

## EUROPEAN ACADEMY ON YOUTH WORK - WORKSHOP REPORT

### Pathways to Youth Leadership: Embedding Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange in a NFE Training Course

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#### TOPIC/PROJECT DISCUSSED

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange is a pilot project launched by the European Commission in 2018, with renewed funding for 2019. Virtual Exchanges are seen as an instrument for developing transversal competences in youth, such as online intercultural communicative competence, digital literacies as well as promoting dialogue and inclusion. But so far, the approach has mainly involved the academic sector. In the 2021-2027 Erasmus programme, Virtual Exchange is foreseen as a new format, which should better outreach to disadvantaged youth and create more opportunities and support for physical mobility. It is thus set to become an important new component of youth work.

The project "Pathways to Youth Leadership: Embedding Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange in a NFE Training Course" involved 12 partners and a total of 24 young participants, from the following countries and organisations:

- Associazione Interculturale NUR- Italy
- Breakthrough Foundation- Netherlands
- Think Forward CIC- United Kingdom
- Ac Amics de la Biblioteca de la Fonteta- Spain
- Kids in Action- Greece
- Zdruzenie na Gragjani Kreativ Skopje – Republic of North Macedonia
- Mreza Mladih Jugoistocne Evrope Udruzenje – Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Balkanidea Novi Sad- Serbia
- Qendrat Youth for Social Changes- Albania
- Sting for Consultancy and Design- Egypt
- Loesje- Palestine
- The Lebanese Association for Inclusive Citizenship- Lebanon

The presentation of the project aimed to introduce the tool of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange and in particular the current status of the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange pilot phase developments to colleagues and stakeholders and to find possible ways of better involving the non-formal education sector in its future steps. Participants had the opportunity to find out how to access Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities and to reflect together on how to engage in influencing their evolution, in order to better tailor the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange format to the needs of the youth work field.

## METHODOLOGY

Given the very limited knowledge about this topic in our field, I wanted to give the participants the opportunity to discuss about it while at the same time getting a true “hands on” experience. So, thanks to the support of EAYW staff and the availability of four colleagues from the Netherlands, Czech Republic, Germany and Italy, who connected in a small-scale virtual exchange simulation, as well as Philipp Möcklinghoff representing the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange consortium, we ventured into a blended workshop.

Introduction	Before addressing the topic, the participants shared their level of integration of digital communication tools in their usual projects, giving all of us a view of the huge differences that are already existing on this issue between organisations and/or youth workers.
Core session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Description of the experience:</b> Introduction of the specific path that we, at my Italian NGO (Associazione Interculturale NUR), together with our main partner of the training course project (Breakthrough Foundation from the Netherlands) went through in applying the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange format to a long-term training project on how to become a committed youth leader. Given the number of partners and countries involved in the project and considering the consequentiality between the training courses planned, we were searching for ways to engage the participants in the whole project duration. Sandra van de Kraak of Breakthrough Foundation came across some information about the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange and it looked promising, so we enrolled in their training and were later able to implement five sessions of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange during the one-year duration of the TC.</li><li>• <b>EVE status quo:</b> After this short introduction, the state of art of the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Action was briefly explained before moving to the most interactive part of the workshop.</li><li>• <b>Active involvement:</b> I planned this part to happen in smaller groups, each involving one of the four online participants. We managed to do so technically by using four different computers and assigning each of the participants connected to a specific “break out room” and by placing each computer with its own smaller group in the room. The task of the groups was to reflect on what makes and characterizes a non-formal education project in our field and how can we translate its core dynamics online.</li></ul>
Final sharing	To conclude the workshop, we gathered back in a plenary setting for an exchange of opinions on how to get the youth field more directly involved in the development of this tool. A final moment of reflection for the zoom out questions included a small provocation about how we can keep youth exchanges and training courses inclusive, effective and innovative in an increasingly digitally rich environment.



## KEY ISSUES RAISED SUCH AS CHALLENGES

As was made visible during the introduction of the participants through a short dynamic exercise asking participants to take a place in the room according to the level of digitalisation of their work, participants evidenced quite a big diversity both in methods/tools used and in roles played in the field. Workshop participants included youth workers, trainers and staff of NGOs, NAs and SALTO structures. But the common and bottom line was that none of them had ever heard before of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange.

Although we had some minor logistic issues, the real challenge emerging from the 60 minutes spent together proved to be real understanding of the potential opportunities laying in the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange initiative. For many, if not most youth workers and trainers it is still quite hard to imagine that a Virtual Exchange can be beneficial to our work. My effort was to show its potentiality and that it is up to us to develop it.

Just to mention a few, the opportunities to be seized can be:

- Support in the getting to know process before a mobility takes place
- An inexpensive first step in long-term processes to introducing young people to intercultural environments
- A practical way to include disadvantaged people that cannot leave their home in an intercultural learning experience
- A tool for long-term inclusive evaluation after a mobility project.

As I mentioned in a slightly provocative approach, sometimes there is a tendency in our field to reject digital and virtual ways of interaction as “not relevant”, “not useful” or just plainly “not interesting”. The main point of my workshop was exactly to move beyond the consideration that the format upon which Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange has been developed up to now is not yet responding to the needs of a field that relies so much on deep interpersonal interaction as the first learning motor. If the youth work field wants to be able to introduce a change in the format of EVE in order to make it more suitable to its needs, there is a strong need for suggestions, testing, engagement and advocacy. The main challenge thus seems to be to convince a critical mass of stakeholders, professionals and actors from the youth work field to become “active citizens” of this innovation.

After all, all the relevant work on the topic of “digital youth work” done in the last few years can be the perfect starting platform for exploring and finding innovative “add-ons” to the Virtual Exchange format as it stands now.

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## INNOVATIVE RESPONSES TO THOSE CHALLENGES

If innovation in this case means embracing the opportunities implicit (and yet still to be fully explored) in this new tool, the responses from participants were diverse but encouraging. Not so surprisingly, the stronger doubts came from colleagues that have greater experience in the field and bigger mastering skills of the typical methodologies used in the youth sector, while curiosity was more noticeable among younger youth workers. I believe this might be a physiological response, but I am happy to say that also one National Agency representative present at the workshop asked for further information about the topic, proving that there are potentials to explore. For instance, two participants expressed interest in the possibility to include simple multiplayer video gaming in EVE sessions to enhance the team building dynamics.

## KEY TRENDS IDENTIFIED (COMMONALITIES BETWEEN COMMENTS/PARTICIPANTS)

The group was quite big and diverse but the emerging trends were confirmed, being the two opposite stances forming in relation to the topic: the more “traditionalist” stance that does not consider virtual mobility a possible tool to be adopted in our field, and the other stance that is, even if not yet able to elaborate specific suggestions, ready and curious to get involved in a potentially innovative tool that might otherwise remain solely used by the higher education field.

## FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS AND 1-2 QUOTES

I received two written feedbacks related to minor technical issues (difficulty in fully using the laptops provided because of their Slovenian interface) and lack of time to fully understand the ways Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange could be used. Comments made during the final minutes of the workshop ranged from scepticism about a tool that seemed, at least one participant, “just another conferencing software” to responses showing great curiosity. One participant asked how to join the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange training and another participant asked if I had thought already of ways to adapt the tool to non-formal learning youth projects. Immediately after the workshop, I also received two requests for interviews for local publications/projects showing a good level of interest, and for a contact with one interested National Agency.

## LINKS TO FURTHER RESOURCES OR INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROJECT AVAILABLE ONLINE



[https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/impact-erasmus-virtual-exchange\\_en](https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/impact-erasmus-virtual-exchange_en)  
[https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/activities\\_en](https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/activities_en)  
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