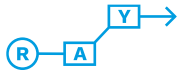Research-based
analysis of European
youth programmes

RESEARCH PROJECT ON COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT FOR YOUTH WORK THROUGH TRAININGS IN THE EUROPEAN YOUTH PROGRAMMES (RAY-COMP)
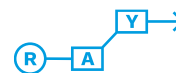
National Report (Module 3)
LITHUANIA
21 MARCH 2024

AUTHOR: DR. JUSTINA GARBAUSKAITĖ-JAKIMOVSKA

1. FOCUS GROUP FORM: FOCUS GROUP 1

1.1. MAIN FACTS

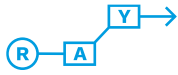|	
Focus Group date	*2024 02 09*
Format (virtual, face-to-face, hybrid)	*Virtual*
Duration of the Focus Group	*1 hour and 40 min.*
Position(s)/Role(s) of the participants:	*P1 – youth worker.* *P2 – youth worker.* *P3 – youth worker.* *P4 – youth leader.* *P5 – youth leader.*

1.2. ABSTRACT

There was a significant consensus within this focus group concerning the training needs, experiences with European programmes, participation in training courses, and learning in general. Providing a fuller view of the youth field in Lithuania was the representation of various regions and different approaches to engaging with young people. Three research participants were full-time youth workers in open youth centres or youth spaces; one was an employed youth leader at a large youth organization; and one was a volunteer youth leader in a youth initiative. Several things stood out: 1) the training offer is extensive; 2) *nobody* has time to fully participate in training programmes; 3) there is always a question if one can trust the quality of a proposed training programme; 4) a lot depends on other participants – what kind of work experiences they have (basic – advanced), what is their learning motivation.

1.3. CONTEXT

I have reached out to many potential participants, seeking recommendations from trainers and other experts in the youth field, as well as organizations active in the youth sector. My aim was to assemble a diverse group of participants representing different types of youth workers – those who work with "difficult" youth and those who work with active youth. It was crucial that they were active at the national level. Therefore, organizations with a primarily international focus, solely engaged in Erasmus+ projects (referred to as "travel agencies" in the trainers' focus group), were excluded, as they do not engage in regular, everyday work with young people.

Many active youth work organizations did not have youth workers who were also actively involved in European youth programs. As one response from a highly advanced youth work organization stated: *"We have so much work; there is no time left for travel."* This somewhat reflects the current state of youth work in Lithuania – many individuals participate in Erasmus+ programs, gaining youth work skills, but do not apply them in their everyday youth work. Conversely, there are many who engage in high-quality day-to-day youth work but struggle to find the time or motivation to engage internationally.

Preparing the group presented no major challenges. I provided them with an informational document explaining the research context and general aspects of the focus group, such as time, anonymity, and how the data would be utilized.

There was one participant, representing a youth initiative, who expressed doubts about whether they qualified as youth workers. They identified more strongly as youth leaders.

Background of participants

P1 has been working as a youth worker for six years. They also serve as the head of an open youth centre and has experience within an Erasmus+ youth projects.

P2 is a youth worker, who also serves as the director of an open youth space in the capital city.

P3 has been a youth worker at an open youth space for four years. They mentioned, *"I want to say that mainly I spend time with young people, but actually, currently I spend most of my time at the computer dealing with different questions and solving various issues."*

P4 has been a youth leader for approximately five years. In the youth policy field, they work with youth organizations. They remarked, *"In my work, everything revolves around young people, and I feel that I am still a young person myself."*

P5 has been a youth leader in a youth-led initiative for ten years. Their work at the initiative is voluntary-based, involving overseeing volunteers, consulting and supporting them, organizing training courses, generating ideas for activities, and more.

1.4. YOUTH WORKER'S COMPETENCES

As discussed in the focus group, the work of a youth worker is very demanding and very diverse. *"It is very diverse and it is a lot. You never know what is ahead in the day. It might involve saving a life, dealing with underaged pregnancy, or a suicide attempt. It can also entail writing a project application and organizing a concert in the town. From very sensitive personal matters to work for the whole city. This is the job of a youth worker."* (P1)

The role entails:

- **Direct work with youth**, including being present in an open youth centre, engaging in mobile youth work, etc. This encompasses individual consultations, group consultations, and group work in order to support young people in their transitions toward independence.
- **Working with** national or international **volunteers**, cooperating with and consulting volunteers in different cities.
- **Project-related tasks** such as writing applications, implementing local, national, and international projects, and supporting youth initiatives.
- **Collaboration** and meetings with other NGOs and community members. This involves maintaining relationships and representing young people, emphasizing the importance of intersectoral partnerships in addressing complex youth issues.
- **Administrative** tasks, including paperwork and other documentation.
- **Organizational** responsibilities such as organizing training courses, events, etc.

"*There is a lot of meaning. It's important to not forget why we started this – to work with young people, to represent young people, to support, to hear them out"* (P1)

To become a good youth worker and effectively support young people in their growth and development, a wide range of competences is essential. These competences include:

- Knowledge of young people - understanding age limits, developmental stages, and psychological factors.
- Understanding youth work forms and activities - knowledge of diverse youth work approaches and the ability to facilitate engaging activities that promote interaction and personal development.
- Establishing trust-based connections - building meaningful, non-judgmental relationships grounded in trust and respect.
- Familiarity with relevant topics - grasp of issues such as psychoactive substances, genders, and sexuality enables informed guidance and prevention efforts.
- Prevention skills - being equipped to recognize and address potential risks and challenges young people may face.
- Supporting independence - guiding and empowering young people to develop the skills and confidence necessary for autonomy, independent living and decision-making.
- Community building - facilitating the creation of inclusive community, fostering common values, and moderating interactions.
- Personal qualities - possessing openness, tolerance, authenticity, and flexibility fosters an inclusive and supportive environment conducive to youth development.
- Effective communication - demonstrating equal communication and relational skills that promote understanding, empathy, and mutual respect between youth workers/leaders and young people.

Developing the competences required for effective youth work is similar for most of the research participants and is a combination of formal and non-formal education, practical experiences, and continuous self-directed learning. The pathways for competence development include:

- Training courses "*we have endless amount of training courses. The offers keep coming every day – national, international, online, face-to-face. If you want to learn, you can learn. There are offers from the Youth Agency, from other providers, through projects, one can also learn independently.*" (P2)
- Volunteering.
- Job shadowing.
- Internships.
- Study visits to other youth centres or youth organisations.
- Workplace learning (or learning by doing, learning from other colleagues)
- Peer-to-peer education.
- Cooperation projects.
- Exchange of practices with partners on the national or international level.
- Formal training in psychology and/or social work.
- Reading manuals for youth workers.
- Reading and individual study.

Training activities within the framework of European Youth Programmes play an additional (not the central) role in the ongoing development of competences among youth workers, offering benefits and opportunities for professional growth. According to the research participants,
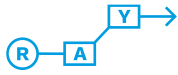
international activities serve as a platform for enriching practices by exploring innovative approaches and best practices from across Europe, particularly in areas such as interculturality and working with diverse groups of young people. They also provide insights into practices that may be well-established in other countries but are still emerging within the local context, such as working with young people from migrant backgrounds, thereby enabling youth workers to identify opportunities for improvement and adaptation within their own practices. Additionally, the opportunity to participate in training activities abroad allows youth workers to change their surroundings and gain fresh perspectives on their work, inspiring creativity, innovation, and renewed motivation.

1.5. TRAINING EXPERIENCES, IMPLEMENTATION AND CHALLENGES

Good training experiences were associated with the following aspects:

- Practical situations, study visits, seeing real practices. *"a good training course is where we are analysing real situations and not some abstract cases."* (P3)
- Involves networking: *"for me it's best when there is a lot of youth workers and we are exploring different topics together. You make connections, network, later on you continue to work together, they motivate you, hear you out"* (P1)
- Space to steam out, to talk to the people who are undergoing the same processes. *"Not only the content, but also the participants"* (P3)
- Non-formal learning methods and principles are applied. Attention to group processes, group building.
- Challenging, experiential.
- A little bit of theory and a lot of practice: *"For me a good training is the one where I come home and I immediately can apply what I have learned <...> If we are learning about planning, we are doing actual planning of what I will do in my youth centre or with young people. And when I come home, I bring back this document and I can use it"* (P3)
- Responding to the current needs of participants and reflecting changing contexts.
- Involves presentation of research data.
- Specialised training courses (e.g. substance abuse, LGBTQ+ consulting) with different types of specialists.
- Logistical aspects are important (support in travel, time management with proper breaks *"to absorb the information that you are getting"* (P4), food, schedule, safety)

While the challenging training experiences were connected to:

- Selection of participants and their motivation: *"sometimes it's bad because of the participants. I have been to several trainings where the participants expressed the wish to leave earlier, they wanted to leave at 12, even though the programme should end by 4. And I was so confused. Am I the only one who wants to learn here?"* (P3)
- Many offers by other NGOs don't stand the quality standard. Even the ones that could be of good quality, they often have to make compromise regarding the participant profile (age, experience), because of the *"missing participants"* (P4)
- Group is too diverse in experiences *"Part of the group was youth workers who work for 3 years and other part of the group who work for 3 days. Ok, for 3 weeks. And for those who are new, the training course was very good. For us... we spent time there. But did we bring something more? Nothing."* (P3)
- Many training courses are of basic (entry) level.
- Quality issues related to Erasmus+ as tourism: "I cannot always fully trust if the training courses will be of good quality, because the descriptions are often very nice. When you arrive – it's tourist type of activities." (P4)

- Programme is too intense. *"working time for 2 days from 8AM to 10PM with little breaks of 15 minutes... it doesn't work. People start leaving to have a cigarette, to take a nap"* (P4)
- Presenting slides and topics, not making it interactive or lack of attention to actual learning.

1.6. TRAINING NEEDS

The participants identified various training needs for themselves, their teams, organizations, and the youth work sector in general. These needs encompassed a broad spectrum of topics, including:
- general knowledge of youth policy structures;
- emotional health;
- facilitation skills;
- intercultural dialogue;
- integration of refugees and young people of migrant background;
- project applications and implementation;
- consulting different types of young people, specialized training courses on gender issues, sexuality, violence;
- substance abuse and addictions;
- crisis management;
- dealing with parents;
- burnout and time management;
- soft skills;
- resilience;
- prevention;
- exams and stress management;
- cooperation with educational institutions, institutions (sharing of responsibilities, dealing with constantly changing practices, laws that affect young people, etc.)
- mobbing;
- fundraising.

Recent developments in the lives of youth, such as the Covid pandemic, war in Ukraine, and constantly changing examination system, have further influenced training needs, particularly in areas related to emotional health, resilience, intercultural competence, and stress management. *"I think it's important that the training courses are organised according to the needs and according to the situations. Then we can have some knowledge on how to deal in particular situations in which you can actually see a change in young people's behaviour, emotional health. Also we have many questions."* (P1)

Recent developments in the youth work sector have had a limited impact on training needs, as noted by the participants of the focus group. Upon careful consideration, they identified only two aspects that may have changed. Firstly, with the increased budget and opportunities arising from Erasmus+ and/or European Solidarity Corps programs, there is a growing need to learn how to better support and facilitate groups of young people to implement their initiatives and/or participate in youth exchanges or other formats. Secondly, at the national level, the number of recognized youth work forms is expanding, highlighting an enhanced need to learn about these emerging forms and implementation.

In response to the evolving landscape of youth work, training offers have expanded significantly, with increased opportunities for learning abroad and improvements in navigating the national training landscape. *"Basically, anything that I get an idea to learn, I have no doubt*
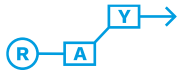
that I will find an opportunity to do it. The offer is wide" (P3) However, participants noted challenges in having sufficient time to dedicate to training as well as accessing advanced courses and long-term training programs for youth workers and directors, indicating a need for more specialized and high-quality training opportunities in the field: *"a training course where only the people who already know the topic will meet"* (P3)

Despite these challenges, the overall assessment was positive, with participants acknowledging the wide range of training opportunities available and expressing a desire for continued improvement and accessibility in training provision.

1.7. CHOOSING A TRAINING

Participants generally choose which training courses to attend based on several factors. Firstly, they prioritize topics that are most relevant to their current needs and interests. Additionally, they consider the content and quality of the training program, preferring courses that offer valuable and practical takeaways rather than basic information. *"I check what the Youth Affairs Agency offer, what Salto posts. And then if something is sent by the youth affairs coordinator directly, where she recommends that we go. First, I choose according to the topic that is interesting for me. Then I overview the draft programme. Then I choose those that I think I can take away something from. So that it is not basic. Because there is less and less time to go somewhere for training. And the last point is according to the date. Unfortunately, this is the reality."* (P3)

The reputation and expertise of the trainers also play a crucial role in their decision-making process, as participants rely on them to deliver effective and engaging sessions. Furthermore, there is a distinction between national and international training opportunities, with participants finding it easier to select courses in Lithuania due to their familiarity with local providers and their track record of delivering quality training. In contrast, navigating international training offerings can be more challenging, as participants may have concerns about the quality and relevance of courses offered through programs like Erasmus+.

Despite these challenges, attractive training opportunities often include repetitive, accredited, or long-term learning programs that issue recognized certificates and/or are valued within the professional community. However, challenges to participation include the need to take time off work or balance training with ongoing work commitments, as well as the fast pace of life, which can make it difficult to prioritize learning.

In terms of organizational support, fostering attendance involves organizers ensuring that participants skill levels, learning needs, and experiences align with the training aims and pre-set participant profile.

1.8. THE ETS

The focus group participants were not familiar with the ETS. *"If it was in some email from the National Agency, then I have read it. But this is it."* (P3)

1.9. ANALYTICAL REMARKS

The supply of training is too big. Youth workers are busy with their work, not finding time to participate. Also, the quality aspect and especially big amount of basic level training courses does not encourage youth workers to participate in international offers. They choose trainings
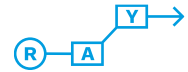
organised by the National Agency or by Salto resource centres, since there is higher chance of better-quality learning process.

The participants themselves also understand that when they bring their work to the training course, it makes their participation more difficult, and they cannot participate fully. This brings us back to the lack of time and high workload of youth workers.

1.10.   OTHER COMMENTS

The group was talking about devalue of training courses as a format. It was mentioned that there are organisations that organise training courses for profit reasons and it is a big part of their budget. *"Their motivation is to make more. This is their business. Someone found a niche and they want to use it"* (P5) The relevance of their proposals is not necessarily high, as mentioned by the research participants.
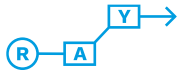
2. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

2.1. CONTEXT

In Lithuania, there is currently no formal education study program specifically for youth work. Instead, organizations involved in open youth work often seek employees with degrees in psychology, social work, or social pedagogy. While these study programs typically include some courses on youth work, group dynamics, and non-formal education, there is no dedicated academic track for youth work. However, the Agency of Youth Affairs offers a certification program for youth workers based on the recognition of non-formal learning experiences. Additionally, the Agency organizes a 5-module long-term training course covering youth work, psychology, social work, youth non-formal education, and youth policy. This course, according to the participants of focus group, is highly sought after, with youth workers often on waiting lists for participation.

The (European) training sector holds significant relevance for youth work qualification in the Lithuanian context. With no formal training program available locally and the constantly evolving nature of youth work, European training opportunities play a vital role in providing essential skills and knowledge to youth workers. While the European training sector was previously more dominant, increased support from national and municipal governments has led to a rise in funding for youth worker training within the country.

The typical profile of a youth worker in Lithuania varies, but many have backgrounds in social work or psychology. Historically, there was no formal recognition of youth work as a profession until the mid-90s, resulting in a diverse range of educational backgrounds among older youth workers, who often entered the field as volunteers. However, many active youth workers have since gained experience through a combination of work and non-formal learning, seeking certification through the Agency of Youth Affairs to formalize their status as youth workers.

In Lithuania, youth work in open youth centres or spaces is typically paid, as these activities are financed by municipalities. However, within the NGO sector, youth work may involve volunteer or project-based activities, though paid positions also exist within certain NGOs.

2.2. RESEARCH QUESTION 1

What training needs do youth workers and leaders within the European youth programmes assess themselves?

Self-assessed training needs of youth workers:
1. Youth policy structures:
   - General knowledge of youth policy structures
   - Cooperation with educational institutions (sharing of responsibilities, dealing with constantly changing practices, laws that affect young people, etc.)

2. Mental health and well-being
   - Emotional health
   - Burnout and time management
   - Resilience
   - Exams and stress management
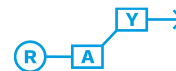
- Prevention (including substance abuse and addictions)
- Specialized training courses on gender issues, sexuality, violence

3. Facilitation and communication
   - Facilitation skills
   - Consulting different types of young people
   - Dealing with parents
   - Soft skills (including leadership, teamwork, and conflict resolution)

4. Diversity and inclusion
   - Intercultural dialogue
   - Integration of refugees and young people of migrant background
   - Specialized training courses on gender issues, sexuality, violence

5. Project management and implementation
   - Project applications and implementation
   - Coaching / guiding young people.

6. Organisational development
   - Crisis management
   - Mobbing (addressing bullying and harassment in workplace)
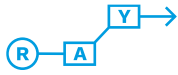   - Fundraising.

2.3.   RESEARCH QUESTION 2

How are possible changes in the training needs perceived at the different levels (youth workers and leaders, trainers, training providers) and how are these addressed?

The youth workers are acutely aware of the shifting landscape of youth work, recognizing the constantly changing needs of young people and the imperative to respond promptly. Participants in the focus groups discussed the current challenges they face, including post-COVID adjustments, exam pressures, and the impacts of wars, emphasizing the importance of staying informed about emerging trends. They expressed a strong desire to anticipate future developments so they can effectively support young people with timely interventions and assistance. To address these evolving training needs, youth workers proactively seek out opportunities that align with emerging topics and trends, prioritizing courses that offer practical insights and solutions to current challenges in youth work. Additionally, they engage in peer learning and knowledge exchange, leveraging professional networks and communities of practice to share experiences, best practices, and innovative approaches for addressing the evolving needs in the field.

2.4.   RESEARCH QUESTION 3

What obstacles do youth workers and leaders face regarding their participation in trainings (at individual and organizational level)?

There are 2 main challenges regarding youth workers and leaders participation in trainings:

1. Limited time availability due to heavy workloads and the fast pace of life, making it difficult to prioritize learning opportunities. Additionally, the need to balance training with ongoing work commitments can be a barrier to participation, as youth workers struggle to take time off or continue working during training courses.
2. Choosing a suitable training course and doubting its quality. This challenge is connected to several factors. First, the amount of available training options, both nationally and internationally, can be overwhelming, making it challenging for youth workers to identify courses that suit their specific needs. Additionally, the lack of standardized accreditation or quality assurance mechanisms for training programs may lead to uncertainty about the credibility and effectiveness of certain courses. This uncertainty is even bigger when considering international training opportunities, where participants may be unfamiliar with the reputation and reliability of training providers.

2.5.   RESEARCH QUESTION 4

Which training approaches do youth workers and leaders esteem appropriate for responding to their needs?

Youth workers and leaders esteem several training approaches as appropriate for responding to their needs. These approaches include:

1. Practical and relevant content. Youth workers prioritize training courses that offer practical insights and solutions to current challenges in youth work. They value content that is directly applicable to their professional context and equips them with skills and knowledge to address emerging issues.
2. Peer learning and knowledge exchange. Youth workers recognize the importance of sharing experiences, best practices, and innovative approaches with colleagues and leveraging professional networks and communities of practice to enhance their learning and development.
3. Specific and targeted programmes. Youth workers appreciate training programmes that address specific emerging topics and trends in youth work. They seek out courses that are designed to meet their evolving needs and provide relevant skills and knowledge to support their practice effectively.

2.6.   RESEARCH QUESTION 5

How does the ETS competence model for youth workers relate to training needs expressed by youth workers and leaders?

Based on the information received during the focus groups, the most important competence for youth workers to develop is communicating meaningfully. Youth workers expressed a need to develop effective communication skills to engage with young people, build meaningful relationships. The research participants also spoke about networking with colleagues and other members of communities, displaying intercultural sensitivity, managing resources, and facilitating learning. Other competencies from the model were mentioned briefly. What did not get much attention was being civically engaged, assessing and evaluating, and designing programs. Little attention to designing programmes could be attributed to the specific nature of the work being carried out by the research participants, with a focus on implementing open youth work and youth-led initiatives that prioritize informal and participatory approaches over pre-designed programs.
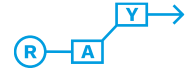
While the research participants may not have been aware of the ETS Competence Model for Youth Workers, the training needs they expressed resonate with many of the competencies outlined in the model, highlighting its relevance and applicability to their professional context.

2.7.   REFERENCES

5 module course (Lithuanian only) https://jra.lt/dirbantiems/suzinok-daugiau/darbo-su-jaunimu-formos/jaunimo-darbuotojai/mokymai