



**Research project on competence development and
capacity building in Erasmus+: Youth in Action**

Belgium (Flemish Community)

Module (A+B)

Executive summary

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1 Introduction

This national report of Belgium (Flanders) is the result of a close collaboration by the Social Work department of the University College of West-Flanders and Jint VZW, the National Agency for Erasmus+: Youth in Action for Belgium (Flemish Community).

All participants included in this research participated in a training activity of Erasmus+: Youth in Action that took place between April-May 2016 and November-December 2016. The selection of participants in Belgium started later in time than in the other participating countries, resulting in a smaller number of participants, namely six. All participants have a bachelor's or master's degree and are professional youth workers. Four men and two women, who all participated for the first time in an international training activity, were included in the selection. Two worked for organisations participating regularly in training activities within the programme. Among the six respondents were experienced and inexperienced youth workers, their experience varying between eight months and thirteen years, their age between 25 and 43.

Four of them participated in a TCA, two in a training activity within KA1. The training activities lasted between four and ten days. Two of those activities took place in Belgium, four in another country. The subject of the training activities varied and included inclusion, interculturality, digital media use, radicalisation and starting a strategic partnership within Erasmus+: Youth in Action.

The respondents were invited to participate in three interviews. The first interview took place before the training activity started. The second interview of the research took place four to seven months after the participants return, the third interview between 11 to 13 months after their participation. In between interview 1 and 2, one participant had changed jobs and was out of reach. In between interview 1 and 2 another participant had seen her job role changed. At the third contact, this participant was of the view that, since interview 2, no significant changes had taken place so she could not contribute anything new to the research. She opted not to participate in the third interview. As a result, five interviews were completed in round 2, four interviews in round 3.

2 Summary of conclusions

a) Expectations/motivation to attend the training activity

The decision to participate is mostly not a strict individual one. It is made in consultation with the organisation. It is often informed by the title and programme of the training activity. One participant is delegated by a working group and all participants are motivated by the subject of the training. A personal interest or an issue, central to an organisation's functioning, encourages participation. One participant states that a shared organisational need is her main drive. Participants claim that, in addition to the subject, also the methodical approach and learning opportunities are contributing factors in their decision process. The international aspect of the activity and the reputation of one of the activity providers are taken into account. Another participant's main motivation is of a political nature.

The participants expect their professional network, knowledge, competences and skills base to be further developed. Expectations vary according to the subject of the training activity. Some participants hope to develop new partnerships for projects and one participant hopes that sharing experiences will have a "therapeutic" impact. Others simply hope to meet interesting people and to be inspired to develop new projects within their own organisation, not necessarily through an international cooperation.

The organisational expectations are much less detailed and include the expectation of receiving feedback from the training activity and organisational recommendations. The form of the feedback is straight forward, depending on the organisational preference: a written report on the return home, a presentation during a staff meeting or during a "train the trainer" session. Most respondents expect to give feedback to colleagues in an informal manner. One organisation hopes that the training activity will lead to reaching a

new target group, another organisation expects the development of an increased inclusive organisational approach.

b) Overall impact and changes

The use of informal methods during the training activity are experienced as positive, as well as the non-formal methods, although they are considered to be less innovative. Respondents who have direct results of the training activity, such as an exchange or a new project tend to be more appreciative. Networking (regardless of how temporarily), meeting interesting people, being inspired by an example presented during the training activity and the development of knowledge, skills and competences are all mentioned as positive outcomes. Some participants welcome attempts to provide post-training activities.

The respondents are disillusioned about aspects of the training activity that did not meet their expectations. Some content of the training activity is described as too theoretical, too shallow or beside the point. Disillusioned respondents experience a lack of networking or contacts that are too short-lived. The post-training activity is often limited to an inactive Facebook page. One respondent is disappointed because of an incomplete programme and another respondent comments that staying in Belgium does not create as many intercultural learning opportunities as going abroad.

The main impact of the training activity is primarily situated at a personal level. It has resulted in newly acquired knowledge, skills or behaviour by the participant. The organisational impact is considered to be small or non-existent. A year after their participation, two organisations have developed, or are in the process of developing, a new exchange as a direct result of the training activity. One of these organisations is inspired by an example from the training activity and has developed a new project based upon this experience. This organisation has also managed to set up a new cooperation with a local partner. The reasons for the limited impact are attributed to the characteristics of the own organisation (too big to be impacted by a single individual, new priorities), the training activity (not profound enough and insufficiently critical of current policies) and the Erasmus+: Youth in Action programme (too administrative burdensome).

c) (International/European) youth work competencies and development/changes

Youth work competences, explicitly mentioned as being developed during the training activity, are mostly professional and intercultural competences. Most prominently are the increased knowledge of fundraising (in and out of E+), gathering and critically interpreting new information, providing feedback and support to young people, adopting new learning tools and expressing a higher appreciation of the importance to assess and evaluate the impact of youth work. A larger knowledge of different approaches and realities in European youth work is mentioned as an intercultural acquired competence. The first round of interviews testifies that competences such as critical thinking, solidarity and an interest in social change, together with professional attitudes such as active listening, empathy and flexibility, were already developed by respondents before they participated in the training activity. The training activity at most reinforces or enhances these competences.

d) Transfer of learning/training outcomes into practice/effects on practice

The acquired methods and knowledge from the training activity have been transferred in a limited degree into day to day practice or to colleagues. Transfer occurs occasionally and informally and is depending upon the initiative of the respondent. No one reports to have received feedback from colleagues and as such the respondents do not know if transfer really occurred. Reasons for this limited transfer are a change in role in the organization, a lack of opportunities to share the learning outcomes, the specificity of the training and rapidly changing social conditions which turn the training obsolete.

e) Future perspectives and outlook

All six participants hope to work in the youth sector for a couple of more years in the first interview. This intention is still alive for the four participants at round 3. By attending additional training, they want to “become better” in what they do. All participants identify new personal challenges. One person is fully committed to achieve the new goals of his organisation and another participant is selected for a research project to assess and evaluate an approach used in his organisation. He has become more aware of the importance of assessing the impact of youth work. This is not the direct result of his participation in the training activity but more a consequence of his daily expertise in the last year. Another respondent hopes to work for an international youth organisation one day and another respondent has the intention to become a trainer himself in Erasmus+: Youth in Action. The training activity has made him realise that his own organisation has an unique and extensive expertise in the inclusion of young people with an immigration background.

The respondents make two suggestions towards training activities in the Erasmus+: Youth in Action programme. One respondent stresses the importance of managing the expectations of a training activity. A limited impact and unfulfilled expectations after investing time into the training activity, can put off participants and/or organisations. Another recommendation involves the post-training activities. Because of the limited transfer of learning outcomes, some participants suggest to share good practices of transferring. This can take on the form of a Skype meeting about transferring learning outcomes or a more active use of Facebook for sharing good transfer practices. Another person suggests to appoint a delegate responsible for nurturing professional contacts to ensure they sustain and become embedded in organizations.

f) Country-specific aspects or conclusions

During the interviews the participants formulate some significant future challenges for the youth sector in Belgium. A few participants fear that the opportunities of leisure activities for inner city youth are decreasing. Previous research in Belgium has shown that the supply of leisure activities and traditional youth work in these areas always has been less than in other areas. If the Erasmus+: Youth in Action supports the youth sector in these areas, then it has a clear added value to traditional youth work in Flanders. Another concern are some policy options made in Belgium towards radicalisation. Since the terror attacks in Paris in 2015 and in Brussels in 2016, Belgium has opted for a repressive approach. This approach can make it very challenging for youth workers to build up a relationship of trust between them and (some) young people. The element of trust is essential to working with young people.