

Youth Policy and Participation (YOYO)

Potentials of participation and informal learning in young people's transitions to the labour market. A comparative analysis in ten European regions



Summary report for the second year

Objectives and content of the second year

The first year of the YOYO mainly had been about assessing the role of informal learning and discourses of participation in national transition systems and by contrasting these with young people's subjective transition experiences. The second year centred around the case studies into good practice projects that aimed at and/or succeeded in shaping young people's transitions into work in a participatory way. In concrete this meant

1. to complete the *descriptive analysis* of case study agencies based on document analysis and expert interviews (continuation of WP 3, originally planned to be concluded in year 1);
2. to produce *video films* together with young people on their transition experiences (WP 4);
3. to conduct *qualitative interviews* with young people on their experiences of learning, motivation, participation and biographic progress in and with the case study agencies (WP 5);
4. and finally to start to work on *national case study reports* integrating the single case studies and all the research steps undertaken (WP 6).

Technical progress and main results

ad 1) The first step of the case studies combined a *descriptive approach towards the selected agencies* with the analysis of their objectives and assumptions by analysis of documents (mission statements, reports, proposals for funding, and internal working documents) and semi-standardised expert interviews (organisation responsables, project workers and external experts from funding institutions, the employment service etc.). These reports provide a broad range of contexts, problem definitions, objectives and approaches with regard to young people's transitions to work. Therefore the national reports were analysed with regard to *types of measure* (legal form, sources of funding, affiliation to a certain field of practice, (definition and construction of) target groups), concepts of *informal learning* and non-formal education, and ways of *active participation* lead to some interesting intermediate findings (see annex 3):

→ *Types of measures:*

- Most selected agencies belong to the so-called *third sector* inasmuch as they are non-profit organisations. On the one hand the lacking reliability of public funding makes them vulnerable over a mid- or long-term perspective. On the other hand they can react to political and administrative priority changes more flexibly than public institutions.

- Most agencies received the biggest part of *funding* from local authorities which can be explained by the bias of the YOYO project towards youth work-related projects and local policies addressing youth transitions. While only few agencies exclusively were funded nationally the funding of another big share of agencies was a rather complex mix absorbing a lot of time and energy of the project workers and responsables.
 - The case study agencies cover the following *practice fields*: youth work, prevention of social exclusion of youth at risk, school related projects, pre-vocational education and training, training schemes, job creation. Of course many of the projects combine more than one of these aspects. Nevertheless, this perspective, for heuristic reasons, can be reduced to more youth work-related and more labour market-related projects.
 - With regard to the *target groups* of the agencies it was of interest how broad or narrow these were constructed and how this was justified. Some projects addressed ‘youth in general’ such as a majority of youth work agencies and/or labour market-related projects in areas with very high levels of youth unemployment (Romania, Spain, Italy). Labour market-related projects in contexts with lower youth unemployment and/or a more differentiated transition system addressed specific ‘disadvantaged’ groups (e.g. young women, migrant youth, homeless young people). The more selective approaches were legitimated with regard to structures of segmentation, with regard to individual deficits, or problem definitions explicitly combined structural and individual aspects.
- ➔ One of the two central issues of WP 3 was to analyse the concepts and role of *informal learning* in the projects. In hardly any project this was the case in terms of a recognition of previously acquired informal competences (except for a Dutch project assisting self-employed young adults or a German dressmaking training project encouraging migrant women to contribute their cultural origins to the creation of new fashion collections). In all projects however non-formal education played a central role, that is a structured reference to the power of informal learning: either by providing a setting (such as youth work) in which certain processes of social learning through group building and collective decision-making are likely to happen; or by organising standardised training in a non-formal manner, including peer education and based on trust between young people and project workers. In all projects, learning was referred in terms of personal learning: self-esteem and self-confidence, biographic reflexivity regarding own needs, interests and strengths, autonomous and conscious decision-making. While the more youth work-related projects rarely have the means to assist young people in ‘making these competencies work’, labour market-oriented either manage to provide young people with biographical options according to subjective needs and interests or (have to) channel young people into pre-determined occupational directions.

→ The second central issue of this analysis is young people's *participation* in the sense of their active influence on their transitions. Four different dimensions of participation can be distinguished: the decision to join the project (voluntary versus forced); processes of decision-making with regard to project activities and organisational structures; civic participation in terms of engaging in public social issues; and finally biographic participation in terms of self-determined learning and decision-making processes regarding the own transition process (which is the central objective of YOYO). In a very crude reduction it can be summarised that youth work projects rank high on all levels of participation but can not provide young people with a 'hard' basis for biographic participation in terms of jobs, income or at least qualificatory entrance tickets to the labour market. With regard to the more labour market-oriented projects access not always is voluntary but structured by workfare policies or by young people's need of a job with no alternatives available; project activities are more organised according to curricula or (assumed) labour market demands; while biographic participation is contradictory between personal empowerment and adaptation to a pre-defined occupational route. The YOYO findings support the assumption that participation enhances motivation, however, motivation not necessarily is equivalent to sustainable integration and biographic progress. There were two agencies that ideally (in YOYO terms) manage to combine the structural and personal aspects of empowerment through participation: La Silhouette in Munich (West Germany) and Lifting the Limits in Armagh (Northern Ireland). Both agencies address exclusively young women with additional difficulties: single motherhood in the case of Lifting the Limits (community development course) and migration background in the case of La Silhouette (dress-making apprenticeship). Addressing structures of segmentation they provide young women with both a safe space in which they experience personal empowerment and 'hard' resources: an income and recognised qualifications. This means that the combination of these two perspectives is possible but clearly is the exception rather than the rule – even in such a biased sample as the YOYO one.

A final question at this stage was whether – despite of the biased sample of exceptional rather than typical projects – a *comparative perspective* could be applied; obviously not in terms of strict cross-country comparison but rather by relating the single projects to their contexts and analyse the meanings and spaces of participation provided. Referring to the typology of transition regimes developed in the State of the Art (Yoyo Working Paper 1) the following hypothesis was suggested: in the universalistic Danish transition regime a participatory approach oriented towards individual development is most clearly also backed by the education system and labour market policies; in the liberal transition regimes in the UK and Ireland both the dynamic labour market and workfare policies support a more instrumental

approach of transition policies which in the case of single mothers however is interpreted in a rather holistic way; in the employment-centred regimes of Germany and the Netherlands youth policy-related notions of participation have (and often fail) to compete with the high status of formally organised vocational training to enter the labour market; in the sub-protective regimes of the Mediterranean countries (and also Romania) due the little coverage and efficacy of institutions the third sector plays a major role combining informal aspects such as credibility with providing formal training or creating (precarious) jobs.

Ad 2) A second step of the case studies were *video tapes* produced by or together with young people in the context of one agency in each region. Under the working title 'being in transition' the objective was to provide access to young people's views through their own symbolic expressions and thus add a participatory way of knowledge production by other means of articulation rather than solely (academic) language. Due to different interpretations of the task by research teams, sub-contracted film makers, project workers and young people, due to sometimes limited motivation of young people (at least in the beginning), and of course due to limited resources, the range of products is broad and heterogeneous: more artificial clips interpreting 'being in transition' in an aesthetic, metaphoric way; more realistic features on the respective case study agencies or documentaries on youth transitions in general in which young people were interviewed. This created a lot of ambiguity among the project partners regarding the benefit of the exercise. Additional knowledge, relevant in terms of research, was gained only in those cases in which the young people/film makers managed to provide a metaphoric view on 'being in transition'. However, with regard to dissemination all agreed that the video films provided an additional means: in scientific contexts they allow to make the simultaneity of similarities and differences visible; in policy contexts they provide means to transport young people's voices; and in practice contexts they are an additional means for (further) training of project workers as they illustrate the relation between different contexts and young people's subjectivities.

Ad 3) A central research and evaluation step of course was the analysis of young people's experiences in the case study agencies in terms of participation and motivation, learning and biographic progress. Ideally, this round of interviews should include those interviewed in the exploratory interviews of WP 2 as 'disengaged'. However, sampling revealed to be rather difficult: some young people had left the projects and could not be tracked, others refused to be interviewed a second time (often feeling ashamed for not having achieved anything in the meantime). From those interviewed a second time some were still in the project, some had dropped out and some had left the project on a regular basis. Additionally, new project participants were interviewed the first time and also asked about transition experiences previous to project entry. As a lesson from the exploratory interviews the methodological

procedure was slightly changed to achieve comparable data yet with a contextualised set of questions. A list of thematic dimensions was developed structured by objectives (What do we want to know?), methodological implications (What should be considered with regard to different sub-groups?) and finally exemplary questions to make clearer what kind of information was required (see annex 4). The interviews reflect the findings of WP 3 (expert interviews and document analysis) in an interesting way: while reporting from their engagement in youth work projects in terms of participation and motivation young people rarely related these experiences to their transitions to work; in contrast to this, those in more labour market oriented projects reported less from participatory experiences but related increased self-esteem to the fact of being supported by project workers in a meaningful way and by having increased their chances of succeeding on the labour market. Young people rarely referred to personal development in terms of learning which reflects the fact that this kind of learning is not valued as such by society and its institutions. The interviews also showed that trust was the main prerequisite for participation and (non-formal) learning processes as well as the feeling to belong to a 'family'.

Ad 4) The production of *national case study reports* was initiated at the end of year 2 and will be discussed and finalised in the beginning of year 3. In order to validate the findings partners had the task to organise local meetings with the projects and eventually external experts to discuss them together. The national case study reports will also be discussed with the members of the advisory board in order to guarantee a maximum of relevance for transition-related research and policy.