

Future of the EU Youth Strategy

Policy document on “Promoting Youth Engagement, in Particular through Volunteering.”

Framework Service Contract to Provide Expertise and Support for European Cooperation in Education, Training, Youth and Sport (EAC/07/2015)



Future of the EU Youth Strategy: Promoting Youth Engagement, in Particular through Volunteering

Introduction

This paper summarises the key outcomes of a Focus Group on “Promoting Youth Engagement, in Particular through Volunteering” conducted as part of the preparations for the Stakeholder Conference on the future of the EU Youth Strategy. The Focus Group, organised by the European Commission (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture - DG EAC), took place in Brussels on 9th of March and involved participants representing a range of stakeholder organisations, as well as representatives from European institutions, and a number of national youth ministries. This paper provides a brief overview of the policy context for the topic addressed in the Focus Group, a summary of the key points emerging from the discussions and, on this basis, provides some suggestions for potential topics for discussion on this theme at the EU Youth Strategy conference.

Policy context

Promoting youth engagement through volunteering is a core field of action for the EU Youth Strategy 2010 – 2018 (EUYS) and the focus of the 2008 Council Recommendation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers. The EUYS Evaluation Report in 2016 highlighted the gains that have been made in this field of action, but it also noted that the pressing issue of youth unemployment has meant that volunteering has received less attention than it deserved given its importance.¹ The report made several recommendations on how to strengthen policy in this area, and in turn support youth engagement and increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for youth and European society as a whole.

Some of the key recommendations that were identified in this report include:

1. Increasing information and dissemination activities, particularly in relation to cross-border volunteering opportunities.
2. Making volunteering mobility more accessible to young people with fewer opportunities (e.g. NEETs, those from rural areas, with disabilities etc.).
3. Simplifying the application process and reducing barriers to volunteering mobility, particularly for cross-border projects (e.g. with visa applications; linguistic support; insurance and protection for volunteers abroad)
4. Increasing the recognition and validation of the competences acquired during volunteering
5. Ensuring that volunteering policies and opportunities can respond to *new* challenges that have emerged since the adoption of the EUYS (notably, combatting the radicalisation of young people and integrating young migrants and refugees).

In light of the above, DG EAC suggested that this Focus Group should concentrate on collecting stakeholder views on how the EUYS could further support volunteering activities in the next phase of its

¹ European Commission (2016), Evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy and the Council Recommendation on the mobility of young volunteers across the EU, Final Report, https://ec.europa.eu/youth/news/20160531-eu-youth-strategy-evaluation_en.

development. The discussions focused on three main sub-topics, and the key points emerging from these discussions are presented in turn below.

Key points emerging from Focus Group discussions

1. How can the future EUYS support the creation of more cross-border volunteering opportunities at Member State level and facilitate closer cooperation with local stakeholders?

Participants provided a number of suggestions to support the development and promotion of cross-border volunteering. These included not only providing additional resources, but also expanding and better supporting the networks that are involved in the development and promotion of this type of opportunity. For example, the EUYS could support activities in border regions, where cross-border activities may be more accessible, and may already be taking place. In addition, the EUYS could send Volunteer Trainers to Member States or regions where the culture of volunteering is not as embedded. These Volunteer Trainers could help to build capacity and enthusiasm.

Participants also agreed that the future EUYS should tackle the legal hurdles that are continuing to present obstacles to cross-border volunteering opportunities (e.g. the risk of losing social security benefits, lack of transparency with regard to residence permits, and skills recognition procedures). To address this, participants suggested that the future Youth Strategy could promote a more harmonised approach to these various issues across countries and a systematisation of rules on social welfare benefits during and after cross-border volunteering opportunities. These changes could be particularly beneficial for young people facing disadvantages, another key theme of this focus group (discussed below).

Participants agreed on the importance of involving local organisations in future actions, including local and regional authorities and local youth organisations. It was agreed that the Youth Strategy could promote the exchange of experiences and practices and the development of networks and partnerships among relevant actors.

2. How can the future EUYS enhance the recognition of learning and skills that are acquired through volunteering, both in formal learning settings (universities, schools) as well as among employers?

In line with the findings of the 2016 EUYS Evaluation, participants agreed that the recognition of volunteering among employers and informal learning settings was an important issue for the EUYS.

The EUYS should further support existing procedures to recognise the skills and competences acquired through volunteering and should support efforts for higher levels of harmonisation across countries in both workplaces and educational settings. Many participants were aware of the ongoing process at the European level with regard to the recognition of prior learning and the European Qualifications Framework, and the links between this initiative and the youth volunteering policy could be strengthened.

The EUYS could help to raise awareness of the existing recognition tools, not just among employers but also among young people themselves. Capacity-building and awareness-raising activities (such as information events or workshops) were suggested as a possible tool to increase the overall understanding of the issue among employers, both in terms of the tools already available and in terms of the benefits of volunteering for their businesses or organizations. This could be achieved by coordinating with employer

and worker platforms such as the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), but also through other employers' networks (Business Europe, networks of SMEs etc.). Young volunteers could also benefit from support in self-assessing the competences and skills they acquired through their volunteering experiences.

Youth organisations, public institutions, schools and universities could have an important role to play in these initiatives. The Youth Strategy should support schools and universities to engage in volunteering activities and collaborate with volunteering NGOs, in addition to encouraging greater harmonisation of practices in the recognition and validation of volunteering activities in schools and universities.

3. How can the EUYS ensure that volunteering fosters social inclusion and strengthens the social fabric?

Participants agreed on the potential and importance of volunteering for tackling social inclusion, while recognising that there are additional barriers to participation for young people with disabilities, special needs or disadvantaged backgrounds, but also for young migrants and refugees. Young people with these characteristics often face major obstacles in taking part in volunteering schemes, often because of the additional costs linked to their participation. Focus group participants agreed that more resources should be invested within volunteering schemes and opportunities to allow for the participation and inclusion of people at risk of social exclusion.

In addition, participants suggested that the EUYS should reach out to local and grassroots initiatives that have strong ties within communities, and consider how the EUYS can promote and strengthen ownership, self-generating opportunities, community-building activities and empowerment of young people.

Participants also noted that increasing inclusion may require a cultural shift at the societal, organisational and individual level. Participants suggested that the EUYS could support an awareness campaign that would aim to address all stereotypes about the type(s) of people who volunteer and to create a more inclusive vision of volunteering.

Potential topics for further discussion

The following topics emerged as possible points to cover at the EU Youth Strategy conference:

1. Legal issues have been identified as a key obstacle to cross-border volunteering, both in the focus group and in the EUYS Evaluation Report; what steps can the future EUYS take to reduce the number of obstacles that young people face (e.g. in claiming social welfare benefits)?
2. Although progress has been made in this area, both the stakeholders in this Focus Group and EUYS Evaluation Report recommended that more should be done to raise awareness of the informal learning that can be acquired through volunteering, and of existing recognition tools. What additional steps can the future EUYS take to raise awareness among key beneficiaries (namely young people and employers)?
3. Participants noted that there are persistent stereotypes about the types of young people who volunteer (and those who do not). What can the EUYS do to help combat these stereotypes (at societal, organisation, and individual level) and to create a more inclusive vision of volunteering?

4. Participants agreed that the future EUYS should expand its networks to include more local organisations (community-based, educational, youth-focused and/ or affiliated to local government). What type of forum or initiative would best support this broader type of engagement?

The information and views set out in this document are those of the authors or meetings participants and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the European Commission.

Neither the Commission nor any other person acting on the Commission's behalf may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained therein.

