research based analysis of youth in action

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Youth in Action
Findings and Implications for Practice

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Research context

The present analysis is based on the results of the transnational studies RAY has conducted on the "Youth in Action Programme" (2007-2013). In the meantime, a new programme (Erasmus+: Youth in Action) has started with adapted structures and objectives. While not all study results are applicable to the new programme, for the present document we assumed applicability where there have been no major changes in project types and relevance for similar contexts in the new programme. RAY results are based on self-perceptions and self-reporting of project leaders and participants. As there appear to be many overlaps between the roles of different categories of stakeholders in the programme and considering their different work contexts for the purpose of this brief we have chosen to leave the question of the relevance of the implications we identify to the practitioners themselves. In some cases the results of the RAY transnational studies do not coincide, and may even contradict, the results of individual national studies. However, in the context of this brief, we belief that implications for practice of these results, wherever they may apply, are useful for improving practice. Some aspects revealed by the results of RAY studies are not within the control of the programme stakeholders to improve. This is important when thinking about implications for both practice and research.

Youth in Action: Findings and Implications [1]

What do the results of the RAY transnational studies tell us about how Youth in Action works[2]. Which findings can be useful for the successor programme Erasmus+/Youth in Action in order to make the projects work better?
The RAY studies demonstrate with its positive results very clearly, that the Youth in Action programme is of added value for many stakeholders – there is much to be proud of! Still, there is always room for improvement, which this paper tries to depict:

What?

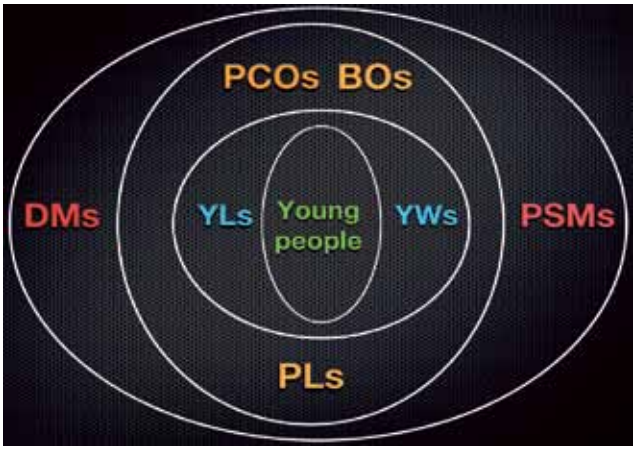
This paper presents implications of the results of the RAY transnational studies so far conducted in four main areas:

- the key principles of Youth in Youth in Action how they are expressed in the practice of the programme;
- how learning takes place and practices of education and learning in Youth in Action;
- the practice of project management in Youth in Action;
- and the place of ideas about quality and practices related to quality in Youth in Action.

Practice is understood as the broad ways in which Youth in Action projects are run, not just their educational dimension.

Why?

The aim of this document is to provide a summary of the information available in the RAY transnational studies that is relevant improving the practice of different stakeholders involved in planning and executing Erasmus+/Youth in Action.



Key: YLs – youth leaders; YWs – youth workers; PCOs – project carrying organisations; BOs – beneficiary organisations i.e. of grants under the YiA programme; PLs – project leaders; DMs – decision makers; PSMs – project support mechanisms.

Who?

This paper is directed to all stakeholders actively engaged in planning and executing Erasmus+/Youth in Action projects. These stakeholders are diverse and include actors whose work in the programme takes place at more or less distance from the participants of Youth in Action projects – ranging from decision makers at both European and national levels through project leaders working directly with participants in educational activities funded by Youth in Action. Many occupy hybrid roles, working at the intersection of the different categories of practices that can be observed in the programme. This is especially the case for project leaders whose responsibilities include both educational work and administrative tasks. While results of the RAY studies may apply directly to only one or other stakeholder group, they may also have implications for other stakeholder groups, even those at a greater distance from the young people. Hence, our analysis of results relevant to practice necessarily also has implications for policy.

Youth in Action: Much to be proud of!

The RAY transnational studies, and the national studies on which they are based, demonstrate many positive results of the Youth in Action programme overall, and prove once again that Youth in Action is of added value, not just for the young people who take part in it, but for broader European policy objectives in the youth, education and employment sectors.

Positive results of participation in Youth in Action for beneficiaries[4]

- considerable development of competences for citizenship, for example, interest in political life, respect for and appreciation of cultural diversity, solidarity, tolerance and individual freedom[5] and for European citizenship;[6]
- considerable development in the area of feeling European and regarding knowledge, awareness and understanding of Europe/an realities;[7]
- positive impact on behaviour, for example increased participation in social and political life, increased commitment against discrimination, racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia and intolerance, solidarity with young people with fewer opportunities;[8]
- positive results regarding professional and educational development,[9] for example, gaining a better understanding of further education/training needs, wishes and opportunities, greater interest in acquiring foreign language skills, increased readiness to work and live abroad,[10] belief that job prospects have been improved,[11] belief that they have gained skills useful for working with young people;
- unexpected positive results for some key competences not directly addressed by the objectives of Youth in Action, for example, learning to learn;
- obvious interest among beneficiary organisations to involve young people with fewer opportunities;
- young people with fewer opportunities that participate Youth in Action do not consider migrant or cultural/ethnic/linguistic minority background to be a special obstacle for the mobility of young people[12] even if it is reported as an obstacle to participation in society;[13]
- significant effects on organisations in the direction of improved quality of support systems for youth activities[14], internationalisation of activities and partnerships, participation of young people in the work and running of the organisations, organisational development (running and management of projects, application of what was learned in practice);
- positive impacts on communities which report to have 'learned' as a result of their members' and community organisations' engagement with the programme;[15]
- positive impacts on personal development of participants;[16]
- positive impact on the competence of project leaders;[17]
- possibly positive impacts on the development of youth volunteering.[18]

Findings and questions for practice

However positive and effective the Youth in Action programme has been, it goes without saying that there is is always room for improvement. The findings and implications presented here are therefore based on results of the RAY transnational studies that:

- are counter-intuitive, in that they challenge the 'accepted wisdom' about the effects of the programme or similar interventions;
- are contradictory, in that they do not tally with other data generated in the course of the studies;
- point to a greater level of challenge to reach identified objectives in specific parts of the programme;
- demonstrate dissatisfaction or low-rankings, and therefore point to a need for improvement
- raise interesting questions for further research (because they have relevance for improving practice).

Key principles of Youth in Action

Active participation European citizenship

Findings

Various results demonstrate that Youth in Action contributes to the objective of fostering active participation and European citizenship. To quote just one specific example, 61 % of participants report that their project allowed for some involvement in the preparation or organisation of the project. The RAY transnational studies conclude that this indicates a participatory approach has been taken, and it is known from other educational research that a participatory approach fosters both these objectives to a greater extent than a non-participatory approach. However, there are also results that show a more differentiated picture:[19]

- certain project types are being run 'for young people' rather than 'with and by them' (Youth Democracy projects, Training & Networking projects, TCP);
- decision-making inside projects is possibly not led by young people to the extent intended (especially, Youth Democracy projects);
- learning by doing is an important general feature of Youth in Action projects, but several project types do not involve as much hands on learning for the participants as might be intended and as would be the case if they were involved more directly in project decision making and implementation (c.f. European Voluntary Service, Structured Dialogue);
- it is the 'already initiated' category of participants that tend to participate most actively (c.f. demographics of participants and statistics on previous experiences);
- projects that are supposed to foster active participation and active European citizenship often do not address it as a theme (e.g. Youth Democracy projects, Youth Initiatives and Youth Exchanges).

- up to 40 % of project leaders (Youth Exchanges, Youth Democracy projects and Training & Networking projects) are not directly involved in the design of their project, but join at a later stage once the project has been designed.

Questions for practice

More attention to the involvement of young people, (including young volunteer project leaders in project decision-making, when assessing projects and when conducting training for project leaders on how to work with young people within the programme in a participatory manner is likely warranted. Furthermore, these data raise questions for three key practice related aspects of the programme (non-formal education, quality development and training), that require discussion in a variety of contexts, ranging from the planning of projects through decision making about the programme as a whole, as follows:

Non-formal education

- how does the programme describe and make understood its concept of a participatory approach?
- how is that concept applied in the programme by those responsible for project development and design?
- in which way is that concept being reflected in the experience of the participants of Youth in Action participants and project leaders, especially?

Quality development

- which quality criteria are given priority when assessing applications for projects and how prominent are criteria related to participation?
- is quality control (regarding participation among others) conducted through the project cycle and if so, in which ways?
- how do the results of quality control get implemented in the programme?
- what does evaluation and quality control tell us about aspects of the participatory approach that are most difficult or challenging for project leaders to replicate in their work with young people during projects?

Training

- how can training support project leaders to develop the participatory approach and work with it more effectively?

Inclusion of youth with fewer opportunities and diversity of youth engaged in the programme

Findings

The Youth in Action programme has two key objectives that speak to inclusion – promotion of inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities and the opening up the programme to more and more diverse kinds of young people. A lot of Youth in Action projects do manage to include young

people with fewer opportunities. RAY research reveals that:

- there is strong interest on the part of beneficiary organisations to engage young people with fewer opportunities;
- and migrant / minority background is not necessarily viewed by those participants considering themselves as having fewer opportunities to be a barrier to participating in the programme (although it is seen as a barrier to participation in society).

The RAY transnational studies do not give figures for how many young people with fewer opportunities are involved in the programme because it is an extremely difficult thing to 'quantify'[20], even on a country by country basis.[21] While it is possible to identify a small group of participants that can clearly be considered young people with fewer opportunities,[22] the data available also show that the majority of participants of the programme do not face obstacles to participation in society/politics and could be considered in a 'favourable position'[23] the kind of participant that takes part in the programme has a higher level of social capital (as shown through e.g. results for highest educational attainment of the mother). Hence, we can conclude that Youth in Action is reaching lots of young people but not enough of those with fewer opportunities.

What might be the reasons for this? The RAY studies provide some clues from which we can infer possible reasons for the (low) level of participation of young people with fewer opportunities.

- an important majority of the project leaders are comparatively well educated. These may be attracting well-educated participants.[24] This raises questions around the importance of social capital, and not only opportunity, for participation and for social mobility;
- while the opportunity to participate may be available, the specific support measures that are usually needed for young people with fewer opportunities to use the available opportunities might not be developed enough.[25]

Questions for practice

It is becoming ever more clear that information and support provided by the National Agencies alone may not be sufficient to ensure that the programme is known to young people with fewer opportunities and that traditionally have not participated in large numbers (specific minorities, etc) and that they get involved. It is also clear that many vehicles are needed to carry information and support to young people who so far have never come into contact with the programme if a. they are to learn about it and b. actually use it.

This has implications for the practice of outreach and for the general regulations and procedures applying to the programme. Better outreach can be achieved with some experimentation, more time and attention and more resources for the purpose. For example, RAY shows that the online dimension of programme outreach was relatively weak at the time of study.[26] Even if the online dimension is becoming more important with time and as internet penetrates more and more aspects of the daily life of young people, institutional responses do not always maintain pace. Procedures may be more difficult to change because of legal implications, but a solid evidence base for which might be impeding the engagement of new publics is in the first place required.[27]

Outreach

- to which extent are the current forms of off- and online outreach to young people with fewer opportunities or to less involved groups of young people effective?
- what can be learned from the practice of youth information, mobile youth work at the local

level and the experience of other youth work programmes dealing specifically with the concerns and issues of young people with fewer opportunities?[28]
- what specific additional outreach mechanisms would be needed?

Programme regulations and procedures

- to which extent are regulations and procedures facilitative or not of the participation of more diverse groups of young people in the programme?
- which and adjustments to information, project selection and funding criteria would be necessary to address key barriers to engagement with the programme?

The 'youth' dimension in Youth in Action

Findings

Certain results cast doubt on Youth in Action's 'authenticity' as a 'youth' or as a 'peer' phenomenon, an aspect that is known to be effective in mobilising and engaging young people and for increasing motivation and participation, raising questions for participation, inclusion and multiplication practices. For example, the RAY studies reveal information about young people's access routes to participation in the programme, as follows:

- 47 % of participants get involved through youth structures (youth organisations, centres and groups). Yet various sources about youth participation show that few young people prefer this kind of participation,[29] even as occasional volunteers, and that formal structures especially membership based organisations with representation functions like youth political parties and trade unions are experiencing decline;
- only 17 % of participants gain access through information and experiences in schools and universities, yet, the majority of young people involved are highly educated, are actively engaged in school/further studies and spend a lot of their time in an educational institution of some kind. Formal education is a key formative experience for young people and a location for peer experiences that have a lasting effect through the lifecourse;
- approximately, 1/3 of participants get involved through friends and / or acquaintances (maybe also family). This is a solid indicator for the 'peer' quality of any experience. Yet 1/3 is relatively small proportion;
- results for project leaders partially mirror the above: 68 % of Project Leaders find out about the programme through formal youth structures, mostly the National Agency and youth organisations, centres or groups; 23 % get involved through friends/acquaintances; 19 % through colleagues at work and only 8 % through schools and universities.

Combined with other results such as the average age of the project leaders and their repetitive participation, these results could indicate that involvement in youth work through Youth in Action is something of an 'insider phenomenon' and current project leaders wittingly or unwittingly act as 'gatekeepers' for newer and younger active participants with leadership potential coming up. Furthermore, and as mentioned above, the online dimension of programme outreach has been weak. This is certainly problematic if one considers the extent and importance of digital communication and interaction in the life-worlds of young people and contemporary youth culture.

Questions for practice

Some potentially interesting questions for the practice of outreach, information and training are raised from bringing these different results together:

- how attractive is Youth in Action to those who have never used it?
- how is the programme communicated? How much presence does it have in youth / peer social media? Where would it need to appear to reach the young people it is not reaching now?
- how does the reproduction of leadership take place inside Youth in Action projects and beneficiary organisations and what influence does Youth in Action have on that process?
- what role can key locations of socialisation including local communities, schools and families play in outreach and information towards individual and groups of youth that have so far not been engaged in the programme?

Learning and the practice of education in Youth in Action

For young people taking part in Youth in Action projects, participation seems to have most significant impact on the acquisition of interpersonal, social, entrepreneurial, intercultural, foreign language, cultural expression and awareness, learning competencies and civic competencies, in that order of importance.

Civic competence

Findings

Strong added value of the programme for competence development in a lifelong learning perspective can be observed. Yet,

- among all of the competences which are shown by RAY to be developed through participation in the programme civic competence comes last, despite the existence of several project types that specifically aim to develop the democratic engagement of young people.[30]
- it would also appear that learning for social participation is stronger than learning for political participation, possibly reflecting that the programme develops the 'informal dimension' of citizenship more than than the formal dimensions.[31]
- checking these results against the themes that participants report to have learned 'something new' about as a result of their participation shows that Europe, inclusion and youth / youth policies rank highest and discrimination, minorities, inter-faith understanding and health rank lowest.[33]

Questions for practice

These results raise the question of how relevant the contents of the programme are to the daily reality of the young people involved in the programme over the second set. Educational practice shows that contents which are relevant to the daily lives of learners help them not only to retain their learning, but to practice acquired competence in a sustainable manner through the life course.

The further question raised is what is the relationship between the content and process of learning and competence development in Youth in Action projects and what are its characteristics. The recent European youth work convention presented research evidence to show that the process of being involved in youth work is consistently more important for the competence and resulting life trajectories of the young people than what is actually being educated about or discussed. Achieving a good balance of learning results for both the social and political, and for both the formal and informal, dimensions of citizenship then might require more attention to be paid to hands

on learning through participation in decision-making, as well as contents more relevant to the daily experience of citizenship in Europe.

The implications for practice of these results are highly diverse ranging from selection of projects through how projects are set up to how projects are staffed, and have knock on effects for the other focus areas dealt with above (management and principles / objectives of the programme). In the first place, the relevance of these results depends on the extent to which a. the acquisition of civic/political competence on the part of participants is a priority for the programme and b. the programme wishes to prioritise a broader set of competence development opportunities for project leaders.

Hybrid functions of project leaders

Findings

RAY shows that majority of project leaders had both an organisational and educational role in the projects, and has interpreted this as suggesting the human resources available to projects are limited, and that there are high organisational demands on project leaders.[34] At the same time, having a hybrid function in a project (educational combined with managerial / organisational) is shown to facilitate the acquisition of a broader scope of competences than having a 'simple' function (i.e. educational or managerial/organisational only) on the part of project leaders. Those with hybrid functions are exposed to and learn through hands on experiences in a wider range of activities and work formats than those with exclusively administrative, managerial or educational functions and some project types (Youth Initiatives, Youth Democracy projects, Youth Exchanges) favour this kind of hybrid function more than others (European Voluntary Service, Structured Dialogue, Training & Networking).[35]

Questions for practice

Possibly most significant here is that those with primarily educational functions appear to have relatively few opportunities to be involved in designing the project and / or cooperating with colleagues from partner organisations from other countries. The question this raises is whether this is limiting the scope and range of their potential learning and competence acquisition opportunities. If the answer is yes, then the attendant question is how the practice of Youth in Action project development can provide more opportunities to project leaders (and eventually also participants) for engaging in these hybrid functions.

The 'pedagogical mix'

Findings

RAY results show that it is the 'pedagogical mix' of formal, non-formal and informal approaches, methods and settings that is most important for lifelong learning competence and citizenship skills development within the programme, for the youth participants and for the project leaders alike, as demonstrated by results for how participants learn best in the programme.[36] Yet, situations and settings demonstrating the pedagogical mix occur less often than one would expect.[37] The community of educational practitioners active in the programme is used to the fact that non-formal education and learning have to be planned to produce learning outcomes. However, the assumed wisdom is often that informal learning is meant to just happen, and will just happen, and RAY results would appear to suggest that this is not actually the case. It is possibly not always clear to project leaders that it is possible to enable informal learning and that it also requires planning.

Questions for practice

The implication for practice is that there may be mileage in considering what learning gains can be achieved by enabling and planning informal learning. Thinking about this means to take another look at the way practitioners understand non-formal education and informal learning, and the importance of their weighting in relation to each other in the educational concepts projects. Among others, the questions that arises for practice are:

- What does planning the informal mean for the approach taken to the learning continuum in Youth in Action projects?
- What does this mean for the choice of methods used?
- What does it mean for how project leaders with educational functions are trained?

Affective and cognitive learning

Findings

The results of the RAY transnational studies appear to show that affective learning is stronger than cognitive learning. Yet similarly to the case of the pedagogical mix, activities that combine both cognitive and affective learning produce the better learning outcomes for several objectives. Specifically, learning effects for affective dimensions of civic competence are stronger than those for cognitive dimensions. The results relating to learning attitudes and values, and concerning how participants learn best also go in this direction.[38] However, the perception that affective learning is stronger may be the result of a mix up in the minds of respondents between cognitive learning and formal learning. Understandably, practitioners want to safeguard the non-formal and informal character of their projects and the programme. Doing so, however, is not mutually exclusive with promoting cognitive learning. It does not mean one has to use formal education methods or be more didactic. It is perfectly possible to take a learner centred approach and use non-formal

learning and even informal learning to learn about ideas, concepts and processes of society and politics and how they relate to each other. In fact, there is reason to believe from other research on citizenship education and political intercultural education that doing so has deeper impact over the life course and in terms of behavioural trajectories for civic engagement.

Questions for practice

The questions raised for practice by these results overlap quite extensively with others raised previously and include:

- Which non-formal education methods and informal learning approaches are being effectively used for the purposes of cognitive learning in Youth in Action projects?
- Which training needs do project leaders require to enable better cognitive learning impact?
- Which themes are missing or would require more attention to ensure better cognitive learning impact?

The RAY results on learning have implications for the citizenship education function of the programme:

It is known from other research on citizenship education that knowledge about current affairs and political literacy are necessary to develop young people's civic agency. Take a contemporary issue migration to the EU from other continents. If young people know nothing about the history of European colonialism, and the role it has played in the contemporary situation of countries in development in the Middle East or Africa, it will likely be more difficult for them to empathise with the migrants fleeing poverty and conflict and coming to Europe to find a better life. So, while young people may develop solidarity with a minority in their country that is discriminated against because of racism, you may not be able to make the link between your sense of civic responsibility in that relation and the plight of migrants dying in the Mediterranean, and they may not be able to understand what it has to do with their sense of European citizenship. Yet, the capacity to do this kind of political reading is important for learning how to act as a citizen. Improving learning impact in the European citizenship dimension might benefit from a deeper qualitative analysis and political reflection on this educational dynamic and how it is taking place (or not) in Youth in Action projects.

The RAY results on learning have implications for the conceptualisation of the objectives of the current programme generation:[39]

Although it is often put out there that soft skills, including a strong sense of one's values and principles, and the capacity to reflect critically on oneself and one's environment, makes young people more attractive on the labour market, such ideas cannot be taken at face value all the time. A lot depends on which labour market is being studied. Howard Williamson spoke about this at the recent European Youth Work Convention convincingly – if you are 18 in Silicon Valley looking to develop your programming career, yes, soft skills gained through volunteering, might indeed make you stand out from the crowd of young and talented programmers all looking to do the same thing. That might indeed make you more competitive, because in the context of widespread innovation and creativity, your critical thinking just might hit the mark. But, if you live in a former mining community in South Wales where the only jobs available are in call centres or logistic centres, then prospective employers are NOT looking for critical thinkers – they are looking for obedient worker bees who do not ask questions and get on with their work with a smile and a nod. These are two very different labour markets, and they demand very different sets of skills.

Project management practice in Youth in Action

Findings

Overall, RAY results for project development and implementation show a mixed picture and some ambivalence regarding the achievement of objectives and quality.

Project management competence and access to the programme

RAY shows important impacts of participation on competence for project management. For example, 78 % of participants indicate that they have 'learned better how to plan and organise a project' and 84 % of participants indicate that they could contribute with their views and ideas to the development and implementation of the project.[40] However, 70 % of project leaders report also that their organisation had cooperated with one or more of the partners in projects funded by an EU youth programme before. While this could imply well functioning partnerships and networks among beneficiary and project carrying organisations in accordance with the objective to foster European cooperation in the youth sector and networks, it could equally imply that first timers have fewer chances of gaining access to the programme.[41]

Quality of project preparation

90 % of project leaders report that their project was well prepared. However, across all project types only 66 % of project leaders report that they had a preparatory meeting (traditionally, a key criteria for a quality preparatory process), even if 60 % also report that virtual meetings were organised using ICT to compensate for the lack of face to face meetings. 83 % of the project leaders who had a preparatory meeting reported it was essential for the quality of preparation.[42] Furthermore, approximately 20 % of the project leaders report that they feel the projects were not developed in a balanced and mutually prepared way.[43] It cannot be considered to be a statement of fact regarding the actual preparation of the projects, because it refers to perception which is subjective but it does tell us that 20 % of project leaders are not satisfied with the quality of the preparatory process they were involved in. These results are somewhat ambiguous, and there are many ways to interpret them. On the one hand, it may be as simple as many project leaders thinking things are well prepared because they have always done their preparations in the same way, and have not thought about how to make them even better. On the other, there may indeed be aspects of the preparatory process, ranging from communication to cooperation to common decision-making, the quality of which could be improved. We do not have enough information about the quality of these preparatory processes, and how that quality relates to achievement of the objectives of the programme, something that further RAY studies might consider developing upon.

Repeat applications

It appears that the number of repeat applications after initial rejection is low.[44] On average, only 15 % of project leaders whose applications had initially been rejected re-applied for a second chance. Differentiation by project type shows that the highest second application rate was for Training and Networking projects, and the lowest for Structural Dialogue projects. These results pose important questions for outreach to so far under-represented groups of beneficiaries. Understanding more about the the demographics of repeat applications, and of those who do not

reapply, as well as about the reasons why applicants who are initially rejected do not reapply, could be very relevant for extending the programme to more diverse groups of young people.

Application and reporting requirements

While the majority of the project leaders in beneficiary organisations are satisfied with the application, administration and reporting requirements of Youth in Action, 30 % (a considerable minority) consider this dimension to be 'difficult'.[45] Reading this result against others that show a high number of project leaders and beneficiary organisations have repeat experience running projects under the programme, two questions arise: Differentiating by project type provides more insight. For example, Youth Democracy projects found their access to Youth in Action funding most difficult across project types, whereas Youth Initiative projects found their access to project funding relatively easy. Training & Networking applicants had the most favourable feedback concerning administration,[46] such that the studies speculate that these might be more experienced.

Questions for practice

The different categories of results presented raise important questions for the practice of project management in the programme, including:

- what could be the alternative to ensure high quality preparation when face-to-face preparatory meetings are not an option?
- can project financing be adapted to guarantee the resources are available for face-to-face preparatory meetings?
- can selection criteria be adapted to ensure a good balance between face to face and virtual preparation is taken into account?
- how can evaluation practices be adapted to ensure that project partners and those delivering projects critically reflect on how to improve preparatory practices even when those involved are generally satisfied with how things go?
- what can be done to improve outreach to first-time applicants, potential '2nd chance applicants' and so far poorly represented publics of young people and to increase their engagement in the programme?
- in which ways could project leaders and young volunteers be more actively engaged in project decision making to foster their competence development?
- how can training or information improve the development of partnerships based on explicit exploration of how partners want to work together?
- which more active and direct measures would be needed to ensure beneficiary organisations can manage the administrative demands of participation, especially when project leaders have hybrid functions (which has been shown to be beneficial to competence development and so should be encouraged to the extent possible)?
- what can be learned and scaled-up from the good practice of stakeholders in Youth in Action and beyond regarding ways to make the administrative burden on beneficiary organisations easier to manage (for example, mentoring through the grant application and implementation process, further simplification of administrative procedures, simplification of legal requirements for participation)?

Ideas and practices related to quality in Youth in Action

Quality

There is no specific universal standard for defining quality across the programme, but many that are applied voluntarily, in the different national and project contexts, and by different stakeholders. This speaks to the bottom up character of the movement that a programme like Youth in Action represents. Yet, some things are considered to be important across the board, and might serve as a baseline for minimum quality standards across the programme. These can be identified in the Europe-wide debates on quality and recognition in European youth work and programmes.

Findings

One of the key objectives of Youth in Action is to contribute to competence development through non-formal education, and undoubtedly there have been some very positive results of the programme in this relation. However, RAY's concentration on learning environments and processes (the pedagogical mix) raises counterintuitive results, and in particular that the activities and situations through which both young people and project leaders achieve best learning (in their own estimation) are not occurring most frequently in the projects. For example,

- methods through which participants learn best only rank 6th with respect to their occurrence in the projects, according to both participants and project leaders;[47]
- the use of traditional methods such as 'listening to inputs' ranks 2nd as occurring in projects, but only 7th in relation to how participants learn best;[48]
- in relation to the question, 'How do participants learn best?', project leaders perceive that participants learn skills in more situations than participants themselves do;[49]
- project leaders learn best from designing the project; cooperating with colleagues from abroad and implementing activities for/with participants. Yet, these three learning situations did not occur frequently in the projects. The activities that happen most often seem to be reflecting and talking about the project experience; informal time / experiences in the project and cooperating with colleagues from one's own organisation. These three activities rank relatively low in terms of how project leaders learn best.[50]

Questions for practice

Many of the questions these results raise are present in debates within the non-formal education community of practice, and in which many Youth in Action practitioners also participate:

- **learner-centredness:** is the learner centred approach as developed as it should be considering the nature of the programme and the primacy of non-formal education / informal learning other RAY results demonstrate?
- **critical self-reflection among practitioners:** are practitioners (in this case understood as

those doing educational work within Youth in Action) reflecting (sufficiently) critically about the relevance, adaptation and suitability of the approaches and the methods they choose for the specific groups of young people they are working with?

- **educational innovation in non-formal education:** does this represent an important risk for practitioners such that they continue to do things the way they were trained to and have always done? Is there an non-formal educational 'ideology' at play in Youth in Action? To which extent does the training that youth workers / leaders and project leaders receive through the programme encourage this?
- **'letting go':** are practitioners able to let go and allow learners lead the learning process? Or does the fact that non-formal education requires planning, clear learning objectives and a curriculum get in the way of a more emancipated approach? To which extent do practitioners in Youth in Action projects need to be 'in control' of the process at all?

Innovation

Findings

The RAY transnational studies show that in some project types there is a frequent use of methods more associated with formal education than with non-formal education or informal learning and that more experienced project leaders tend to use the same methods on a regular basis in similar project experiences, although this does change, and project leaders seem to become more curious about what new or different methods they might use after their fifth similar project experience.

Questions for practice

These results raise questions about educational innovation in the Youth in Action programme, with implications for both the learning outcomes for the various stakeholders, especially participants, and the quality of the programme overall. Key questions to consider could be:

- Why are project leaders not innovating more?
- What might be holding them back from using a greater variety of methods?
- Why do some project types do better on this than others?

It is difficult to assess these results in terms of what they say about the actual quality of the educational offer and the methods used. It remains unclear for whom the new methods used are new – for the participants or for the project leaders. In the end, innovation is not only about doing something new for the sake of it, but rather about how it is new for the context.

Even so, they raise questions:

- What importance does educational innovation have, if any, for particular groups of the participants and other stakeholders?
- Could project quality be enhanced if youth workers, youth leaders and project leaders were to be trained in or to receive more support around educational innovation?

Other learning effects of the programme

There are many other learning effects and outcomes in Youth in Action, some of them rather counter-intuitive.

Findings

For example, the transnational analysis 2011 shows that

- learning to learn (not a programme objective) ranks higher in terms of perceived achievement than civic competence (programme objective);
- mathematical skills or communication in the first language are developed at an equal level as digital and media skills, which one might expect to be fostered much more through Youth in Action projects;[51]
- Youth Initiatives, Youth Democracy projects, European Voluntary Service and Structured Dialogue projects demonstrate below average percentages for effects on international contacts and mobility;[52]
- Youth Democracy projects and European Voluntary Service projects demonstrate the lowest percentage for effects on project management competence, which is surprising since Youth Democracy projects should especially take a participatory approach and participation in EVS normally involves working in a project;[53]
- results for the contribution of European Voluntary Service to skills development are weakest for civic competence, which is counter-intuitive considering its volunteering focus and the standard wisdom on the role volunteering plays in the development of civic competence;[54]
- an European Voluntary Service hosting experience is more significant for skills development than a sending experience. Yet, the assumption is usually that going to another country provides for a more intensive learning experience;[55]
- Youth Democracy projects show relatively low increase for commitment against discrimination, intolerance, xenophobia and racism, and for support for people with fewer opportunities. Yet, these issues are strongly related to democracy;[56]
- Youth Initiatives show relatively low increase for interest in European issues reflecting the challenge of these projects to include a European dimensions.[57]

Questions for practice

These counterintuitive results raise a number of questions:

- How can the programme ensure learning objectives set are met, at the same time as leaving room for the experimentation and innovation that leads to positive unexpected outcomes;
- What kind of training would support project leaders and educational practitioners to be more responsive to unexpected situations and outcomes as a means of maximising learning potential?

Furthermore, given that having an active part in decision making and a hands on role in the project (a truly participatory approach) appears to be one of the most important factors influencing learning and competence development positively (far more important than 'consuming the project'), these results also raise questions such as:

- what does learning signify for those designing and implementing projects? And when those implementing are not those who designed the project, how does learning quality differ?
- does this definition match with the way the programme designers see it?
- what is the relationship between methodological practices of developing, implementing and evaluating projects and acquisition of key competences for participants and wider groups of stakeholders?
- what is the relationship of contents / themes / foci of projects to learning? Are contents as / more / less important than the process? And, if the balance between the two is not an important factor, what criteria should influence the choice of focus, emphasis, etc?
- how do we see the relationships between objectives and result – does the reality of how NFE is delivered clash with the reality of how young people learn in the projects and the ideological positions of those delivering NFE in the programme?
- how can training for those running the activities address the above issues?
- and what does this mean for developing minimum standards?

Furthermore, the results on what specific project types achieve best can also be useful for reflecting on how the programme evolves and is conceptualised in the future. Some project types seem to be 'all-rounders', in terms of the learning results they are able to deliver for participants and project leaders.

Conclusion

The implications for practice of the results contained in this document are wide ranging in that they reveal many interesting contours about which formats of project deliver best for which kinds of objectives, and about the kinds of mix of project types that deliver for particular objectives. Depending on what the programme is supposed to achieve (at the national or international level), and on how objectives and priorities evolve in each specific context, the mixes prioritised could be different. Hence, beyond educational practice and training, this information can be useful for evaluation and strategic planning at both the European and national levels.

Annex

[1] The 2011 and 2012 RAY Transnational Studies inquired into the Youth in Action programme, and the objectives and project forms of Youth in Action are slightly different. Furthermore, the results of the studies conducted regarding each of the national programmes may not be mirrored in the results of the transnational studies.

[2] This document is based on the presentation and paper by the same title prepared by Yael Ohana for the RAY Triangular Summit in Vienna in 2015; the full paper and information about the RAY Triangular Summit 2015 can be consulted at: http://www.researchyouth.net/conferences/. A full video recording of the input can be viewed online at: https://youtu.be/W5UK5n_luqk, https://youtu.be/mGKE0oQkb74, https://youtu.be/YFGGS5OX_nU

[3] Learning in Youth in Action – Transnational Analysis 2012 http://www.researchyouth.net/documents/ray_specialsurvey_learning.pdf

Exploring Youth in Action – Transnational Analysis 2011 http://www.researchyouth.net/documents/ray_20102011_transnational_analysis_fullreport.pdf

Exploring Youth in Action – Transnational Analysis 2010 http://www.researchyouth.net/documents/ray_20092010_transnational_analysis_fullreport.pdf

[4] These positive of results of participation in Youth in Action are a summary of the results of RAY research into how the programme influences the development of the eight key competencies in for Lifelong Learning and media literacy, primarily. See in particular table 156 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[5] Tables 167, 173 and 176 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[6] 80% of the responding participants indicate that the participation in the project has made them 'more receptive for Europe's multiculturality', 66% report that they 'feel more as a European'; 68 % indicate that the project has raised their awareness of disadvantaged people. See Tables 167 & 168, 2011 Transnational Analysis and pp. 78-79.

[7] Tables 139, 167, 173, 176 and 177 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[8] Approx 35% of participants state that they have changed their behaviour in some way as a result of participation in the project. This is corroborated by the results for the project leaders.

[9] Tables 170, 173, 177, 181 in 2011 Translational Analysis.

[10] p. 30 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[11] p. 30 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[12] Tables 56, 57 and 60 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[13] Table 59 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[14] pp. 26-28 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[15] Tables 193, 197 and 1999 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[16] 92% of the respondents report that the participation in the project has contributed to their personal development. See Table 167 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[17] Tables 185, 186, 187, 188, 189 and 192 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[18] 57 % of the Project Leaders carrying Youth in Action projects are volunteers. Table 90 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[19] See tables 83, 84 and 89 in 2012 Special Learning Survey.

[20] National definitions and criteria for assessing this 'status' across RAY countries differ, as do the thresholds for how many factors equal having fewer opportunities. In addition, the self-perceptions and the subjective experience of the young people concerned needs to be factored in.

[21] France and Belgium have attempted to assess the quantity of young people with fewer opportunities involved in their programmes, using their own indicators and come up with figures around 17-20 %.

[22] Based on the figures available, this percentage might be as low as 10 % or as high as 30 % for the programme as a whole. See Tables 15, 23, 27, 29, 35, 36, 49, 52 in 2011 Transnational Analysis, pp. 25-26.

[23] Tables 15, 18, 19, 26, 27, 31, 34, 35, 37, 39, 40, 43, 47 and p. 25 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[24] Table 70 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[25] This can be inferred from other results that show Youth in Action's limited openness to first time organisations (and by implication, those in harder to reach communities) and from the information available in the RAY studies (or not) on the role financial aspects play in facilitating or preventing participation (financial conditions differ considerably from country to country). Nevertheless, only approx. 8 % of participants get involved in Youth in Action through activities and information channels of the National Agency (Table 103 in 2011 Transnational Analysis) and that approx. 45 % of participants in Youth in Action had to pay some form of participation fee / contribution to project costs. It is, however, not clear which percentage of young people who considered themselves as 'having fewer opportunities' had / did not have

to pay for participation and it is not clear if having to pay a participation fee is because of a lack of co-funding for projects or because of other reasons.

[26] p. 64 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[27] This aspect is dealt with in a little more detail in the section on project management.

[28] For example the Council of Europe's Enter! Youth Programme. More information on: /enter.coe.int/

[29] See for example: http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-political-participation.pdf

[30] See tables 144, 145, 146, 151, 156 in the 2011 Transnational Analysis and pp. 22-24; and Tables 69, 70 and 71 in 2012 Special Learning Survey, pp. 59-61.

[31] See Table 151 and p. 73 in 2011 Transnational Analysis which imply that the affective dimensions of civic competence are better developed in Youth in Action projects than cognitive ones.

[32] p. 71 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[33] Tables 139, 140, 141, 142 and p.71 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[34] Table 93 in 2011 Translational Analysis.

[35] Tables 55 & 91 in 2012 Special Learning Survey.

[36] Tables 87 and 88 in 2012 Special Learning Survey.

[37] Tables 81, 82, 87 and 88 and p.25 in 2012 Special Learning Survey.

[38] p. 73 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[39] A short comparison between the objectives of this latest programme generation's outcome orientation and those of previous programme generations shows that it focuses even more strongly on employability and contributing to inclusion through education, training, and employment mobility than those previous programmes.

[40] Tables 167 & 138 respectively in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[41] Table 118 and p. 69 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[42] Tables 118 and 119 in 2011 Transnational Analysis respectively

[43] Table 119 in the 2011 Transnational Analysis tells us about the perception of mutual development of projects on the part of the project leaders.

[44] Table 133 in 2011 Transnational Analysis

[45] Table 115 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[47] Table 116 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[48] Tables 81, 82, 87 & 88 in 2012 Special Learning Survey.

[49] p. 25 in 2012 Special Learning Survey.

[50] Tables 87 & 88 in 2012 Special Learning Survey.

[51] Tables 90 & 92 in 2012 Special Learning Survey.

[52] pp. 23-24 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[53] p. 80 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[54] Table 168 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[55] pp. 74-75 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[56] p. 74 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[57] p. 77 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

[58] p. 78 in 2011 Transnational Analysis.

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About RAY

'Research-based Analysis and Monitoring of Erasmus+: Youth in Action' (RAY) is implemented by a network of 31 Erasmus+: Youth in Action National Agencies and their research partners currently in 29 European countries ('RAY Network').

It seeks to find out more about the following questions:

- What are the effects of the European Union Programme Erasmus+: Youth in Action programme on young people, youth workers and youth leaders involved in the projects funded by this programme?
- What and how do they learn through their participation in these projects? Which competences do they develop and how?
- Which specific contexts, settings, conditions, educational approaches, methodologies and methods are successful in fostering the development of key competences for lifelong learning in Youth in Action projects funded through the Youth in Action Programme (2007-2013) and now through Erasmus+: Youth in Action Programme?
- What are the effects on youth groups, organisations, institutions, structures and communities involved in the programme?
- And how does the programme contribute to the achievement of the objectives and priorities of the Youth in Action Programme (now Erasmus+: Youth in Action Programme), in particular to the promotion of active/democratic citizenship and participation in civil society, tolerance, solidarity and understanding between young people in different countries, the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities and the development of quality and networking in youth work?

http://www.researchyouth.net

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