collaboration across units 	ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revise reporting mechanisms to the board 	Q1 2015
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support the board in its strategic role 	ongoing

Planned Outcome 6.2 Staff members have the skills and knowledge to support organisations to make effective use of the opportunities provided by Léargas programmes

To achieve this we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to provide professional development related to competencies identified in the PMDS process 	PMDS schedule

Planned Outcome 6.3 Individual staff members achieve the best possible performance in carrying out their role

To achieve this we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure staff members understand the requirements of their role 	Q1 2015 and PMDS schedule
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review staff performance on a regular basis 	PMDS schedule

Planned Outcome 6.4 Léargas uses strong financial management processes to ensure that national and European funding are used to achieve maximum impact in the most efficient manner

To achieve this we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain relevant accounting standards in line with government, European and international guidelines 	Ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor funding absorption rates 	Quarterly
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtain value for money in funding activity 	Quarterly
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the work of the Board in the overall financial management of the organisation 	Board meetings schedule

Planned Outcome 6.5 Léargas operates in compliance with the requirements of the Department of Finance and the European Commission

To achieve this we will

Do this:	By:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the work of the Finance and Audit Committee in its annual internal audit plan 	Annually
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet all the reporting and payment requirements of government departments and the European Commission 	Ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observe Public Procurement guidelines 	Ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain and update the risk register 	Annually
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain the Operations Manual 	Annually