

# 18 Virtual exchange strengthens international youth work

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## Abstract

Pathways to Youth Leadership was an Erasmus+: Youth in Action long term training involving 24 youngsters from 12 countries. Grant cuts required squeezing the residential programme, originally planned to last three weeks, into two. That is why, after taking part in the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (E+VE) training, we successfully added five VE sessions to the project. Youth work relies on personal interaction, experiential learning, and non-formal education. Transferring that into online interaction has been our greatest innovation and challenge. In our field, there is resistance to online activities, but the Covid-19 pandemic is changing this. We need to practise online facilitation, develop the required skills, and define the role E+VE can play in youth work.

**Keywords:** youth, leadership, virtual exchange, training.

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## 1. Context

Pathways to Youth Leadership is a long term leadership training initially proposed by the youth work organisations Breakthrough (the Netherlands), Associazione Interculturale NUR (Italy), and Think Forward (UK), embraced by a 12-organisation partnership and financed by Erasmus+: Youth in Action.

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The training involved 24 young leaders from 12 different countries, including some from the EU neighbouring South East Europe (SEE) and Mediterranean And Middle East (MEDA) regions. The target group was young adults, those new to youth work, ex-beneficiaries of Erasmus+ (either youth exchanges or European Voluntary Service), and young people looking for further training. Realities differ substantially within the participating countries, and sharing and learning from each other is an essential part of the programme. The participation of MEDA and SEE neighbouring regions brings another rich learning dimension to this process and offers an authentic platform for exploring cultural differences and similarities.

The long term training aimed to offer a platform for developing and understanding the principles and practice of youth leadership, and let leadership competences become habits to empower young people close to or involved in the partnering organisations' activities. One of the key goals of the programme is to support participants through their own flexible learning path, facilitating and validating their learning by means of digital open badges.

The team of freelance trainers leading the long term residential training course were three male and one female from Italy, The Netherlands, and the UK who already knew each other and had had an opportunity to develop a close partnership and professional approach to fostering learning through innovative, creative, and flexible methods. Having collaborated both in projects on youth leadership and youth work related competences development on one side, and on innovative digital tools-based projects in the field of youth on the other, it was natural for us to embrace the possibility offered by the E+VE pilot project.

Due to grant cuts in the design phase of the programme, the team faced a challenge when forced to squeeze a three-week residential learning programme into one based on only two weeks of mobility. This made us decide to proactively use digital tools, and to test E+VE.

To better embed the E+VE component into our programme, two trainers took part in the VE training organised by UNICollaboration. As a result of the further

engagement in a collaboration between our partnership and UNICollaboration, a structured programme of five VE dialogue sessions was added to the existing programme (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The third E+VE meeting of Pathways to Youth Leadership<sup>3</sup>



## 2. Aims and description of the project

The first aim of Pathways to Youth Leadership is to train young people to develop effective leadership habits (Figure 2). A habit is not achieved in one week, therefore our training course needed to be structured over a longer time period. This posed a significant challenge in planning the course: how could we keep young people on board and engaged for long enough to achieve these habits?

3. Published in [https://www.instagram.com/p/ByiSeLso\\_CY/?igshid=1e04macq4dasb](https://www.instagram.com/p/ByiSeLso_CY/?igshid=1e04macq4dasb)

The main goal we wanted to reach by including in our agenda five dialogue sessions was to allow for a smoother flow of the project itself given that one of the three residential training courses we had asked for had not been funded in the final grant agreement. Besides resulting in a lack of time to deliver the full content of our project, the distribution of two residential trainings in a rather long project posed some doubts on the actual chances of maintaining a high commitment to the project among youth participants.

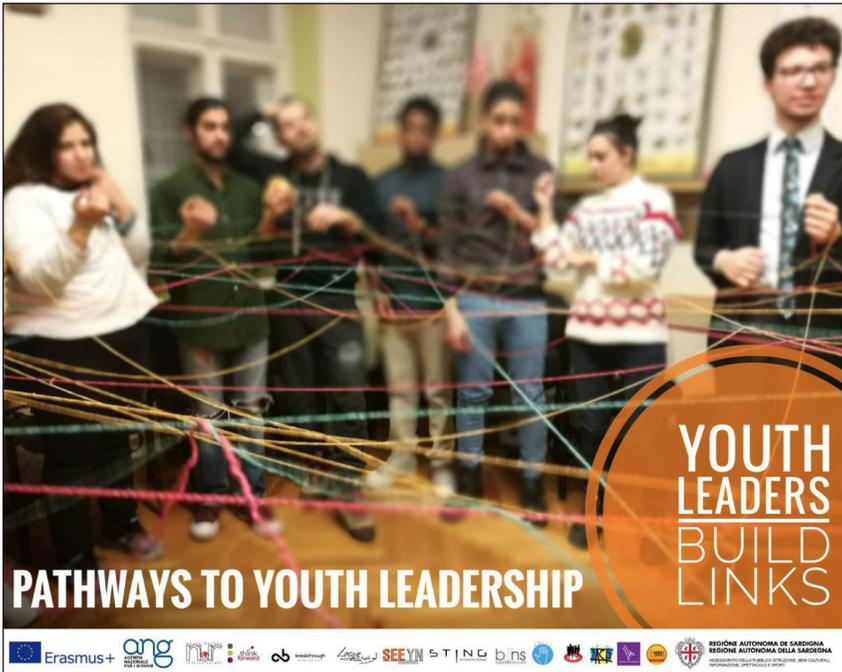
Fearing higher than normal drop-out rates and difficulties in retaining learning from one training to another, we turned to VE as a bridging solution between them.

Also, by programming the VE sessions to happen before the first mobility, after the second and between the two, we were able to plan content of the online sessions to fulfil three specific tasks:

- group building and ice breaking, before the first mobility to lessen the element of culture shock when arriving in a strange place abroad and meeting a lot of new people at once;
- content-development and learning-reinforcement, for the sessions between mobilities to support learners to keep on working on their effective leadership habits; and
- follow-up and evaluation, for the session planned at the end of the process to help learners recognise their learning and achievements and think in a constructive and practical way about their next steps.

So, even if participants were approximately the same across the whole project and the main methods, tools, and approaches used in each of the five sessions were also very consistent across the almost 12 months of the life-span of our project, we managed to differentiate the aim of each session according to the specific phase of the project's timeline in which it was implemented.

Figure 2. Pathways to Youth Leadership building links during a residential session<sup>4</sup>



### 3. Nuts and bolts

Our youth work activities are normally based on experiential learning, and active participation, peer learning approaches often identified as non-formal education methods. Therefore, the first VE session, before the first residential mobility, was mainly planned to support young participants in connecting with each other and the delivery team, making the step to going abroad accessible for everybody, and to create a friendly and safe learning environment. Content for this first session focused on getting-to-know-each-other and on a first understanding of the way

4. Published in <https://www.instagram.com/p/BtjuZGYFN77/?igshid=1d3fkpy44i938>

we would be working with active learning methods in a non-formal education setting (also using other software than just the video conferencing platform), shared viewing and commenting of videos and documents about ‘What is Erasmus+’<sup>5</sup> or ‘What is Youthpass’<sup>6</sup>, a ‘facilitated dialogue’ in small breakout rooms about the expectations for the entire learning programme, and support for more logistics-related topics such as how to travel to the first physical mobility destination in Italy.

During the first residential training, a ‘buddy system’ and reflection groups were started, with the aim of creating a peer-support system among participants to help them during their learning process, in particular in the time between the two mobilities. These groups were used as support groups in the next VE sessions implemented between the two residential courses, one per month, to keep a high level of engagement among our young youth leaders.

The logistics of our VE sessions followed a standardised process in order to transform them into good habits as fast as possible. Before each session, participants received an invitation to take part, as well as information on time zones and on how to enter Zoom, complete with a fully explanatory screenshot tutorial, and an overview of the topics and content for the VE meeting.

In every step we were supported by the UNICollaboration team, who provided two dialogue facilitators for each session. Each exchange started with reinforcing a feeling of being in a safe environment for everybody. As a note-taking tool during the VE sessions we used Etherpad. Participants were thus able to take notes about their discussions in their breakout groups. We gave buddy groups time to meet within the VE session and participants frequently contacted each other outside our meetings using a specific Whatsapp chat we initiated, and we noticed that they were supporting each other to a great extent. But while the personal support and engagement goals were very easy to reach, having structured learning meetings was more difficult. Probably being the very first attempt in

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5. <https://youtu.be/TvondHqhKXM>

6. [https://www.youthpass.eu/downloads/13-62-157/flyer\\_yp\\_for\\_youth\\_worker.pdf](https://www.youthpass.eu/downloads/13-62-157/flyer_yp_for_youth_worker.pdf)

transferring non-formal education dynamics into an online environment, we paid too much attention to the ‘human touch’ aspects of our methods, sacrificing a little more detailed planning for the delivery of the learning content.

#### **4. Evaluation, assessment, and recognition**

Throughout the entire process we had several evaluation moments within the team and by participants via observations, checking out after each VE session, and regular Google Sheets evaluation forms. A year after the last VE meeting officially linked to the project, we had a new one, and participants are still planning and implementing their own VE meetings.

Given the blended nature of the project, the evaluation system was also structured to reflect this approach. So we had a very rich system of tools to evaluate, ranging from online questionnaires (both delivered by the trainers team and by the UNICollaboration team that supported us through the whole process) to digital open badges. We had already developed specific badges for the assessment of the learning component of the main content of the training course. These proved invaluable tools to explain the concept of recognition of learning in a non-formal education context and it engaged our young youth leaders in self assessing their new competences or even in a peer assessment process where each one could validate badge requests from the other participants; but we may have over-complicated the tool by planning too many and too specific badges. As a result, participants focused only on the few that they felt were more relevant to them, not using the whole range of options. On the other hand, we were offering a flexible learning path where young people could follow their own learning at the moment which was right for them (Figure 3).

Other tools and means to assess learning through the project included specific reflection group activities during the residential parts of the course, the issuing of Youthpass certificates, a long term self-assessment of improvements in specific leadership skills and the Erasmus+ Mobility Tool+ questionnaires.



How to be a good role model online and to support young people to give them the safety for a good learning path is not simply a matter of ‘translating’ activities that we are very much used to implementing in person into an online environment. Even finding the right icebreakers and accurately preparing a functional time scheduling was sometimes a challenge. Two members of our team followed the training course provided by UNICollaboration but even from the very early stages of such preparation it was clear to us that the strong roots in the academic world from which E+VE has sprung gave the tool and the concepts behind it a deep ‘formal-education imprinting’ making it less easy to implement in our field.

Also the almost total absence of previous cases from which to draw examples and guidance was an obstacle that left us almost alone (though always supported by the UNICollaboration team) in wondering and searching for the right solutions.

This was reflected in even small details such as, for instance, the choice of tools to complement the video conferencing platform of choice. Just to mention a few examples, what we could add next time is different note-taking tools, which will allow participants to also use other methods rather than just text to show their learning during VEs, for example via online post-its, posting images, etc. Through trial and error and a year-and-a-half on from our first exchange, we are in a much better position to assess our methods and tools we used during the VE sessions. Nevertheless, we still need to work on methods to support young people on how to use these tools and keep everybody on board. Tools that seem great on a computer screen also need to be usable on mobile devices in case of weak Internet connections. We often had young people who lost their connection during the VE meeting, and people dropping in and out of the virtual sessions due to technical issues. At least initially, we would recommend having three facilitators on board all with very precise tasks. One can facilitate the learning process, one can offer technical support, and one can provide individual support through the private chat function to young participants who need it. It is also crucial that the members of the facilitation team are able to trust each other’s capacity in this.

VE meetings can be a very exciting and fun way of having learning experiences, even when they take place through a screen where you can see each other. As youth workers, we believe that people need to meet in person, but a combination of digital youth work and in person youth work is very effective. We did not always play the VE facilitator role as it had been defined in the training from UNICollaboration. The training was built on a format that for some aspects works best in the academic field and some tools typical of the youth sector needed to be kind of ‘invented’. Building relationships with young people during the residential ultimately made the VE room an easier place to navigate. However, we also saw with several young people different behaviours online and offline. In our next training, we need to better understand this and support young people in the online process to feel safe enough to be the person they want to be online and offline.

One significant lesson we learnt was linked to the fact that the working hours used for preparation, the actual VE, and the evaluation, were not financed, meaning that we delivered the whole package of five VE sessions on a totally voluntary basis. We were unaware of funding mechanisms to finance such activities. But the lesson learnt is that foreseeing a reasonable budget for recognising the facilitators’ work and time can support us in devoting more time to the online activities of a project, making it easier to take into account more details that, when considered carefully, will lead to better quality in our VE delivery and outcomes.

We would also like to mention a great learning point we got from experimenting with E+VE. As mentioned, our project turned out to be one of the very first (and few) from the Erasmus+ youth funded sector and this gave us the opportunity to widely disseminate the results of the experience. We were invited to present a workshop on the project and VE innovation to the first edition of the European Academy on youth work<sup>7</sup> organised by seven national agencies of Erasmus+:

- Youth in Action, Agenzia Nazionale Per I Giovani, Italy;
- EDUFI, Finland;
- JTBA, Lithuania;

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7. <https://www.eayw.net/>

- JINT, Belgium-Flanders;
- JUGEND für Europa, Germany;
- Jugend in Aktion, Interkulturelles Zentrum, Austria;
- MOVIT, Slovenia; and
- SALTOYOUTH Resource Centres and the partnership between the European Union and the Council of Europe in the field of youth in Slovenia in May 2019.

It was a significant opportunity to share a truly innovative project in our field among colleagues, institutions, and organisations like ours. The presentation of the project aimed to introduce the tool of E+VE and in particular the current status of the E+VE 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 in the workshop had the opportunity to find out how to access E+VE activities and to reflect together on how to engage in influencing their evolution, in order to better tailor the E+VE format to the needs of the youth work field. Workshop participants were youth workers, trainers, and staff of non-government organisations, national agencies, and SALTO-Youth<sup>8</sup> structures; nevertheless, none of them had ever heard of E+VE.

The main challenge for participants proved to be understanding the potential opportunities of the E+VE initiative. For many, if not most youth workers and trainers, it seemed difficult to imagine that a VE could be beneficial to our field of work as there is still a tendency in our non-formal education field to reject digital and virtual ways of interaction as ‘not relevant’, ‘not useful’, or simply ‘not interesting’. This is quite a strange attitude if we consider the big efforts made in recent years to innovate the sector and all the progress made in the area of ‘digital youth work’.

This same attitude was still quite visible, even if with a noticeably more constructive curiosity about the topic, at the end of February, 2020, when we had another chance to present the project and E+VE as a valuable support to

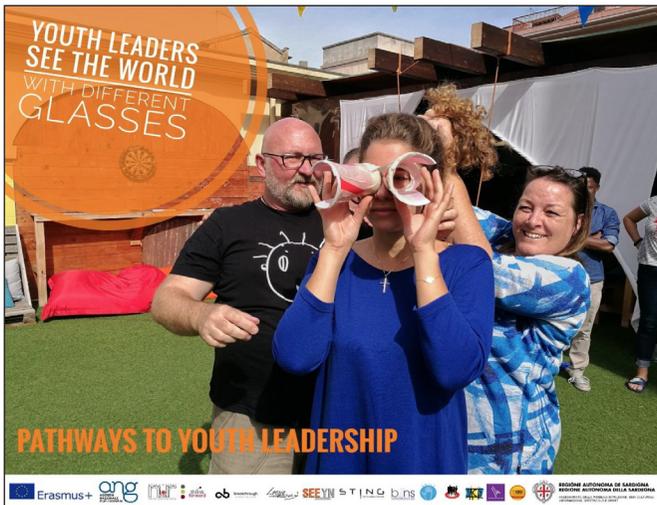
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8. Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities for Youth

learning even in the non-academic world. This was during the ‘Exploring the digital dimension of youth workers’ competences’ conference, held in Vienna by the Austrian National Agency IZ – Verein zur Förderung von Vielfalt, Dialog und Bildung.

What was definitely much more effective in raising interest and attention to what we had implemented came in the first weeks of March 2020 and the progressive extension of lockdown measures across Europe due to the Covid-19 health emergency. Facing the need to forcibly find alternatives to physical mobility, our youth field has shifted towards a much more active and constructive engagement in understanding and discovering the potential of the E+VE idea and tools and this is a great opportunity for all the stakeholders of the non-formal education world as well as for E+VE alike. Creativity from the field of youth work can definitely benefit the E+VE programme in finding new and effective ways to involve and engage young people even in the virtual path to intercultural learning.

Figure 4. Exercise to support the understanding of differences in perspectives of people<sup>9</sup>



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9. Published in <https://www.instagram.com/p/BovxUH2nac/?igshid=sfbhrdlv9okm>



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