

Research-based Analysis and Monitoring of Erasmus+: Youth in Action – RAY

Rationale

Research-based analysis and monitoring of Erasmus+: Youth in Action Programme (E+/YiA) is ultimately aimed at producing reliable and valid documentation and understanding of processes and outcomes of the programme and of the activities supported through the programme. There are various interests for pursuing research-based analysis and monitoring of YiA: policymakers are interested in the impact and sustainability of the measures established to implement policies and in demonstrating that public funds are spent effectively and efficiently; practitioners are interested in their own and their colleagues' professional development as well as in demonstrating to others that they are doing a good job; and researchers are interested in knowledge and understanding about processes and outcomes of non-formal education activities in the youth field.

A shared motivation is to identify and understand quality in all its expressions in order to recognise and make better use of youth work and non-formal youth education. Research-based analysis and monitoring of E+/YiA can help to provide a solid foundation for decisions about 'what else' and 'what more' can be done to improve the quality of experience and impact of activities supported under European youth programmes.

Objectives

The main objectives are:

- to contribute to quality assurance and quality development in the implementation of the E+:YiA Programme;
- to contribute to evidence-based and research-informed youth policy development;
- to contribute to the recognition of non-formal education and learning in the youth field, in particular in the context of international youth work and learning mobility;
- to promote dialogue between research, policy and practice in the youth field.

In this respect, main questions addressed in research-based analysis and monitoring of E+/YiA are more specifically:

- What is the effect of E+/YiA projects on the actors involved and on the respective groups, organisations, institutions and structures? In particular,
 - What do participants, youth workers and youth leaders participating in E+/YiA projects learn and which competences do they acquire thereby?
 - What is the impact on their attitudes, competences and behaviour with respect to participation and active/democratic citizenship?
 - What are the organisations of funded projects learning? In which respects are they learning organisations?

- How do the actors involved in E+/YiA projects learn? How do they develop their competences? What are the pedagogic designs applied in the projects? How are these implemented in practice?

At the level of the E+/YiA programme, the questions addressed are more specifically:

- To what extent are the programme objectives and priorities pursued in the funded projects?
- How do the implementation structures and measures contribute to the achievement of programme objectives?
- Which further measures could improve the achievement of programme and youth policy objectives, in particular in view of the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities?
- Which instruments for the validation and recognition of competences acquired through non-formal learning are used and/or can be (further) developed?

The RAY Network

The RAY Network pursuing the objectives outlined above was founded on the initiative of the Austrian National Agency of the YiA Programme, in particular by its consortium partners Interkulturelles Zentrum and the Institute of Educational Science at the University of Innsbruck. The aim of this initiative was to develop joint transnational research activities related to YiA in line with the objectives outlined above. A first network meeting took place in Innsbruck in June 2008, involving YiA National Agencies and their research partners from Austria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany and the Slovak Republic. Since then, network meetings took place twice a year aimed at developing and coordinating research-based analysis and monitoring of YiA and its implementation. Currently the RAY Network involves the E+/YiA National Agencies and their research partners from the following 29 countries: Austria, Belgium (Flemish-speaking community), Belgium (French-speaking community), Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

Research approach

In principle, the research on the programme and its activities foresees a combination of quantitative and qualitative social research methods and instruments:

- standardised surveys with project participants, project leaders, key staff of beneficiary organisations as well as with applicant organisations which were rejected;
- case studies and longitudinal studies of selected projects;
- action research in selected projects;
- interviews with different actors involved in E+/YiA as well as with youth leaders and youth workers not participating in E+/YiA;
- focus groups with participants, project leaders and staff of beneficiary organisations.

Research activities

Based on concepts and research instruments developed by the Institute of Educational Science at the University of Innsbruck in Austria, two multilingual online questionnaires in 18 languages¹ were established – one for participants and one for project leaders/team members of YiA-funded projects. Between October 2009 and November 2014, more than 132,000 participants and project leaders/team members of YiA projects were invited to RAY online surveys and more than 41,000 completed the respective questionnaires. These surveys are coordinated for the RAY Network by the Institute of Education of the University of Innsbruck.

The RAY Network members analysed the responses for projects funded through their YiA National Agencies and produced respective reports; a first transnational analysis of data collected between October 2009 and June 2010 was presented in 2011, a second transnational analysis of data collected in October 2010 and in May 2011 was presented in 2012.

These “standard surveys” were continued by the RAY Network on an annual basis in order to receive a sufficient number of responses also at national level to provide for meaningful results during the programme duration until the end of 2013 and beyond since many projects funded by the YiA Programme ended in 2014.

Additionally, “special surveys” were developed to focus on special issues related to YiA, in particular, a special survey on non-formal education and learning in YiA projects, with a view to study which conditions and contexts support learning and the development of key competences in YiA projects, and a special survey on competence development aimed at validating outcomes from the standard surveys. Both special surveys were implemented in 2012. Respective reports are available.

Furthermore, a joint approach and methodology for qualitative studies at national level aimed at validating the results of the surveys and further developing the research approach and instruments have been developed and were implemented 2013.

The added value of the RAY network

At a national level, research instruments and methods are usually developed and applied in only one language – normally the language of the country where the research takes place (an exception are countries with more than one official language, or research specifically aimed at involving linguistic minorities). For research in a national context this is normally sufficient.

When it comes to research in an international context – which is the case for RAY – it is normally necessary to work in more languages. While it might be possible to work with one or more languages which are largely understood in an

¹ Bulgarian, Czech, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Slovak, Swedish and Turkish.

international context (such as English, French, Russian, Spanish, etc.) these languages might still be foreign languages for most persons involved/addressed, and only for a minority it might be the first/native language.

In the case of research-based analysis of Youth in Action, a purely national approach can normally involve only actors from the respective country – and not actors from other countries who were involved in activities funded through the National Agency of that country (at least not in their native language). And it could not involve participants taking part in a project funded by the National Agency in another country. Since YiA projects are mostly funded by the hosting country, this results in involving actors from the country doing the research who participated in a YiA project taking place in that country – therefore actors who did not make their project experience in another country.

The RAY network allows its partners

- to address and involve E+/YiA actors in projects funded by them in presently 18 different languages (including in English, French, German and Russian for those not being a native speaker of one of the official languages in RAY Network countries);
- to address and involve actors from their country in projects which were funded by National Agencies in presently 20 different countries.

This provides for a truly international research approach and for transnational analyses of the responses.

Further developments

The RAY network is open for new partners to join. E+/YiA National Agencies and research partners interested in joining the network and its research activities should contact the Institute of Educational Science at the University of Innsbruck for further information and advice, in particular also with respect to finding and involving research partners.

Contact:

office@researchyouth.net: General RAY subjects (Interkulturelles Zentrum)
coordination@researchyouth.net: RAY research activities (Innsbruck University)