HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE ACROSS EUROPE GET INTO WORK

A REPORT ON THE “EASIER TRANSITIONS” PROJECT
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Fundacion Canfranc  Spain
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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report records and evaluates the findings of the Easier Transitions project, which took place between 2014 and 2015.

More information can be found at www.easiertransitions.org or via the Erasmus reference number 2014-1-UK01-KA205-001843.

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More information about WONDER can be found at www.wonderfoundation.org.uk
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABOUT THE REPORT</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABOUT THE AUTHORS</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BACKGROUND: YOUTH WORK ACROSS FOUR EUROPEAN COUNTRIES</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition into employment</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences in skills and practices</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROJECT DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do young people think?</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do employers think?</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE EASIER TRANSITIONS SYLLABUS</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nine key skills</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEARNING THROUGH VOLUNTEERING</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why volunteering?</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How it worked in practice</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEARNING THROUGH CO-PRODUCTION</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why co-production?</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges and how it worked in practice</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lessons learned</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iGRO: AN APP FOR REFLECTION AND PERSONAL GROWTH</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why was it needed?</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How was it developed?</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User evaluation</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROJECT CASE STUDIES</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatima</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myriam</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

When considering options for work and continued education, disadvantaged young people and those supporting them often only recognise the skills learned through formal channels – school-based education or work experience. Through discussions with partners working with young people across Europe, we realised that something was missing.

Easier Transitions aimed to empower both youth workers and young people to reflect on the value of informal and non-formal education, including volunteering. In doing so, project partners worked with adolescents across four European countries to help them develop the skills and confidence they needed to enter the workplace.

BACKGROUND: YOUTH WORK ACROSS FOUR EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

Transition into employment

Youth unemployment across Europe is high\(^1\), and it is clear that there is a big gap between the skills young people need to find employment and what they learn at school. A 2014 report found that 74% of European education providers were confident that their graduates were prepared for work, but only 38% of young people and 35% of employers agreed.\(^2\)

\(^1\) Eurofound (2014), Mapping youth transitions in Europe, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg

Unemployment rates in European countries – June 2016.
Europe 2020 further highlights that most European countries need to adapt their educational systems to ensure young people are work-ready, and that more needs to be done to support young people as they transition into employment.

From the age young people leave home to their country’s economic situation, there are many factors that can affect a young person’s transition from education to the workplace. However, some countries are better at supporting the transition than others. Germany, for example, combines education and work, and has higher rates of employment and a smoother, quicker transition from school to work as a result. Generally, countries with greater integration of school and work, through apprenticeship programmes or effectively combining school and early labour market experiences, have lower rates of unemployment.

Alongside a school system that is better integrated with the workplace, youth volunteering and engagement has been identified as one of the ways to bridge the gap between education and work. Erasmus+ funds youth projects that develop skills relevant to national and European labour market needs. The Wonder Foundation (UK) and three other charities, Fundación Canfranc (Spain), Kopienas Attīstības Centrs (Latvia) and Fundacija Sursum (Slovenia) all committed to supporting young people to improve their lives were keen to develop a response to Erasmus+ that would benefit the diverse young people we worked with.

Differences in skills and practices

The Wonder Foundation currently develops and delivers projects that strategically address social issues and assess participant progress, but this is not common practice across Europe. While there are youth strategies, policies and programmes in most European countries, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions found that ‘there is no systematic monitoring of the results of these programmes in order to determine their success.’ Looking at our own delivery models in the UK, youth workers were accustomed to delivering projects with outcomes in mind, but this methodology was not as formalized in Spain, Latvia or Slovenia. A lack of robust evaluation can have a profound impact on the quality of the project being delivered. If project goals are unclear, it is hard to assess whether they have been met and if delivery has had the desired impact.

**PROJECT DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT**

Looking at the data from PISA report and at the conclusions from our consultation, we wanted to design a project that met three key objectives:

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6 Youth unemployment rate in Europe (EU member states) as of May 2016 (seasonally adjusted)

• To encourage 200 young people to reflect, and teach them how to make informed choices.
• To provide practical volunteering opportunities.
• To support 30 youth workers across 4 EU countries (UK, Slovenia, Latvia and Spain) to develop activities that would help young people’s career development.

We firstly built on evaluation methods used in the UK, developing tools for youth workers to help them to observe, name and measure outcomes of youth work on young people. We then designed specific training on embedding young people’s career development into youth work.

**What do young people think?**

In 2014, the partners held a conference to understand how our 120 project beneficiaries felt about their employability skills. 97% of young people reported that education hadn’t prepared them for a career. We also found that young people were not aware of the skills learned through non-formal educational activities, such as youth club activities, involvement in sports teams or other hobbies were relevant to employment.
During the consultation at that same conference, young people from Slovenia, Latvia and Spain, (all countries that have higher levels of youth unemployment than the UK) reported that they felt they were not as work-ready as their British counterparts. The OECD PISA report (2012) on youth competencies agreed - finding that British young people are more ready to enter the job market than Spaniards, Latvians and Slovenians. The young conference attendees felt it was important that within the project there was scope for British adolescents to share their knowledge and skills with their peers.

**What do employers think?**

Having identified the gap between what education is offering young people and what they actually need to survive in the workplace, we decided to carry out research, asking a variety of employers across Europe from different sectors of industry what skills young people needed to get a job.

During 2014 - 15 we consulted with a variety of businesses and educational institutions, predominately through questionnaires asking about what they needed from entry-level employees, and any gaps they had noticed from young people in these contexts. When we had collected and evaluated the data it was clear that certain qualities and competencies cropped up time and time again across all sectors. From this, we were able narrow it down to a list of nine priority skills for young people entering the workforce.

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http://ec.europa.eu/youth/library/study/youth-work-report_en.pdf*
THE EASIER TRANSITIONS SYLLABUS

Our young participants reported feeling overwhelmed by the job application process and completely confused about what employers wanted from them. They often felt like they were in a ‘lose lose’ situation. Using our preliminary research, we developed a list of key skills that could help them overcome this.

Nine key skills

- Communication
- Flexibility
- Initiative
- Global Awareness
- Financial Awareness
- Teamwork
- Problem Solving
- Leadership
- Time Management

These key skills provided the framework we used to develop learning resources, and also offered young people clear goals to work towards.

Working with the group of young people, we developed fun, practical activities and session plans designed to help youth workers provide better careers support for the adolescents they aim to help.

Throughout this process, participants themselves also took these nine core competencies on board. This happened in two main ways: learning through volunteering, and learning through working directly on the mobile app (iGro) to help others like them to pick up the same skills.
LEARNING THROUGH VOLUNTEERING

The young people participating in the Easier Transitions project were encouraged to volunteer. Volunteering contributes to local communities and helps young people learn key employability skills before entering employment. Young people can develop their initiative, teamwork skills and flexibility, in ways they cannot do in a classroom. Young participants were eager to support their peers in their learning and development while also learning skills they could apply to their own careers.

Why volunteering?

Young people don’t just want to be told to find a job. They need to be given the opportunity to gain practical work experience. Volunteering is a great way for young people to test the waters of employment. Often the recruitment process and time commitments are more casual than for a paid position, helping young people to experience the responsibility of working when they do not have the necessary skills or experience to enter paid employment.

Research shows that students who volunteered during their time at university felt that their transferable skills such as communication, interpersonal and team working improved because of volunteering. They also agreed that it had improved their employability and they used their voluntary work as an example in interviews. Volunteering can also provide a self-confidence boost, a sense of purpose and decrease anxiety. This is crucial considering that the long term unemployed are three times more likely to be depressed than those in employment. Volunteering is also a way for young people to increase their social capital and develop a network, which is often an important element of a job search.

How it worked in practice

For the volunteering side of Easier Transitions, we worked with:

- 400 young people from economically deprived backgrounds (unemployed, or with fewer educational opportunities, with fewer opportunities to develop their skills).
- 200 young women experiencing barriers to integration due to social, cultural and economic difficulties.
- 60 young people with learning disabilities.

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9 Colin Rochester (with Kim Donahue, Jurgen Grotz, Matthew Hill, Nick Ockenden, and Judith Unell), (2009) A Gateway to Work. The role of Volunteer Centres in supporting the link between volunteering and employment, Institute for Volunteering Research


LEARNING THROUGH CO-PRODUCTION

More than 150 young people across the four countries were directly involved in the project through co-production. This enabled us to incorporate local responses, the perspectives of beneficiaries, as well as a European response in the development process. By helping young people share their experiences with each other and work directly on the solution, we were able to deliver a project that was well adapted to the needs of its target users.

The network provided by the four Easier Transitions partners enhanced the impact of the co-production approach. Young people had the opportunity to see their peers in other counties experiencing the same problems and barriers and working to overcome them. Typically employability projects like these are national, but in an increasingly globalised economy it’s essential that young people are aware of other cultures and job markets, and are comfortable working with a diverse group of colleagues.

Why co-production?

Co-production means talking with young people, not at them. The beneficiaries involved knew their opinions were valued and respected, and because of this they felt an ownership of the project. In many cases this encouraged them to go above and beyond to ensure their work was of the highest quality.

Working with young people meant we were able to better understand the challenges they face, and how youth workers can help address them. It also encouraged all partners to think critically about how we can help young people and employers to better understand each other.

Challenges and how it worked in practice

The young people involved had no experience working on a project of this scale. We provided support to ensure that the project was done to a high standard, and that they had concrete outcomes to help them progress in their careers.

We offered:

- One-to-one mentoring and support to ensure that young people felt that they could cope with the project
- Workshops on: project management, time management, governance and budget management to ensure that they were competent in all aspects of project delivery.

These provisions meant that, in each country, young people took leadership roles in project activities. Their insight into the gaps in knowledge and skills shaped the content of the training, which they also helped to write. Finally, participants developed materials for skills workshops and information, which can be found on the Easier Transitions website (www.easiertransitions.org).
Lessons learned

One size does not fit all but there are universal principles that are relevant to young people across the EU and diversity is strength. Working with young people from diverse ethnic groups, socio-economic backgrounds, employment and education statuses meant that we were able to test what worked with different groups of people. Youth workers and teachers should be encouraged and supported to trust young people to come up with good ideas and deliver high quality activities, fostering specific employability skills. Sometimes co-production and youth led activities are slow to start, but – in our experience - the effort and investment pays off.

It was also encouraging to see the Spanish participants, who were educated in systems that typically don’t promote independent thinking and initiative, gradually becoming more resourceful and learning from the behaviours exhibited by their peers from the UK, Slovenia and Latvia.
iGRO: AN APP FOR REFLECTION AND PERSONAL GROWTH

Why was it needed?
Young people often struggle to reflect on learning and to identify areas for personal skills development. The Wonder Foundation’s consultation identified that a mobile phone application (app) would be a useful tool to help young people monitor personal growth, and to encourage their peers to regularly reflect and record their progress.

How was it developed?
During project design at focus groups in with young people in UK, Slovenia, Spain and Latvia, we discussed how an app could realistically support young people, who were encouraged to look at existing resources and evaluate how useful they found them.

There were many English language employability resources for young people online. However, the Slovenian and Latvian participants were keen to have a skills app in their own language, as there were very few available. Providing an app in those languages meant we would be able to engage with thousands of young people who didn’t speak or had very limited English, or who would prefer to use their native languages.

After reviewing other apps in English, participants still believed that there was a gap for an app which would be accessible on the go, whether or not there was wireless internet. This was important as young people tended to have limited mobile data on their phones, and wireless internet is not available everywhere.

Across the four countries young people came up with the idea of developing an app to:

• Identify, evidence and record different key employability skills.
• Help them become more aware of their own skills.
• Develop a strong CV.
• Easily prepare for interviews. By having a regularly updated record of their achievements, they would find it easier to communicate with an employer.
• Have fun while building skills. It was crucial that using the app wouldn’t be a chore otherwise, like many apps, once downloaded it might never be used again.

The app was named iGro to reflect the personal growth that it aimed to foster and following consultation with the four countries to create a name that was acceptable and did not any alternative meanings in any other European language.
Challenges
As app development progressed the app required more time and resources than the Wonder Foundation could commit to ensure that it remained functional, was managed effectively and would be kept up to date with new content. Therefore, following ongoing consultation, we decided that the management and ownership of the app should remain with the developer. The developers are still perfecting it, and we are excited about the impact we know the app will have on young people as they start to think about their career.

User evaluation
Evaluation is ongoing, but more than 20 charities and youth organisations are currently using the app, and three other organisations are running pilots of the latest version.

Feedback so far has been positive. Young people have said using the app has helped them to think about their personal strengths, decide how to develop their weaker skills and record their achievements.
PROJECT CASE STUDIES

Fatima

After finishing college and failing to get a place at university Fatima was unsure how to spend her unexpected gap year. She got involved in the Easier Transitions project through her local volunteering centre after hearing about it through a peer. She started her time working in the administration of the Easier Transitions project as a volunteer, and through the project we also matched her with a mentor, who met Fatima twice a month. Together they worked on goals aimed at helping Fatima get a permanent job or an apprenticeship. Fatima came from a family with English as a second language and was a bit behind in her literacy. She was also physically disabled and was not used to travelling far, so her worldview was small.

Through her work experience Fatima was supported to practice literacy and numeracy. She was given tasks that allowed her to develop specific skills she had identified with her mentor. By the end of the project Fatima had improved her literacy and numeracy, increased her knowledge of options available to her, improved her confidence and accessed a great deal of resources she had not known about before. All this contributed to Fatima getting an apprenticeship at a global retailer.

Fatima said: “my mentor’s motivation definitely pushed me to do well; participating in the Easier Transitions project has given me the confidence to apply for jobs as I have felt really encouraged and also increase my confidence.”

Myriam

“I dropped out of university after I realised I was not enjoying my course or the university environment. I felt like a fish out of water. Coming back to London I found a job in a coffee shop. I loved being busy again and being with people but talking to my friends I realised I needed to find something that would not just sustain me but also help me to grow. I decided to start volunteering at WONDER for the Easier Transitions project. I just loved it! It was varied, I met different people I would have never met before and I was introduced by the project lead to a college that offered courses that would suit my interest. I arranged to go to the college and I enrolled immediately - I am so excited! It seems just perfect: small, professional, caring and with opportunities. I want to say thanks to the Wonder Foundation for helping me reflect in my skills, my interests and where I want to be. Above all for the personal interest they took on me, which has given me the confidence to know I am setting out on the right path.”
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Across Europe, there is a gap between what young people learn at school and what is expected of them in the workplace. Non-formal education such as volunteering is an excellent path to help young people transition into the world of work. All of us (youth workers, teachers, parents, peers) need to help adolescents acquire the skills they will need to get a job and succeed as good citizens.

As a result, we recommend ongoing projects, awareness campaigns and initiatives to:

- Build awareness of the nine core competencies, continue to update them with business-oriented research and build new tools and apps to help young people acquire them.
- Incentivise the co-production approach to ensure relevant solutions for young people, and to make sure that projects also directly benefit young people as they go along.
- Encourage volunteering and similar informal activities for young people as part of their skills growth.
- Include reflective skills assessments as part of volunteering programmes to help young people make the most of their experiences.
- Ensure young people share ideas with their peers from other countries and increase their awareness of the globalised workforce.