

How Irish schools can use Erasmus+

This year, 44 schools or school education organisations around Ireland received funding of more than €2.5 million from Erasmus+, the European Union programme for education, training, youth and sport. The programme allows for a diverse range of activities in projects large and small. Erasmus+ thus has huge scope for integrating change and innovation into the classroom. Yet often teachers don't quite know where to start, or what options are available.

To begin, it's essential to know that Erasmus+ has an organisation-based approach; projects need to address the identified needs of the entire organisation rather than of individual staff members, and must be in the context of a European Development Plan. In effect this means that organisations must agree what their development or strategic priorities are, and use Erasmus+ to pursue these goals. There are two types of projects available to do this, known as 'Key Actions'. No matter which type, a successful Erasmus+ project is one that becomes central to school life and is beneficial to school, staff and pupils.

Under Key Action 1, staff members can travel abroad for short teaching assignments or training periods designed to assist the whole school. As an example, St Paul's Primary in Laois used this action to develop intercultural competencies among its staff. With pupils coming from ever more diverse cultural backgrounds, the school saw a need to promote a sense of shared citizenship empowering all pupils

to be part of the larger European community. A cross-section of staff was selected to attend a training course on 'European Diversity Education' in Latvia, or to job shadow teachers in Slovenia. The staff then shared their learning within the organisation, helping to implement an intercultural approach across the whole school that recognised diversity and individual pupil needs.

Under Key Action 2, schools and/or school education organisations can lead or join a Strategic Partnership – a collaborative international project where organisations work together to raise standards in teaching and learning, by developing and sharing new working methods or research. These can be school-only partnerships, partnerships between local/regional authorities, or partnerships between schools and other education and training organisations. These kinds of projects need not be highly complex; for example, St Mary's Parish Primary in Louth formed a partnership with four European schools to collect myths and legends from each country using ICT. The legends became the basis for a curriculum resource to develop students' oral and written literacy skills, which will be made available online for other literacy teachers. From 2016, strategic partnerships in school education will further distinguish between projects that produce innovative intellectual outputs and those that focus on exchange of good practice. There will also

be a separate budget allocation for each, so that like is compared with like!

Implementing successful Erasmus+ projects requires the support of the organisation as a whole, which may be a challenge if there is no history of such projects or a reluctance to get involved. One approach for teachers in this situation is to begin with eTwinning, a European initiative that digitally connects schools for highly flexible collaborative projects. eTwinning projects can begin immediately after registration and be as short or long as desired, so they are well suited for individual class work. In addition to creating the initial engagement with Europe, many Erasmus+ projects have been born out of connections made through eTwinning – including the Key Action 1 project mentioned above!

Schools that are considering Erasmus+ applications should be aware that it is a competitive programme, and that applications require a good deal of planning and forethought. There is one deadline each year for applications: 2 February 2016 for Key Action 1 and 31 March 2016 for Key Action 2. Léargas holds information and application sessions before each deadline, and supports applicants throughout the process. See www.leargas.ie or contact schoolsvet@leargas.ie for more information. See also ad on page 30.

CHARIS HUGHES, Communications Officer, Léargas

St Michael's Boys NS, Mervue, Co Galway, are involved in an eTwinning project

