

Abstract

The Belgian Court of Audit investigated European action programmes in Flanders

The Belgian Court of Audit examined the Leonardo da Vinci, Socrates and Youth European action programmes. The implementation of these programmes in Flanders was shown to be a success. However, Flemish authorities show little interest in the field of management of the agencies in charge, although they are financially responsible for them. Some agencies had too little insight into Flemish cofinancing. The project selection procedures are liable for improvement and there are few watertight procedures in place to prevent double financing of one and the same project. The Court of Audit recommended that each agency should keep a central register of the Flemish contribution and refine its procedures. The Flemish authorities should also take action in matters such as oversight and reporting.

Introduction

Since 2005 the Court of Audit has each year delved into the examination of a specific European topic in order to be able, in the long run, to obtain an overall picture of European funds in Flanders. In 2006, it audited the European action programmes meant to encourage the cooperation between the Member States in the field of vocational training, education and youth activities. During the programme period 2000-2006 these programmes came under the heading Leonardo da Vinci, Socrates and Youth. As from 2007 the Leonardo da Vinci and Socrates programmes will be merged into the Lifelong Learning Programme. The Youth programme will be maintained on its own.

Management

The action programmes are managed, on the one hand, by the European Commission and, on the other, by the national governments. Each national government appoints a national authority, which oversees the efficient running of the programme. It in its turn designates a national agency, which takes on the programme's implementation. The authority is financially responsible in case of a defective programme operation. The rights and duties of the parties are defined in various contracts. Europe has clearly defined the subsidization requirements and the procedures to follow. This has clear advantages but initiators often experienced it as being cumbersome and time-consuming.

The Leonardo da Vinci action programme

The Leonardo da Vinci actionprogramme offers financial support to projects with regard to occupational training. Flanders was found to have enough qualitatively high-minded project proposals to ensure that European resources were properly used. It lacked, however, a centralized overview of the total Flemish project cofinancing, which is only available for operating costs. Generally speaking the programme was a success. There were, however, few watertight procedures in place to prevent double financing with other European schemes. Project evaluators as well as the selection committee members were sometimes coming from organisations allowed in principle to introduce projects, this is not without risks. Flemish authorities did not set up specific controls.

The Socrates action programme

The educational programme did not provide either a clear overview of Flemish project cofinancing. Flanders contributes largely to certain actions, such as Erasmus and Grundtvig, so that partial overlapping of the Leonardo da Vinci target group and, possibly, Flemish subsidies funding was creating a potential for double financing. Previously selection procedures were, at times, insufficiently documented. Moreover, Flanders was sometimes late in meeting its contractual reporting obligations towards the European Commission.

The Youth action programme

The Youth programme focuses on informal learning and free time activities. The non-profit organization Jint acts as an agency, but is also in charge of carrying out other Flemish tasks. It did not appear clearly what share of the Flemish operating resources the non-profit organization was specifically allocating to its operation as an agency. There is a potential for overlapping of the Flemish and the European modes of financing for certain projects. Group exchanges and volunteering work in Europe were particularly successful in Flanders. Nevertheless projects available were often not large enough to make use of the full European budget. As a result, Jint had not yet developed quality standards with a view to grading admissible projects. For a large part, the selection was made by people on the spot, with the subsequent risks involved.

The minister's reply

The Flemish Minister for Work, Education and Training could go along with the remarks in the report. As to the Flemish Minister for Youth affairs, he stated that he was convinced that enough guarantees in the project selection process were in place to avoid conflicts of interest.