Study on the landscape of youth representation in the EU

Executive summary

Framework Service Contract to carry out studies supporting European cooperation in education and youth (EAC/47/2014)
EUROPEAN COMMISSION
Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
Directorate B - Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
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*Framework Service Contract to carry out studies supporting European cooperation in education and youth (EAC/47/2014)*

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Executive summary

In June 2019, the European Commission (EC) appointed Ecorys to carry out a Study on the landscape of youth representation in the EU. The work was carried out between June and October 2019, in the context of the EAC-47-2014 Multiple Framework Service Contract to carry out studies supporting European Cooperation in Education and Youth.

Study aims and objectives

The study aimed to provide new evidence on the landscape of youth representation at the European level in the context of the implementation of the European Union Youth Strategy (EUYS)\(^ 1 \), with particular regard to the ‘Engage’ priority concerning youth participation in democratic life. To these ends, the four objectives were:

a) To provide a general mapping of European Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and EU wide networks in the field of youth with a view to identifying gaps in youth representation at the EU level with special attention to outreach and appropriate representation of diverse interests from regional and local levels;

b) To assess the contribution of EU funding to youth organisations and networks, in particular under the Erasmus+ programme in relation to youth participation and youth representation;

c) To identify the new trends in youth participation and formulate recommendations on how their potential could be better tapped under the EU Youth Strategy; and,

d) To formulate recommendations with regard to EU funding to European nongovernmental organisations and EU-wide networks in the youth field.

The geographical scope of the study covered all EU Member States at that date, while acknowledging that the remit of some NGOs extends beyond this. Organisations within this scope included any NGO operating within the EU youth sector, including those operating at national or local levels, either with or without EU grant funding.

Overview of key findings

The study provides a snapshot of an EU youth sector in transition – from governance arrangements based around traditional democratic representative forms of participation, towards an increasingly diverse and networked civil society. It highlights both gaps and opportunities, showing that while NGOs operating at local and national levels do not always feel well represented in EU level decision making, there is a strong will to collaborate, and that NGOs across Europe see a central role for the EC and EU level ENGOs in providing an infrastructure and in co-creating new spaces for participation.

The study provides a strong indication that the EU youth sector is growing – with the emergence of new NGOs and youth movements; increasing numbers of affiliations, and an ever greater number and range of NGOs accessing EU grant funding via the relevant Erasmus + Key Actions. These trends would seem to have been buoyed by an expanding EU youth population; increased mobility, and access to EU mobility and exchange programmes, and rising levels of EU expenditure on youth. Nonetheless, the study provides indications that this growth has been geographically uneven, with unequal access to youth opportunities within the different EU regions, and among young people according to their status and circumstances. As well as young people who are considered

marginalised or disadvantaged, including ethnic minorities, migrants and religious groups, LGBTQ+, young people with disability, homeless young people, young people in rural areas, and those with mental health issues, the study suggests that the ‘majority middle ground’ of youth are often also overlooked.

While EU grant funding has been fundamental in sustaining youth NGOs at a time of shrinking public expenditure, the study finds that the structure and administrative requirements of EU funding are often prohibitive to smaller grassroots NGOs and youth movements. It concludes that more flexible and sustained funding streams are needed, while also highlighting the potential for EU grants to catalyse partnership working, finding creative ways to engage youth beyond ‘the usual suspects’. It also points towards a need to rethink opportunities for young people to learn and develop citizenship competencies through experience gained in schools and within civil society organisations.

Finally, the study underlines that spaces for youth representation are often contested, and that representative and direct forms of democracy have an uneasy coexistence. While recognising the importance of formal politics and political parties, European youth favoured informal forms of social expression on issues that they were passionate about and could relate to. They often looked for a more radical challenge to the status quo, where NGO representatives looked to funding and structural reforms. It will be important for the EC to listen to continue to listen and respond to these diverse voices, and to create spaces for dialogue, as the EU Youth Strategy enters a new cycle for 2019-27.

**Study recommendations**

The study team made a number of recommendations, based on the strength of the evidence presented within the report. These are summarised below.

**Recommendations for the European Commission**

1. To review and streamline the funding envelopes and criteria for EU grant funding, widening access to grassroots NGOs and youth movements:

   a) **Greater funding stability and continuity** – a shift in funding from time limited projects towards funding for partnerships and networks, with continuity in grants allowing youth NGOs to plan ahead and to participate actively in networks.

   b) **Flexibility in the criteria and eligibility requirements** – alleviation of restrictions to the participation of smaller NGOs and youth-led movements, through seed-corn grants for micro NGOs, and brokerage to form partnerships to bid.

   c) **Proportionality, and (re)allocating funds according to need** – the interviews with youth NGOs showed some concerns that the funding envelopes make it harder to access funds due to how they are configured, and that a flatter and simpler set of criteria would make it easier to allocate funding where it is needed.

   d) **Reduced administrative requirements** - lighter touch grant reporting, support for auditing and self-assessment, with additional technical support provided at all stages of the bid process to ‘hand hold’ NGOs, and access to digital tools to assist NGOs with financial and governance matters (see also Recommendation 6, below).

   e) **Retaining certain ring-fenced streams** to support more targeted engagement with disadvantaged youth (see also Recommendation 2, below).

2. To ring-fence additional EU grant funding for disadvantaged youth, and for the grassroots level NGOs that are best placed to reach and engage with them.
3. To identify and support mechanisms for engaging young people more directly in decisions regarding the utilisation of EU grant funding.

4. To optimise the role of existing EU youth programmes and infrastructure, to support the evolving needs of a ‘networked’ youth sector.

5. To complement existing programmes with new platforms and spaces to support horizontal collaboration between youth NGOs across Europe.

6. To develop user friendly and standardised tools to support youth NGOs with monitoring and evaluation, making use of digital and social media data.

7. To consider further research, to address the gaps identified through the study, including:
   a) Researching new spaces for political engagement and action
   b) Beyond the participation bubble - views and aspirations of not-engaged youth
   c) Understanding intra-generational differences in youth representation
   d) Examining the meaning and benefits of active citizenship for EU youth
   e) Further research into youth movements and alternative forms of participation
   f) Sizing the digital footprint of Europe’s youth sector

**Recommendations for national and local stakeholders in the EU**

8. To raise awareness of the opportunities for young people to engage in democratic life, and to make this information accessible via youth information services, communications campaigns, and schools-based programmes

9. To make the case for a greater share of co-funding for EU grant programmes from national and municipal authorities, to maximise the impact of the funds and to ensure that they are targeted at priorities within each Member State

**Research methodology**

The study was carried out between June and October 2019 using a mixed methods research design. The work programme was organised around five main work packages:

- **WP1: Inception and scoping research (June-July 2019):** framework development; scoping review of academic research literature; development of draft research tools for the study, and submission of inception report in July 2019.

- **WP2: Analysis of secondary data-sets (July 2019):** preliminary mapping of EU NGOs and networks, drawing upon EC and Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) databases, and web and literature searches; review and descriptive analysis of EACEA data on Erasmus+ youth grants managed at centralised level (2014-18), and a deep dive review of 8 projects, and analysis of April 2019 Eurobarometer results², to build upon and update the analysis presented in the 2018 Youth Report³.

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• **WP3: Online survey of NGOs (July-August 2019):** an online survey of EU youth NGOs and networks (n=528 respondents). The survey was structured to describe and profile youth NGOs, and to gather feedback on the topics under each objective.

• **WP4: Focus groups with young people (August-September 2019):** engagement with young people across Europe and to understand their views and experiences of participation in democratic life (n=13 groups). Six countries were selected to ensure balanced geographical coverage and varying levels of youth representation (2019 Eurobarometer data). The researchers provided write-ups, which were collated and informed the thematic analysis presented within the report.

• **WP5: Synthesis and reporting (September-October 2019):** the evidence from all strands was drawn together to provide a final synthesis. Prior to final reporting, a short online consultation was held with EU NGOs and networks participating in the survey, to validate the emerging findings and to gather additional evidence.

**Interpreting the study data**

The study presents a valuable snapshot of youth NGO activity across Europe at summer 2019, with representation from all of the main types of NGOs, and covering all European Member States at that date. The qualitative research was carried out with young people from diverse backgrounds from across Europe, with balanced geographical coverage and a cross-section of countries with different levels of representation. This allows for a good level of confidence in the research findings. As with any study, certain data limitations and caveats apply. The true number of NGOs operating in Europe is not known, and the survey findings are not therefore fully generalizable to the wider population.

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4 English, French, Spanish, German, Italian and Polish
5 The survey was cascaded via the members of EU networks, the EC’s social media channels, and via the Eurodesk and Erasmus+ NA representatives in each MS.
6 Belgium, Croatia, Italy, Ireland, Lithuania and Sweden. The study team liaised with youth organisations in each country to recruit young people, from diverse backgrounds. The groups were carried out interactively using a semi-structured topic guide and visual materials, and were recorded digitally with respondents’ consent.
7 A total of 15 responses were received, and analysed alongside the data from the other strands of data collection.
Figure 1: The study in statistics

THE STUDY IN STATISTICS

Scale and Social Value of the EU Youth Sector

- €211 million
- 34.3 million

The proportion of the Erasmus+ budget allocated to youth, according to the 2019 annual work programme.

The number of participants reported by beneficiaries after the implementation of Civil society cooperation calls in the field of youth in 2016-2017.

Funding and Representation Gaps

- 33%
- 29%

The proportion of national and local youth NGOs feeling that young people from their organisation are well represented at an EU level.

The proportion of youth NGO representatives who considered that EU youth NGOs and networks are adequately funded and supported.

Growth and Expansion, Including New Forms of Youth Representation

- 55%
- 22%
- 69%

The proportion of youth NGO representatives who reported that the number of young people affiliated to their organisation has grown over the past 5 years.

The proportion of youth movements with a youth-led governing body or management committee, compared with 22% for other youth NGOs.

Variations in the % of young people voting in local, national or European elections, by EU MS (Flash Eurobarometer 478 (2019)).

26% Croatia, Ireland 61%
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