

RAY-MON: Monitoring Erasmus+/YiA from 2014 until 2020

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Abstract

The Research-based analysis of European youth programmes (RAY) Network is an open and self-governed European research network, dedicated to conducting mixed-method research on international youth work and the European non-formal education programmes. The core of our work form different monitoring projects with which we have been following the European Youth Programmes ever since 2009. RAY offers unique longitudinal research into non-formal education and international youth work in Europe, fighting for evidence-based policy and practice and an increased recognition of youth work.

In this paper we will discuss RAY data on the previous Erasmus + /Youth in Action programme generation (2014-2020). Apart from sharing key findings, for instance regarding young people with fewer opportunities, we will showcase advantages and challenges of working with such a huge database (56.691 fully valid responses of project participants). The current programme priorities (diversity and inclusion, digital transformation, environment and sustainability and participation in democratic life) give us an ideal lens to show the immense contribution our data can make for evidence-based youth policies and practice, but also the limitations we face. We will focus particularly on issues with comparability and adapting to changing times, on translation quality of the multilingual survey, online application and increasing survey fatigue particularly among youth.

We are currently revamping our surveys, aiming for a shorter and more attractive presentation through modularisation, mixed-device adaptability and *youthful* functions, such as emojis and voice notes. Technological and ethical challenges are manifold, e.g. regarding the opening up of our database to interested researchers and stakeholders. Assessing the impact our research is having at different levels and thus fostering it further is yet another marker on our roadmap into the future.

Introduction

In this paper we present and discuss RAY data on the Erasmus+/Youth in Action programme (2014-2020). Before diving deep into our findings, challenges and latest survey revision, we provide an overview about the European Youth Programmes, the RAY network and the RAY-MON research project.

The European Union offers a range of different initiatives for young people, currently including two youth programmes with a special focus on non-formal education and learning¹: The European Solidarity Corps and the youth strand within the Erasmus+ programme. These programmes are implemented in 7-year cycles, so-called generations. The Erasmus + youth strand is currently called Erasmus+/youth, but was named Erasmus+/Youth in Action (E+/YiA) in the last programme generation (2014-2020). It is the European Union's learning mobility programme for young people and youth work organisations, institutions and professionals. The programme promotes intercultural dialogue, non-formal learning, equity and inclusion (<https://www.researchyouth.net/factsheets/programme-objectives/>). The European Solidarity Corps was just born as an alone-standing programme towards the end of the last programme generation, substituting the European Voluntary Service that had previously formed part of Erasmus +.

¹ For more information see: https://youth.europa.eu/home_en

The RAY Network², short for Research-based Analysis and Monitoring of European Youth Programmes, carried by the National Agencies of the European Youth Programmes and their research partners in more than 35 countries³, has conducted monitoring surveys of the European youth programmes since 2008 (https://researchyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/RAY-MON_Research-Report-20142020.pdf). The goals of the network are to contribute to quality assurance and development in the implementation of the European Youth Programmes, evidence-based and research-informed youth policy development, the recognition of non-formal education and learning in the youth field, in particular in the context of international youth work and learning mobility and the promotion of the dialogue between research, policy and practice in the youth field. Research by the RAY Network combines quantitative and qualitative research methods and instruments. In this paper we focus on data gained through regular monitoring with online surveys for Erasmus+/YiA (RAY-MON).

The RAY-MON (Monitoring) research project explores the effects and outcomes of the Erasmus+ Youth in Action Programme from the perspective of project participants and project leaders. This project builds on the 'Standard Surveys' conducted with participants and project leaders/teams within Youth in Action (2007-2013). Over the programme generation 2014-2020, we completed 3 survey rounds, sending every bi-yearly personalized invitations to all programme participants and leaders who had taken part in the programme since the last survey round, so usually between 2 and 10 months after the end of their project. This means we reached virtually the whole population under research and gathered in the time span from 2014 to 2020 in total 56.691 fully valid responses from project participants and 11.484 from project leaders⁴.

In the following we will show some of the findings we gained through these huge samples for each survey round but also over time. Then we will focus on challenges that arise in such a longitudinal, multi-language and transnational research. Finally, we will share some insights into how we tackled the challenge of revising our survey for the new programme generation, before concluding with an outlook into the future of our data set.

Key developments

The European Youth Programmes have seen over time a certain evolution of their objectives and priorities⁵. In this section we present key findings from our monitoring of Erasmus+/YiA (RAY-MON) regarding:

- Competence development of individuals and organisations
- Participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement
- Inclusion and diversity
- Digital transformation and environment and fight against climate change

Not all areas on the above list have been of priority for the programme during the complete period of analysis. For example, digitalisation and sustainability have only rather recently gained increased relevance within the European Youth Programmes, culminating in their inclusion within the four main

² For more information on our network, projects and publications please check our website: <https://www.researchyouth.net>.

³ 35 countries between 2014 and 2020: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and United Kingdom.

⁴ For more information on RAY-MON please check our website and the comparative report for the programme generation 2014-2020: https://researchyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/RAY-MON_Research-Report-20142020.pdf

⁵ For more information on the current programme priorities see: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-a/priorities-of-the-erasmus-programme>.

programme priorities of the current programme generation (2021-2027). The RAY monitoring offers, consequently, much less data for them than for the other priorities.

In general, most patterns of responses (absolute percent of agreement with the survey's statements) stayed relatively stable throughout the three survey rounds, which, given the size of our samples, indicates that the perceptions of the programme from the point of view of project leaders and project participants have remained relatively stable over the pre-pandemic time (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten, Mayerl & Pitschmann, 2022).

Competence development of individuals and organisations

In terms of competence development, intercultural skills are clearly the area in which most respondents saw participants, project leaders and organisations developing the most as a result of participation. Indeed, a high percentage of participants reported that they learned something new about cultural diversity (about 70%) and around 90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they learned to get along with people who have a different cultural background through their participation in their project (all percentages stable over survey rounds) (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021, p.238ff.). Similarly, the most highly rated effect on organisations is increased appreciation of cultural diversity, as judged by project participants (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021, p.303ff.).

Other highly rated effects on organisations are the creation of contacts/partnerships with other countries, though a certain decrease over survey rounds can be observed (depending on the activity type there is between 4% and 7% decrease), and networking at European level (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021, p.303ff.). For individuals, we see that youth and youth work (about 60%), education (about 40%) and personal development (about 50%) (all percentages stable over survey rounds) are the next most reported learning outcomes (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021, p.238ff.). Common understandings of personal development include the acquisition of soft skills, better understanding of oneself, personal confidence and more direction when it comes to deciding next steps in one's personal or professional life – together with knowledge about available resources to use on those next steps. The findings display how many respondents agreed that they acquired each of the components of personal development across survey rounds (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021, p. 249ff.)

For organisations, networking seems to be a crucial component of how they gain new relevant information and incorporate new patterns of operation allowing them to better perform their tasks and approach their goals (Akarçeşme, Horta Herranz, Karsten, Roth & Strecker, 2023, in press). Therefore, we can conclude that individuals perceive their participation in the programmes as an experience that brings them and their organisations the knowledge and tools to continue growing meaningfully beyond their involvement in a specific project.

Participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement

Even before participation was introduced as one of the priorities of the European Youth Programmes, it was one of the key youth-specific goals of the Erasmus+ programme⁶. Correspondingly, the RAY-MON survey inquires on a wide range of concepts and themes connected to participation, such as active citizenship, democracy, human rights, anti-discrimination and many more. RAY MON has items on knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and practices.

In our three survey rounds (2014-2020), respondents agreed that through participation in the European youth programmes both their organisations and themselves improved their ability to contribute to their community and to create participative processes within their work. Across survey rounds, the number of respondents that reported they improved their ability to achieve something in

⁶ For more information on the current programme priorities, see: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-a/priorities-of-the-erasmus-programme>.

the interest of the community through their participation in the programme stayed over 90% (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021, p.252ff.). These skills are translated into action swiftly: the percentage of respondents that report actually becoming more active as citizens as a result of their participation in the programme compared to their engagement before the project steadily increased from 34% to 37% (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021, p.271ff.); and the percentage of participants who intend to become a member of a political and/or social movement, association or organisation as a result of their participation in the project increased from 56% to 59% over survey rounds (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021, p.287ff.).

Overall, it can be stated that Erasmus+/YiA meaningfully contributes to young people's learning and understanding of participation and citizenship. Additionally, young beneficiaries become more engaged in society and politics while youth workers' ability to foster participation among youth is strengthened. For example, respondents indicate an increase of knowledge when it comes to cultural diversity (70%), discrimination/non-discrimination (39%), inclusion of disadvantaged or marginalised people in society (36%), active citizenship/participation in civil society and democratic life (32%), and Youth policy development (17%) (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten, Mayerl & Pitschmann, 2022, p.21). On a skills level, 96% of responding project participants improved their ability to get along with people who have a different cultural background, and 90% enhanced their ability to achieve something in the interest of the community. Those skills are put into practice, too: 37% of respondents answered that they have as a result of their participation in Erasmus+/YiA become more active as citizens. With regard to participation and citizenship, Erasmus+ projects are not only a means to an end in the sense that they promote respective knowledge, skills, values and practices. In contrast, these projects are political and social spheres themselves, offering young people ways to become active and participate, also within the project development and implementation. The involvement of project participants in the preparation and implementation of projects is reported by about 80% of participants across project types and survey rounds (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021, p. 235ff.). This shows that the projects created situations in which leaders and participants put participation and co-creation into practice. Almost 40% of the participants were motivated to engage in their project because they valued participation as a way to directly become involved socially and politically (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten, Mayerl & Pitschmann, 2022, p.41).

Equally remarkable is that youth workers and youth leaders report that they learned better how to foster participation of young people in the preparation and implementation of (youth) projects (consistently across survey rounds: over 80% of youth workers taking part as participants and over 90% of project leaders) (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021, p. 263ff.). 60% of youth workers who were participants in the programmes agreed that their organisations became more open with regard to the participation of young people as a result of their project. They also reported that the project made their organisations more open to the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities (about 66% agreed, stable over rounds) and the involvement in European issues (66 to 63%, decreasing over rounds) (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021).

Taking part in a project also had an effect on the European orientation of participants. The number of participants who reported that, as a result of their project, they now keep themselves informed about current European affairs steadily increased from 38% to 43% across the three survey rounds (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021, p. 271ff.).

In sum, participating in the European youth programmes seems to inspire people to turn towards the communities they belong to. Their projects make them want to learn about Europe and join social and political movements around them, and they empower them to feel that they are better able to meaningfully contribute to their community. In fact, we see the beginning of this boost to their interest on participation already while their projects are still unfinished: as participants and leaders, a large percentage of them seems to agree they succeeded at implementing and developing their project together.

However, disaggregated data indicates room for improvement when it comes to enabling personal development on participation and citizenship as well as engagement in the project for everybody. For instance, more self-identified as male participants than female agreed strongly that they had been able to contribute their views and ideas to the implementation of the project (36,9% to 32,6%), that they improved their ability to discuss political topics seriously (27,8% to 22,1%) or that after the project, they intend to become a member of a political and/or social movement, association or organisation (25,2% to 21%) (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021).

On a positive note, participants who report to get much less than their fair share of opportunities compared to other people of their age in their country have 10% stronger intentions to become a member of a political and/or social movement, association or organisation than those who report to get their fair share (31,1% to 20,9% strongly agree). Equally, participants who report to belong to a minority show stronger intentions to engage in some form of social and/or political institution than participants who do not report a minority affiliation (27,9% to 21,6%) (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021). Thus, participation in Erasmus+ projects seems to be an especially activating experience for those who tend to have less voice in society and politics.

Inclusion and Diversity

To strengthen social inclusion and solidarity in Europe is another key youth-specific aim of the European youth programmes. One step towards this goal is the attempt to include young people with fewer opportunities (YPFO) as participants in the programmes. In our surveys, we see that the percentage of responding project leaders who stated that young people with fewer opportunities or with special needs participated in their projects increased from 60% to 70% through the three survey rounds (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021, p.101) and the percentage of responding participants who confirmed that they themselves work with young people with fewer opportunities or with special needs was 62%, 64% and 61% in the three survey rounds (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021, p.108).

The definition of young people with fewer opportunities is difficult to delineate. Within the European youth programmes, this definition is based on the obstacles that young people face - social, economic, educational, geographical or health-related obstacles, disabilities, cultural differences. A young person with fewer opportunities faces different and/or more difficult obstacles in some of these areas than their peers. This means the definition is region-dependent, since the opportunities of a young person's peers are region-dependent⁷. In our surveys, 49% to 65% of responding project participants reported that they are faced with at least one obstacle in society (increasing over survey rounds) (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021, p.128). The main obstacle is gaining access to work and employment (78%, 55%, 56% of agreement per survey round), followed by active participation in society and politics (48%, 32%, 34% of agreement per survey round) (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021, p.129ff.). The most commonly reported specific types of obstacles were not having enough money (50% to 48%, decreasing over rounds) and living in a remote area (about 17% across rounds) (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021, p.132ff.).

Still, the programme's inclusion approach works. The percentage of respondents who said that they actively support the inclusion of people with fewer opportunities more than before the project increased from 38% to 43% for project participants (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021, p.271ff.) and from 48% to 56% for project leaders (p.277ff.). Moreover, the percentage of project leaders who considered that their project contributed to supporting the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities or special needs in Erasmus+/YiA also increased steadily across survey rounds from 83% to 88% (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021, p.310ff.). At the organisational level, about 67% of

⁷ To read more about the definition of young people with fewer opportunities (YPFO) within the European youth programmes, see: <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/inclusion/archive/archive-resources/inclusiongroups/inclusionoffenders/InclusionOffendersWho/>

participants agreed that the project resulted in an increased commitment of their organisations to include young people with fewer opportunities (stable across survey rounds) (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021, p.303ff.).

Taken together, these findings show that the European youth programmes are going into the right direction when it comes to being a tool for inclusion at the transnational and national level in European countries. Project participants and leaders alike agree that their projects meaningfully contribute to the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities in their communities and organisations, and many of these young people with fewer opportunities make it to be part of the program itself. The RAY Inclusion study has dived deeper into a comparison of the impact of project participation on participants, comparing different profiles of participants with and without fewer opportunities, showing very similar results for all groups (Meyers, Mayerl & Fennes, 2020). This shows that the programme is inclusive in the sense of offering all the participants who take part similar options to develop and grow. Nevertheless, little is known about the young people who do not take part in the programme and there is always work to be done to continue reaching out to young people with fewer opportunities and promoting their benefiting from their participation in the program.

Digital transformation, environment and fight against climate change

It was only with the introduction of the second programme generation in 2021, that digital transformation and environmental protection, sustainable development and climate action have been elevated as priorities of the European Youth Programmes. As the monitoring rounds took place from 2014-2020, the conducted surveys lack a focus on these priority areas so far. Nonetheless, the gathered data provides some insights still.

Regarding digitalisation and digital transformation, the monitoring addressed project participants' self-assessment of personal development on three levels: knowledge growth, skills development and use of media for communication. In the most recent survey round 2019/2020, 20% of the respondents agree or strongly agree to have learned something new about media and ICT (Information and Communications Technology), 57% improved their ability to produce media content on their own and/or to use digital devices such as smartphones or notebooks, and 36% used ICT to communicate in other languages spoken during the project. When comparing these numbers, the immense gap between knowledge and skills acquisition catches the eye. More numbers help shed light on what at first glance seems to be a huge difference: first, the number of projects that name digital media as an explicit project topic resides at approximately the same level as participants who claimed to have learned something new around media and ICT (20%), which might indicate that learning processes are more likely to happen when explicitly dealt with in the project. In contrast, skills acquisition seems to be a process that happens in Erasmus+/YiA projects without needing to be addressed specifically, as abilities are reported to have improved in all areas in relatively high numbers (57-95%). In fact, media production is the area of improvement that scores lowest when it comes to skills development. So, while at first sight knowledge acquisition seems to limp behind ability improvement regarding digital media, the roles are not so clearly distributed after all (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten, Mayerl & Pitschmann, 2022).

On the European Youth Programme's priority area around sustainability issues, the monitoring surveys provide insights on three levels as well, this time being knowledge growth, action and values: 27,2% of project participants learned something new about environmental protection and/or sustainable development; 35,9% of respondents claim to contribute more to environmental protection than before the project; and environmental issues/sustainable development has become more important to 55,7%. Interestingly, the development of knowledge, skills and values on environmental and sustainability issues are only partly inter-related. Only 43% of those who claim to now contribute more to environmental protection also say they have learnt something new about environment and/or sustainability – indicating that on the one hand, motivation to take action does not always need to be connected to new insights on climate change, and that learning processes, on the other hand, do not

automatically lead to behavioural changes. The global dimension of environmental protection and sustainable development is also represented in the data: project participants who now contribute more actively to environmental protection are also more likely to have established contacts with people in other countries, which are useful for their involvement in social or political issues, than the general sample (34% to 45%). Also, such active contribution might likely happen with other participants from the Erasmus+ project: while 32% of the general sample intend to develop joint activities or projects with people they got to know through the project, the now more environmentally active respondents' intentions to do so reside at 42%⁸.

Disaggregated data for digitalisation and sustainability issues shows a remarkably low number of gaps, indicating that Erasmus+/YiA projects provide almost equal opportunities for personal development for everybody in these areas. For both topics, there are no meaningful differences in responses among different gender (binary), age, geography and minority affiliation. Regarding sustainability and climate protection, no gaps are further found regarding the respondents' fair share of opportunities and prior project experience, while some differences can be observed in these areas when it comes to digitalisation: For once, project experience seems to matter here, as respondents with prior experience are more likely to have learned about media and ICT than those without (21,8% to 16,9%), and are more likely to have improved their digital abilities as well (57,7% to 53,1%). Furthermore, Erasmus+/YiA projects seem to contribute to lessen the digital divide, because respondents who describe themselves as getting somewhat less (57%) or much less (60,6%) of a fair share of opportunities are more likely to improve their digital abilities compared to those who think they are getting a fair share (55,3%) or more (53,3).

Challenges

The previous section has shown the many advantages of having applied the same survey, with only very small changes, repeatedly over a whole programme generation. Nevertheless, working with such a huge multilingual longitudinal survey comes with several challenges. The EU programmes and other regulations, namely the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), change; contact data needs to be cleaned from duplicates, faulty e-mail addresses etc.; the survey has to be set up in different languages, and data has to be stored and analysed in a meaningful and secure way. Facilitating the development, translation, administration and analysis of surveys has additionally become more challenging as the RAY Network has become bigger and more different research traditions, interests and contexts have to be reconciled. In the following we will take a closer look at issues with comparability and language challenges when working with a multilingual longitudinal survey. In this we will already look at changes over time, intrinsically embedded in our longitudinal research. However, we will dive deep into how we tackled the challenge to adapt to changing times in the next section on our survey revision.

Comparability

Our access to contact data is a central piece in our research allowing us to reach virtually the whole population under research with individualised survey invitations. This likely affected our response rates very positively. Our response rates lay at 24% and 27%, respectively, in 2015/16 and 2017/18, after two rounds of data cleaning, eliminating about one third of the initial respondents (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten & Mayerl, 2021, p.22). New data protection regulations took, however, effect during the programme generation 2014-2020 and changed substantively how we reached out to project participants and project teams (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten, Mayerl & Pitschmann, 2022, p.20). This led to a decreased outreach and a response rate of 21% in the last survey round (ibid.) and reduces the

⁸ In this section we include at some points, among others here, data that was not yet published in other reports – another consequence of the 'newness' of this priority. Whenever no reference is included, the indicated data is published here for the first time. Researchers can request access to RAY data.

comparability of the three survey rounds (2014-2020). Further changes jeopardized our access to potential survey participants for the programme generation 2021-2027 for several years, forcing us to interrupt our monitoring surveys until 2023. This meant we had to find different strategies to bridge the gap and study in particular the impact of the pandemic on the European youth sector⁹.

Another limitation is that we cannot make any assumptions about the representativeness of the participant profiles we detect in our survey, as the programme, by choice and design, does not make certain participant data available to protect vulnerable participants. Issues with IT tools provoke further data gaps:

there is no dataset for all project participants available. This is quite intentional and owed to the programme design: Not all activity types require the registration of personal details of project participants. If you consider, just for a moment, educational activities with vulnerable young people, you will immediately recognise why this is a conscious and conscientious decision. (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten, Mayerl & Pitschmann, 2022, p.20)

Comparability even within our dataset is also challenging both between countries and over time. Contexts vary widely, beyond and within national borders, making it difficult to agree on and interpret survey questions. In any survey, no matter how clearly and concisely questions and answer options are formulated, remains a certain risk of respondents answering inaccurately (<https://measuringu.com/incorrect-survey-answers/>). “As language is used and understood in concrete situations and within specific contexts, words and sentences may mean (slightly) different things, refer to different life-worlds and reflect different experiences” (Erhard, Jukschat & Sammet, 2021, p.4). Moreover, meanings and contexts can change over time making the comparison over different survey rounds challenging, even within the same national context. Regarding environmental sustainability, for example, questions developed for the MON survey basically focussed on the individual’s behaviour and particularly on recycling. With the rise of new and often youth-led climate movements, the general context and attitude towards environmental sustainability changed and as recycling became the third in the list of Rs (reduce, reuse, recycle, rethink), it makes little sense to now compare the attachment to recycling over time. It simply does not mean the same any longer.

Language issues

Working with many different languages is of course also challenging. As the RAY network became bigger, more languages are included. The MON survey was available in 25 languages in 2015, in 26 languages in 2017, and in 29 languages in 2019 (Böhler, Fennes, Karsten, Mayerl & Pitschmann, 2022, p.20). Translations into national and regional languages are necessary to keep the threshold to participation as low as possible. Having the survey in English only would not only decrease its accessibility, but not solve issues with different understandings and notions of wordings and phrasings either. Youth work realities are heterogeneous in Europe (Kiilakoski & Basarab, 2018). National youth work cultures are (to a different extent) entangled and intertwined with European youth work discourses and policies. Monitoring surveys on the European youth programmes have to be aware of those complexities, meaning their design has to be at the same time broad enough to account for national and lingual intricacies and precise enough to still produce meaningful insights.

By translating the survey, we avoid issues with English proficiency and make different notions explicit. Nevertheless, it has to be said that we still cannot offer translations into all languages participants may identify as their mother tongues, as in particular languages not official in the EU are not covered. Similarly, no plain language translations or easy-to-read versions are available so far. Moreover, translating the survey into different languages is a very difficult task and practices vary from country to country. While in some contexts, professional translation agencies are contracted, in other national

⁹ For those interested in the pandemic, see our RAY-COR research projects and the reports it produced: <https://www.researchyouth.net/reports/>.

researchers or National Agency staff assume this task. Some languages are spoken in several countries within the network, so that a coordination between countries and agreement on shared terminology is possible, while still allowing for the necessary adaptations to each country. Other translations cannot benefit from such cross-border team work.

Examples for concrete issues with translations can be as key as the terms “youth work” and “youth worker” as these do not exist in all languages and national contexts. While this is sometimes an advantage, for example in reaching out to organisations working with young people but not identifying as youth work organisations, it can be tricky to make clear what we are speaking about in our surveys. Having an additional initial definition of what we mean with youth work can seem in some contexts unnecessary and obvious and may in others not be enough to ensure everybody is on the same page. Only having the definition in some languages would, however, reduce the comparability and increase the burden for participants who are shown this additional text. Similarly, opting for longer descriptive phrasings to circumscribe what is meant in each question can make the questions long and awkward – leading to additional issues when small screens are used to respond the survey.

It is sometimes in the middle of translations that different understandings of terminology become visible – making it difficult to control if other translators followed the same idea behind a term or opted for a translation that, though on first sight correct, actually hints into a different direction. In our latest translations we received, for example, the query if a question asking “how close people feel to Europe”, referred to emotional attachment or physical distance, as there were different words for these in the target language. Choosing the first option also means that the translated question will be somewhat clearer and avoid misunderstandings that can still apply in English and other translations where one term implies both conceptions. As issues keep arising, our notes for translations become longer and more detailed, though we continue to seek a balance and to keep our manuals practical. In the end, all guidelines can only seek to reduce or compensate for existing translation issues, as “it is epistemologically impossible to eliminate the translation problem completely” (Erhard, Jukschat & Sammet, 2021, p.6).

Just as contexts, languages change – often reflecting the context changes and evolving at different paces in different regional contexts. New words appear or become commonly used in some contexts, but not in all. For example, the term “digital youth work” is now very common in Finland, but several other national languages did not yet develop a common understanding of this term and either need a more descriptive phrasing or a definition of it, provoking once again issues with comparability if the user burden varies and readability on small screens.

In some languages where a distinction between a more formal and informal treatment of persons is made, the use of these treatments changes and it becomes, for example, more common practice to treat survey respondents on first-name terms. In other contexts, translators may consider it necessary to translate survey questions with different levels of formality for project participants and project leaders – leading to an additional workload for their translations and requiring the technical possibility of different survey paths depending on the profile. Not adapting to these changes could lower the attractiveness and thus response rates in the affected languages.

Research looking into the translation of questionnaires and survey questions is constantly increasing and issues like the analysis of open-ended questions across languages are being tackled (Dorer, 2021). Practical guidelines for longitudinal research designs, acknowledging both differences between as well as within languages over time are, however, still missing. In RAY we build heavily on our national researchers, involving them in the questions design and translations as much as in the analyses. For the monitoring surveys, this is particularly important for the analysis of answers to open-ended questions. In other RAY research with qualitative national research, national researchers work in their national languages and only translate their findings into English when sharing them with the transnational team. In this we comply with the following recommendation: “Only for the final cross-

case analysis and the presentation to the academic peers the results should be translated into what she calls ‘target language’—which is mostly English” (Erhard, Jukschat & Sammet, 2021, p. 5).

Survey revision

The previous sections have already mentioned several changes over time, namely changes in the GDPR and changes in context and languages (e.g. the rise of digitalisation and environmental sustainability). These developments are also mirrored in other aspects, e.g. the new programme priorities of the current programme generation (2021-2027) including ‘digital transformation’ and ‘environment and fight against climate change’, next to ‘inclusion and diversity’ and ‘participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement’. These have come with a range of further documents to inform and contextualise the programme, namely the European Union Youth Strategy, the Digital education plan, the participation strategy, the inclusion strategy, etc.

In the meantime, the research environments changed just as much as the (digital) habits of young people. Our first monitoring survey was initially designed in 2009 and later on adapted for the 2014-2019 programme period of the European youth programmes. Since then, the use of smartphones has increased dramatically – in 2019, mobile traffic comprised more than half (56%) of all website traffic (Carre, Leonick & McTiernan, 2020). Especially for young people and children, a smartphone is the preferred means of going online (Machackova et al., 2020).

In addition to the change in digital behaviours, survey fatigue is another issue to take into consideration. The widespread availability and usage of online-surveys is long known to increase research activities and thus lead to an overexposure to surveys which result in lower response rates (Porter, Whitecomb & Weitzer, 2004). The Covid-19 pandemic has led to another surge of online surveys and thus aggravated the overall problem. Beside a general increase in survey break-off rates on mobile devices (Mavletova & Couper, 20015), age seems to play a significant role when it comes to survey length and in particular young males only complete very short surveys of between 10 and 20 minutes, ideally even less (Revilla & Höhne, 2020). For the RAY Monitoring this has several implications:

- A decreased use of e-mail addresses could provoke a decrease in response rates
- **Mixed-device approach:** We applied a mixed-device approach in our revision by e.g. removing all matrix questions from our questionnaire in order to ensure readability on mobile devices.
- **Cutting survey length:** While our E+/YiA questionnaire had a length of 24 minutes (mean) we are striving for 15 minutes with our revised survey.

Against the backdrop of all these changes, a revision of our survey became necessary – and was one of the major challenges we had to tackle in the network over the last years. Revising such a huge survey with National Agencies and researchers from 35 different European countries was not an easy task. How did we deal with the issue of staying up to date and adapting to changing contexts while still seeking comparability over time? And how could we shorten our surveys while including and considering new programme topics and diverse national realities?

Our main approach was to modularise our survey, dividing it into ‘chunks’, so that all survey participants will no longer see all modules. This shortens the survey significantly allowing us to quicker adapt to new changes, as new modules can be developed to substitute no longer relevant ones. For the current programme generation for example, modules on the new programme priorities have been developed.

Modularisation has proven to mitigate break-off rates (Toepoel & Lugtig, 2022). Given the sample sizes we achieved in the past, each module should still reach enough participants to allow for meaningful insights. Furthermore, data imputation might become possible, allowing for the recreation of the missing modules for all respondents (Axenfeld, Blom, Bruch & Wolf, 2022). For the new version of the RAY MON survey, we went for single-topic modules, meaning that beyond the initial module

displayed to all participants, all other modules focus on one topic, rather than distributing the questions on different topics randomly over modules (Raghunathan & Grizzle, 1995; Graham et al. 2006; Rhemtulla & Little 2012; Peytchev & Peytcheva, 2017). Though a random distribution is supposed to better enable data imputation, the participant experience is worse, as participants feel to jump randomly from one topic to another (Axenfeld, Blom, Bruch & Wolf, 2022). In line with the RAY Network's mission, we put participant experience above potential data imputation.

An issue that has bothered us in this revision, but found rather little expression in our final questionnaires was the youthfulness of our surveys. Though shortening our survey should already allow us to maintain or even increase our response rates, we challenged ourselves to turn the survey truly youthful and considered a variety of options how to do so. In the end, we have opted for a rather cautious approach, including one question with an answer scale expressed in smileys and one open-ended question allowing for voice message answers. Emojis have been positively evaluated by survey respondents (Toepoel, Vermeeren & Metin, 2021) and could also be a way to turn the surveys more inclusive towards participants with less proficiency in the available languages. Voice messages have just recently become a feasible option for research, as an open-source programme for automatic transcriptions of audios in many languages has been developed and is expected to include more languages in the future (<https://github.com/audapolis/audapolis>). The future may bring further and better options to keep our surveys attractive for young people and our modularisation approach will allow us to easier revise our surveys in the future, potentially expanding on these and other youthful features over survey rounds.

As shown above (see Challenges), we cannot be sure about the representativeness of our participants in comparison to all programme participants. Beyond the programme, we know even less about how representative our data might be regarding youth not taking part in the programme. By including questions from other larger surveys, like the European Value Survey or the World Value Survey, we can soften this issue in the future and get a better idea of how different or similar our respondents are to other people their age.

On national level, a similar approach can be pursued, as all RAY partners have the chance to add 2-3 questions for participants from their country only. They can use these additional questions to allow their researchers a comparison with other national youth surveys or to engage in more detail with specificities of their context. Some national datasets are inevitably very small, limiting the options for further analysis.

Similarly, in spite of our struggles with comparability, keeping questions over the years and also regarding previous survey revisions has allowed our network to keep an eye on trends in the European Youth sector ever since 2008. Though comparability is necessarily and undeniably lost in this new revision, keeping questions and scales whenever possible, will allow us to keep a feeling for long-term trends. We call this "breaking things, but gently."¹⁰

Conclusion

In this paper we have presented longitudinal survey research from the RAY Network looking into the European Youth Programme Erasmus+/Youth in Action. After introducing you to the European youth work universe and its respective terminology, we have shared key findings our monitoring survey produced for the programme generation 2014-2020. In this, we have challenged ourselves to seek insights for the four priorities of the current programme generation (2021-2027): 'Inclusion and diversity', 'digital transformation', 'environment and fight against climate change', and 'Participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement'. This exercise makes the advantages and inconveniences of our previous survey design visible, as we were able to show some data even for the new challenges concerning digitalisation and climate change, but could by far not dive as deep into

¹⁰ For more insights into the guiding principles in our survey revision, see the respective presentation from our Youth Research Dialogue series: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rC_IVjIJZeo.

these topics as we would like and need to, in order to continue our task to contribute to the quality assurance and development in the implementation of the European Youth Programmes. Afterwards we have offered an x-ray of further challenges we face, leading over to the main challenge of revising the survey for the new programme generation. In a final section, we have shared some of the insights and principles that guided us in this endeavour.

Our outlook into the future of our monitoring surveys includes the prevision to turn our data sets publicly available. For now, researchers outside the RAY Network were encouraged to get in touch to request access to our data and a number of researchers and institutes have made use of this offer. Our plan is to allow anybody interested to dive into our data, including policy makers, youth work practitioners and youth. Beyond this, we will continue to address challenges as they arise and seek to find, for example, a solution for our outreach to potential participants should the use of e-mail addresses fall into further decay in the future. We will also continue to challenge ourselves to keep our surveys attractive for new cohorts of young people. We plan to share first insights from the current survey round at our annual network meeting in September¹¹.

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¹¹ Consider joining the live-stream of a panel discussion on these findings or watching its recording. The panel will be made available on our youtube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@researchyouth>.

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