

Strengthening Professional Youth Work in the YourEP Project. An Evaluation.ⁱ

Executive Summary

Introduction

Europe's youth today is right in the middle of societal challenges and crises. On the one side this makes them take to the streets, demanding action on climate change or safe havens for refugees. Surveys show: The number of young voters in this year's European Parliament Election rose significantly. On the other hand, young people in Europe are over-proportionately affected by crisis. In 2017, 28% of the EU-population between 16 and 29 years old were living at risk of poverty – compared to 22% of the overall population (cf. Eurostat, 2018). Furthermore, demographic changes mean that young people's voices are becoming less forceful. Today, only 33% of the EU population is below the age of 29 (cf. Eurostat 2017). In a nutshell this means that the EU's increasingly less young people are increasingly more often affected by crisis.

This is where the YES Forum comes in, whose member organisations deal with young people with fewer opportunities every day. Local problems of homelessness, drug abuse or school drop-outs become much more complex when seen in the light of global challenges. The above mentioned crises mean it is essential though to incorporate these into the usual youth work inclusion processes. Supporting young people in a professional way is crucial to make this work. The YES Forum has realised this and set Strengthening Professional Youth Work as one of its goals. Whether this goal was reached in the YourEP project is the topic of this evaluation research.

The SALTO Competence Model

In this evaluation we define professional work as competency-based, following Heiner (2004). Therefore, we use a competence based model to explore professional youth work in the YourEP project. The model used was developed by Jugend für Europa/SALTO Training and Cooperation (2016) specifically for European youth work and is the

most recent competence model available for European youth workⁱⁱ.

The SALTO *Competence Model for Youth Workers to Work Internationally* encompasses competences which are desirable for youth workers planning, implementing and evaluating international learning experiences such as those offered in the Erasmus+ programme. The competences compiled in the competence model are not exhaustive and should be seen more as a flexible framework that can be further developed and adapted (cf. JUGEND für Europa/SALTO Training & Cooperation, 2016, p. 9). Overall, the SALTO competence model identifies eight competences.

This evaluation will focus on competency two – designing programmes. It encompasses having a good understanding of the different target groups that one works with and their backgrounds, being able to respond to the needs and realities of young people, which are more complex in an international context and, implicitly, includes how designing programmes can involve addressing political, societal and cultural issues in youth work (cf. JUGEND für Europa/SALTO Training & Cooperation, 2016, p. 26).

Current research

All in all the review of current literature shows that there is little research next to the official evaluation of the Erasmus+ youth programme by RAY - *Research-based Analysis and Monitoring of Erasmus+: Youth in Action* which focuses on competence development of youth workers in Erasmus+ funded youth projects. It is especially surprising that the SALTO Competence Model has not been used as an analytical framework in this context before. This evaluation therefore aims to contribute to closing this gap in research.

The YES Forum

The Youth and European Social Work Forum (YES Forum) is a European network promoting the participation of all young people in society. Founded in 2002, the YES Forum now brings together 39 member organisations from all over Europe. Its main goal is to provide opportunities for young people facing social exclusion and stigmatisation to voice their opinions on topics that

concern them. To reach this goal, the YES Forum organises workshops, conferences and seminars. Furthermore, the YES Forum is a platform for exchange of Best Practise in European youth work. It also actively engages in advocacy in national and European advocacy work for the social inclusion of all youth.

The Yes Forum’s Annual Report illustrates its current focal points in its four main goals: improving future prospects of vulnerable young people regarding education, training and employment, strengthening professional approaches in youth work across Europe, boosting participation of marginalised young people in democratic decision making processes and increasing the political and social recognition of youth issues on the political agenda (cf. YES Forum EWIV, 2019, S. 6 f.). This evaluation focuses on the second goal. According to the YES Forum’s Strategy 2020, strengthening professional youth work encompasses promoting synergies between members and further developing and creating innovative and effective youth work practice that takes into account the different needs of young people in the different European countries (cf. Strategy 2020, internal YES Forum document).

The YourEP Project

The YourEP project is a project to promote political participation of young people with fewer opportunities through political simulation. Youth work professionals and young people worked together for almost two years to create an inclusive, accessible simulation game of the European parliament. It was funded as a Key Action II project by the Erasmus+ programme, the EU’s funding programme for formal and vocational education, youth and sports. Key Action II supports projects that create partnerships for the promotion of innovation and for the exchange of Best Practice. In the area of youth, one of its focus points is supporting the professional development of youth workers as well as new youth work approaches (cf. European Commission, 2019).

Project Data	
Full title	YourEP – Political games are a serious business
Project start	01.04.2017
Duration	21 months

Target group	- Young people with fewer opportunities ⁱⁱⁱ - youth work professionals
Coordination	YES Forum
Partner organisations	JEF Europe (as expert for Europe) 8 youth and social work organisations

The YourEP project has two target groups: young people and professional youth workers. This evaluation focuses on the youth workers. Overall, 10 youth workers and 30 young people were part of the core programme^{iv}. In most organisations, 1-2 youth workers took part in the YourEP project.

The overall goal of the YourEP project was to make political simulations accessible to a diverse audience. The special focus point was thereby put on young people with fewer opportunities, in line with the YES Forum goals. YourEP project goals explicitly mention the strengthening of youth work through the focus on the development of a new tool for the inclusion of young people in political simulations as well as the sharing of skills and measures for the inclusion and promotion of active citizenship among youth with fewer opportunities. Furthermore, the new innovative and inclusive tool for political simulations aimed to enable partner organisations to integrate these better into their daily work (cf. YES Forum EWIV).

The goals mentioned here are first indices for the evaluation research questions.

Research question and aims

This evaluation explores if the YES Forums goal of strengthening professional youth work was reached in the YourEP project. Therefore, the focus of the evaluation is if and how the youth workers developed professional due to their participation in the YourEP project. The research question is therefore as follows:

Did the YourEP project strengthen the participating youth workers professionally?

Based on the aims for the participating youth worker’s development defined in YourEP’s goals, the focus of the evaluation was put on the competence “designing programmes”, as this goal most accurately captures the anticipated competence

development of youth workers creating a new simulation tool together with young people in the YourEP project. The concrete goals of the evaluation are therefore as follows:

1. We know if the YES Forum strengthens professional approaches in European youth work.
2. We know if the YourEP project strengthened the professionalism of the involved youth workers.
 - A.) We know if the youth workers gained competence in the area of project development.
 - B.) We know if the youth workers acquired any more competences in the project and which ones these are.^v
3. We have shared the evaluation results with its stakeholders.

Evaluation Design

The evaluation was conducted as an external, summative outcome evaluation (cf. Döring & Bortz, 2016, 2016; cf. Haubrich, Holthusen & Struhkamp, 2005, p. 2). The focus of the evaluation was to assess which effects could be observed among the involved youth workers at the end of the project with a focus on competence development in the area of “designing programmes”.

Methodology

The present study uses a mixed methods approach. This means that qualitative and quantitative data was collected according to different methods and underlying methodologies with the aim of combining the strengths of multiple methods in one research project (cf. Kelle 2018, p.28). We used an explanatory design where the first quantitative research phase^{vi} informs the second, in our case more in-depth, qualitative phase (cf. Kuckartz 2014, p.78). The mixed methods approach allowed us to get a more nuanced insight on the professional development of the youth workers through the contextualisation and expanded interpretation of the quantitative results through the qualitative interviews.

Online Survey

The online survey was used as a first exploration of the experiences and competence development of youth workers.

Data Collection

The survey was made available to the youth workers involved in the YourEP project through an

online link which was sent via email. The following topic areas were covered in the survey:

- what working professionally means to youth workers
- overall learning outcome in the four dimensions according to the used competence model
- opinion on statements about the YourEP project based on the used competence model’s description of the competence “designing programmes” and covering the four areas of competence development
- professional background and experience in international youth work
- involvement in the YourEP projects, i.e. was the respondent involved for the whole project or just partly

The survey was conducted as a full survey. All youth workers present at the final conference of the YourEP project gave their consent to be contacted to participate in the survey. They were asked to forward the link to colleagues who had also taken part in the YourEP project.

Data Analysis

To analyse the data from the quantitative questions regarding competence development, the arithmetic mean was calculated. If it equalled min. 2, this was defined as an indicator for competence gain^{vii}. However, due to the small total number of youth workers being just 10, the results must be viewed with caution. The qualitative data collected in the online survey was summarised and portrayed in a way that showed the aspects the respondents mentioned. Unfortunately it was not possible to create an overview of the diversity of the youth worker’s qualifications due to reasons of anonymity.

Qualitative interviews

As this evaluation was carried out using the explanatory model, the qualitative part of the evaluation was begun after the implementation and first analysis of the online survey. Therefore, first results from the online survey influenced the interview guide.

Data collection

The qualitative interviews were designed based on Kendall and Merton’s (1956) focused interviews^{viii} which are characterised by a relatively structured framework and the presence of a theoretical concept.

The interview guide was developed based on the procedure illustrated by Kuckartz, Dresing, Rädiker and Stefer (2008, p. 20). The interviews covered interviewee's definitions of professional youth work, their perceived competence development in the area of designing programmes, whether competences were strengthened in general and encouraged a critical view on the possibilities to work professionally in the YourEP project. The questions were open-ended to ensure enough space for interviewees to illustrate their viewpoints. As only two people gave their consent to be interviewed, interviewees were not randomly chosen. Interviews were held in a language both the interviewer and interviewee were comfortable with and took place via telephone or internet conference call.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analysed as case studies illustrating in detail individual aspects of competence development of the interviewed youth workers. The analysis took place as a qualitative content analysis following Kuckartz (2008) and Mayring (2010). This encompasses a process of categorising and coding interview data using a mixture of deductive and inductive categories. The interviews were analysed using the MAXQDA text analysis software. The categories largely follow those of the interview guide, the two inductive categories "limitations after the project" and "general feedback" were added after viewing the interview data, resulting in the following categories:

1. Self-definition of working professionally in European youth work
2. Competence development in general
3. Competence development in designing programmes
 - 3.a Behaviour
 - 3.b Knowledge
 - 3.c Attitudes
 - 3.d Skills
4. Limitations to working professionally
 - 4.a Limitations during the project
 - 4.b Limitations arising after the projects
5. General feedback

Interview data was anonymised after transcription. It is important to critically reflect why these two people decided to take part and not to forget the limitations for data interpretation that come with such a small sample.

Evaluation Criteria

The evaluation is an outcome evaluation meaning that the short term effects (outcomes) of the project on the youth workers were explored. The results capture the interviewed youth workers' perceived competence development.

The SALTO competence model is the basis of the evaluation criteria. Its indicators for competence development in the area of designing programmes were used explicitly as statements in the online survey and implicitly as guidelines for analysis in the interviews.

The goal of the YES Forum to strengthen professional youth work in the YourEP project is defined as successfully reached when the youth workers reported competence development in the area of designing programmes.

Research Findings

The results from the online survey show that for youth workers, working professionally in the YourEP project particularly meant to exchange knowledge with project partners and to pass on newly learned knowledge about the EU within their organisations. Furthermore, working as partners with the young people and becoming more aware of one's own professional competences were mentioned.

The online survey suggests that a positive competence development in the area of designing programmes was reached. In three competence dimensions, the arithmetic mean was more than 3 (knowledge, skills, behaviour), the fourth dimension (attitude) scored just below 3. Nevertheless, this means that youth workers perceived positive competence development in all four dimensions of the competence (cf. online survey - data analysis)^{ix}.

The results from the interviews show that when working professionally with youth, the relationship to the young person is paramount. On the one hand this encompasses reliability, on the other maintaining a professional distance. Both interview partners found it important to guide young people well and to open up new perspectives especially regarding an international/European dimension. Furthermore, professional standards, learned in training courses and through professional experience, are a part of the common understanding of professional work that the youth workers shared in the interviews.

Limitations of professional work during and after the project are mostly situated on a structural level. This includes aspects such as finding colleagues to participate in European projects, acquiring suitable funding and integrating new insights into existing concepts and approaches. Mrs. Schwarz reports colleagues initially responding to the YourEP project with “*oh, fantastic, but then nobody wants to actually do it*” (interview 1 (12)). She stresses the importance of all staff, including management, wanting to participate. For Mr. Lang, funding remains a difficulty to continue work after the project ended.

Regarding the competence gain in the area of project development, the interviewees' reports show that the project YourEP has encouraged change. While Mrs. Schwarz' answers indicate developments mostly in the areas of attitude and ways of thinking, Mr Lang's answers indicate the most profound developments in the area of behaviour. Mrs. Schwarz encounters lots of scepticism as to whether the project YourEP can be carried out with the youth she works with. Personally she sees many difficulties too, but displays a strong will to overcome these which is based on the positive experiences gained in the YourEP project: “*it is a new challenge, definitely, but it it's worth taking*” (interview 1(24/26). Mr Lang on the other hand has been influenced by the YourEP project resulting in youth-centredness now being a greater value in his work. A youth council was set up at his work place which now ensures that young people are involved in all decisions made that concern them. Moreover, he is now more confident and aware of the opportunities that politics offer for youth work: “*We've just finished a project a couple of months back and this time we invited like the local councils and things like that because I was like: we need to be more involved with the councillors [...]. It's given us more confidence, or even me who has just realised that that's an avenue we can explore for funding or help as well*” (interview 2(50).

General learning outcomes include both interview partners learning more about the EU and its political structures. Mrs. Schwarz reflects on the “*European feeling*” she remembers from the project: “*I think, one has to do something actively to promote this European feeling, because, it won't come by itself. When it comes from above, we are Europe, I think, there is no connection at all.*” (interview 1(24)). Mr. Lang was impressed by the empowering effect of

the project and now motivates younger participants by giving them the perspective of taking part in those projects when they are older: “*So it's sort of empowering them to see the world more and stuff like that so keeping them on the right track*” (interview 2(54)).

All in all the opinion of the interviewees was very positive. Both praise the professional preparation and coordination by the YES Forum's project coordinator. They would both be willing to take part in projects such as the YourEP project.

Interpretation of Research Findings

The interpretation of relevant results took place based on the aims of the evaluation already mentioned. Firstly, an everyday understanding of professional youth work based on the results of the online survey and the interviews will be drafted.

Professional Youth Work – Draft Definition from Participants of Online Survey and Interviews

Way of Working: Enabling young people to lead an independent life while not taking over too much responsibility; making youth aware of their strengths; consulting young people before making decisions; working together on one level; taking responsibility for one's behaviour; professionals perceive themselves as learners

Professional relationship: characterised by trust; professional distance; field of ambiguity between friendly relationship and safeguarding.

Exchange with other youth workers: Exchange of experiences; integration of new insights into daily work and passing these on to colleagues and the wider organisation.

Professional background: academic or scientific training; compliance with professional standards through continuous training; development of professional manner through practical experience; awareness of one's own abilities.

The mentioned thematic focuses of the youth workers participating in the survey can all be found in Heiner's (2004; 2007) model of professionalism. Two were not mentioned – self-reflectiveness and structural requirements. In the case of the latter, this was not the focus of the evaluation meaning this could be a reason why they were not mentioned. In

the case of the former, while self-reflectiveness is not mentioned explicitly, the way in which the youth workers think about their work – especially during the interviews – shows that they are in fact very capable of self-reflection, even if they do not explicitly mention it in their definitions of professional youth work.

Evaluation of Competence Development

As the respondents now think differently about things/situations concerning project development, report a change of awareness and report what they now find important due to participation in the YourEP projects, the respondents indicate positive competence development in the area of *attitude*.

As they furthermore report acting differently during project development, the respondents indicate a gain in the competence dimension of *behaviour*.

As the respondents report skills they improved in designing programmes, that they learnt new skills concerning project development and which these were, the respondents indicate positive competence development in the area of *skills*.

As the respondents moreover now report knowing more about designing programmes, this indicates a gain in the competence dimension of *knowledge*.

Only positive competence development in all dimensions of the “designing programmes” competence indicate an overall gain of competence in the area of designing programmes.

As this is the case, we can say that positive competence development in designing pro-grammes occurred in the YourEP project. However, this result must be seen with caution as only two youth workers were interviewed and therefore this must be seen as more of a spotlight on two case studies than informative information.

During the course of the research it became apparent that the aim to also explore the competence development of the youth workers in general along the other seven competences of the SALTO competence model would not be possible. This would have needed an in-depth analysis of the competences as it was implemented in the focus competence designing programmes. Unfortunately this would have increased the workload too much.

While learning points outside of the competence area of designing programmes were coded in interview data, it is not possible to say if these refer to competences as defined in the SALTO competence model, therefore unfortunately the evaluation aim no. 2B could not be reached.

Conclusion

Due to the small amount of data created, it is unfortunately not possible to give recommendations as to a concrete future design of projects. Nevertheless, recommendations on a different level are possible.

Our key recommendation is to evaluate other projects too, in order to be able to better legitimate them and make better decisions concerning subsequent projects. Thereby it is important to create an appropriate evaluation design which captures the YES Forum’s goals. The current evaluation procedures using simple questionnaires are not sufficient for this. The YES Forum’s current feedback form for professionals only inquires about feedback concerning organisation of events and other structural dimensions of the projects, not however the professional learning process of the youth workers. As the strengthening of professional youth work is one of the YES Forum’s main goals, this should be considered in all projects, not just in trainings focussed on practitioners.

The evaluation design used in this study presents a starting point for closing the gap of quality monitoring in the YES Forum which can be further developed and adjusted accordingly. Reviewing if the YES Forum reaches its goals (and if needed adjusting its procedures accordingly) holds the opportunity for the YES Forum to stand more strongly and confidently present its quality in the knowledge that it does meaningful work.

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ⁱ This Executive Summary is based on the German original reserach “Die Stärkung der Professionalität von Jugend(sozial)arbeiter_innen im Projekt YourEP. Eine Evaluation.”. In cases of discrepancy, please refer to the German version.

ⁱⁱ In the SALTO model competences are defined as follows: „In this document, we understand competences as an overall system of values, attitudes and beliefs as well as skills and knowledge that we use to successfully manage complex situations and tasks. Self-confidence, motivation and well-being are important pre-requisites for a youth worker to fully make use of his/her competences“ (JUGEND für Europa/ SALTO Training & Cooperation, 2016, p. 23).

ⁱⁱⁱ These included youth facing a variety of difficulties ranging from poverty and geographical disadvantages to more complex difficulties in independent living and communication.

^{iv} They not only took part in local but also in international meetings. In some partner organisations, more young people and staff were involved in the project at a local level. Moreover, due to a few absences there was a slight fluctuation of participants.

^v The aim 2B is subordinate of aim 2A, which describes the main focus of project design. The inclusion of 2B however ensures that effects that were not intended can also be shown.

^{vi} It must be added here that the online survey encompassed in itself a mixed methods design with open questions and multiple choice questions. However, the focus of the online survey lay on the quantitative questions.

^{vii} Answers were given to statements slightly adapted from the SALTO Competence Model on a scale from 1 “not at all” to 4 “definitely”.

^{viii} In English, the term semi-structured interview is most common to describe the type of interviews conducted (cf. Adams (2015): Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews. In: Hartry/ Newcomer/ Wholey (Ed.): Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation. 4th Ed.)

^{ix} The online survey was completed by 5 respondents. 1 respondent began but did not finish the survey.