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Exploring The Experiences of Youth Projects in Ireland Engaging In The Erasmus+/ESC European Youth Programmes

Irish National Report: Summary

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

This report presents an overview of selected findings from a wider research project exploring the experiences of Irish youth projects engaging in the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes. The research was conducted in two phases, generating a broader body of evidence and insight than can be presented here. This report highlights selected key findings rather than providing a comprehensive account of all the evidence collected. The full research report, bringing together findings from both phases, will be published in 2027.

This report brings together survey and interview evidence on how youth projects in Ireland experience four Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps (ESC) youth programmes: ESC Volunteering, Youth Exchanges, Participation Projects and Youth Worker Mobility. It is organised around six participation themes: motivation, ease of contributing, what participants learned, participatory quality, being active, and using digital technologies for democratic participation.

Each thematic area brings together the survey and interview evidence and closes with a key message. Two areas explored in depth by the evidence—safety and the resources organisations need to deliver quality participation—cut across the six themes rather than sitting within one. They are therefore brought together in Chapter 8 as the conditions that make participation possible. The report concludes with a discussion of the findings, followed by conclusions and recommendations.

1.2 THE PROGRAMMES

Erasmus+ is the EU programme for education, training, youth and sport for 2021–2027. It aims to widen opportunities for participants and organisations, with a focus on the programme's qualitative impact and on more inclusive, cohesive, greener and digitally fit societies. It is delivered through three Key Actions: learning mobility of individuals (KA1), cooperation among organisations (KA2) and support for policy development (KA3).

The European Solidarity Corps funds young people aged 18–30 to take part in solidarity activities, primarily volunteering, at home and across the EU. In humanitarian-aid contexts, the age limit was extended in 2022 to 35. In the current programme period, both programmes place particular emphasis on reaching young people experiencing social and economic marginalisation.

1.3 EVIDENCE AND METHODS

The quantitative strand draws on four Irish implementations of the RAY Monitoring Survey, administered by Léargas, with 542 responses in total: ESC Volunteering (67), Youth Exchanges (203), Participation Projects (60) and Youth Worker Mobility (212). Each dataset was cleaned and analysed separately in SPSS using a common framework. Because the data are ordinal and some subgroups are small, the analysis used non-parametric tests (Mann–Whitney U, Kruskal–Wallis, chi-square with Fisher's exact test where needed, and Spearman correlation), with Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons. The findings should be interpreted with caution: response rates were low, and respondents cannot be as-

sumed to constitute a representative sample of participants across the four programme types. The results may therefore be subject to non-response and selection bias and should not be generalised to the wider participant population. Appropriate non-parametric tests and adjustments for multiple comparisons support analysis of the available data but do not overcome these limitations in representativeness.

The qualitative strand consists of seven semi-structured interviews with staff from hosting and sending organisations and with individual participants. The interview guide was adapted from the RAY MON and SOC interview framework. Several questions were designed to probe patterns already visible in the survey, such as the low digital scores. Transcripts were anonymised and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. The two strands were integrated at the write-up stage.

The seven interviews were purposively selected to reflect variation in organisations' experience of Erasmus+, geographical location and organisation type. The findings are not intended to be statistically representative; they provide qualitative insight into organisational and staff perspectives.

Although two interviewees were young adults reflecting on their earlier experiences of youth exchanges, the findings primarily reflect organisational perspectives rather than the direct voices of young people currently participating in the programmes. Several subgroup comparisons, particularly in the smaller ESC Volunteering and Participation Projects datasets, are based on small cell sizes and should be read as indicative.

The interviews add depth to the survey findings by illuminating the perspectives and experiences of participating organisations. As the two strands were collected independently, the interviews

provide contextual understanding rather than directly explaining or validating specific survey patterns.

1.4 KEY FINDINGS

Overall, the evidence shows that young people and youth workers value these programmes highly, and that the programmes work fairly evenly across the groups the surveys could measure. Participants find it easy to contribute, experience their projects as genuinely participatory, and report strong intercultural, social and professional learning. Challenges recur across all four programmes: digital provision, civic and democratic knowledge, the use of Youthpass after the project, and the safety, funding and capacity conditions on which quality participation depends. Table A summarises the main findings and key message for each theme; the following chapters examine each in detail.

TABLE A: KEY FINDINGS BY THEME

THEME	MAIN FINDINGS	KEY MESSAGE
Motivation and access	Referral routes work comparably well; finance, documents, travel readiness and safeguarding judgements are the main barriers	Access, not motivation, is the deciding factor; it depends on sustained organisational support
Ease of contributing	High overall; rural ESC volunteers rate experiences higher; language anxiety, affordability and gender-related barriers remain challenges	Preparation and trusted relationships underpin participation
Learning	92% intercultural competence (Youth Exchanges); democracy 19%, EU 25%; Youthpass receipt 26–62%, use low	A clear civic knowledge gap, not disengagement; Youthpass is under-used
Participatory quality	Cooperation 87%, ideas into action 80%; consistent across groups; survey completion relies on staff	Strong participation in projects; evaluation and feedback remain uneven
Being active	89% of youth workers report impact on practice; progression into leadership and jobs; organisations transformed	Staff-level development is the evidence gap
Digital	Lowest-rated quality dimension in all four programmes (ESC 4.15/10; YWM 5.79/10)	Make digital learning intentional and accessible
Conditions	High safety ratings with a minority of concerns; funding shortfalls and rising travel costs	Continuous safeguarding and predictable funding

2. Motivation and Access: Why Young People Take Part

The Irish surveys do not report motivation items directly, but they show that entry routes into the programmes work well. In Youth Exchanges, overall experience ratings did not differ significantly by referral route, indicating that referrals from mentors, organisations and friends were comparably effective. Interviewees described their motivation in terms of widening access: one organisation leader aimed to ensure that every young person who wanted an Erasmus experience could have one.

"I make it my business to give everybody an opportunity to have an Erasmus program that wants to do one."

For the young people these organisations work with, the main obstacle is not a lack of motivation but whether participation is possible at all. Staff defined "young people with fewer opportunities" broadly, in terms of finances, cultural background, geography, health (including mental health) and challenging behaviour. Four barriers recurred across the interviews:

- **Financial Hardship**. Families who struggle to make even small contributions; organisations covering passports, clothing, suitcases and sanitary products, and quietly waiving a nominal €50 fee.
- **Documentation**. Asylum seekers unable to travel without the right documents; separated parents refusing to sign passport forms, sometimes leading to court processes; passports that symbolised poverty and caused shame, which needed discreet one-to-one support.

- **Travel Readiness**. First-time travel, or fear of leaving the local area, created nervousness for young people and parents alike.
- **Readiness And Safeguarding Judgements**. Staff supported young people who were "hugely at risk" to travel abroad, including one young man caught up in a local feud, for whom a placement in Lithuania "took the whole heat out of it". Staff also had to decide when inconsistent engagement in preparation meant that a young person could not go.

"Sometimes as well, when they don't have a passport, it can be quite embarrassing for them ... especially for the boys, it kind of symbolized like a bit of poverty."

KEY MESSAGE

For young people with fewer opportunities in Ireland, the deciding factor is access rather than motivation. Participation depends on sustained organisational support to overcome financial, documentary and personal barriers.

3. Ease of Contributing

Participants generally found it easy to take part and contribute, although experiences differed across groups. In ESC Volunteering, participants in rural areas reported significantly higher enjoyment, ease of contribution and satisfaction with sustainability aspects than city-based volunteers. In Participation Projects, overall enjoyment was very high (mean 8.81 out of 10) and did not vary by participants' area of residence or education level. Two challenges stand out. Affordability received comparatively lower satisfaction ratings in both Youth Exchanges and Participation Projects (mean 7.98 in the latter). In Participation Projects, the nine participants who identified gender as a barrier gave lower ratings for overall experience, enjoyment and ease of contribution. None of these differences was statistically significant, so this finding is suggestive only.

The interviews explain what makes contributing easy and what gets in the way. Three factors stood out.

1. **Thorough Preparation.** Organisations typically prepared groups for six to eight weeks, meeting weekly and then twice a week during the final fortnight. Preparation covered logistics (accommodation, food, Garda vetting, introductions to host organisations and finding suitable roles) and cultural expectations, such as removing shoes indoors. It also helped young people understand that an exchange is "not a holiday".

"We've the accommodation sorted ... we've the vetting done in advance ... it's bringing them around the cen-

ters, and … getting them introduced … so they're able to hit the ground running."

2. **Relational Support.** Trusted staff, named mentors and regular check-ins gave participants the confidence to take risks and manage difficulties. Mentors offered practical help (maps, bus timetables, emergency numbers) as well as reassurance.

"Every time I did take a risk, you know, I was supported in that risk … I felt like X was taking it with me."

3. **Language And Culture.** These were the main barriers to contributing once abroad. Young people worried that peers were talking about them in another language, felt frustrated when they could not make themselves understood, and sometimes withdrew. One participant described how this "stopped me wanting to push myself to go for a drink or go for dinner or order something in a shop … I wasn't talking to as many people as I could have been." Staff tried to reduce these anxieties through explanation and preparation, but could not remove them entirely.

KEY MESSAGE

Ease of contributing is high, and it is built on preparation and trusted relationships rather than happening by chance. Language anxiety, affordability and (tentatively) gender are the points where some young people find it harder to take a full part.

4. What Participants Learn

The survey data show a consistent learning profile across the four programmes: strong interpersonal and social learning, with less pronounced reported gains in civic knowledge, digital skills and language skills.

- **Intercultural Learning Is The Clearest Success.** In Youth Exchanges, 92% of participants rated intercultural competence positively, and this held across referral routes, demographic groups and living areas.
- **Social Values Lead In ESC.** ESC Volunteering participants reported inclusion and solidarity as their strongest learning areas (73.1% each).
- **Civic Knowledge Lags.** In Youth Exchanges, only 19% reported learning about democracy and 25% about how the EU works; in ESC Volunteering, both figures were below 30%. This is notable for citizenship-focused programmes.
- **Critical Thinking Is A Strong Reported Outcome In Participation Projects.** Critical thinking and discussing political topics were the strongest reported learning outcomes (around 85%), while digital and language skills showed comparatively lower reported gains.
- **Youth Workers Learn About Their Own Practice.** In Youth Worker Mobility, the strongest areas were peer learning (72%), youth work itself (71%), youth empowerment (71%) and non-formal learning (69%).

All four programmes produced a positive shift in participants' sense of closeness to Europe. Participation Projects showed the largest gain (+1.69 points) and Youth Worker Mobility the smallest (+1.10). Where it could be tested, gains were concentrated among participants who started with the lowest scores; this was statistically significant in ESC Volunteering and Participation Projects. In Youth Exchanges, first-time participants showed a larger increase than repeat participants, although the difference was not statistically significant.

This is consistent with a ceiling effect: those who already feel strongly European have less room to increase their scores, so the smaller gain in Youth Worker Mobility may reflect an already-engaged population rather than a less effective programme.

Interviews describe learning that the surveys capture only partly: confidence, broader perspectives and a willingness to take risks. Participants spoke of coming "out of my shell", forming lifelong friendships, and how the experience helped them transition to college. Intercultural contact challenged existing assumptions. For one young woman, managing the trip was itself an achievement: "I did it, mam, I did it ... I survived, I'm fine."

"I can do this now ... that was hard and I did it."

RECOGNISING LEARNING: YOUTHPASS

Youthpass is the programmes' tool for recognising non-formal learning, and the Irish data show a clear drop-off between taking

part, receiving a certificate and using it. In ESC Volunteering, 57% received a Youthpass, but only 11 of 67 participants used it afterwards. In Youth Exchanges, 62% received one, and 82% of recipients never used it; younger recipients were significantly less likely to use it. Participation Projects had the lowest receipt rate, at 26%, rising with education level (Table 1), although the numbers are small. In Youth Worker Mobility, 71% never used their certificate. Where Youthpass was used, the quality of reflection was rated highly (mean 7.91 out of 10 in Participation Projects).

TABLE 1: Participation Projects: Youthpass Receipt By Education Level

EDUCATION LEVEL	RECEIVED	TOTAL	RECEIPT RATE
ISCED 2: lower secondary	5	25	20.0%
ISCED 3–5: upper secondary/ vocational	2	7	28.6%
ISCED 6–8: higher education	6	18	33.3%

Interviewees valued Youthpass as recognition of non-formal learning, as evidence for job and apprenticeship applications, and as a personal record: “I would use my Youth Pass now still to this day.” Organisations that used it effectively did so deliberately, with Youthpass workshops in every exchange, daily reflection time, short workbooks, group completion, translated sheets and end-of-project ceremonies. For some young people, including those from non-European backgrounds, a European certificate was “a

big deal". The challenge is staff time: "it does take quite a bit of time ... but it's worth it in the end", and staff often moved on to the next project before it was finished.

KEY MESSAGE

Irish participants learn most about diversity, inclusion, solidarity and intercultural understanding, and least about democracy and how the EU works. This points to a specific gap in civic knowledge rather than civic disengagement. Youthpass is valued but under-used: the gap is at the last mile, between receiving a certificate and using it.

5. Participatory Quality

This theme examines how far participants felt their project was participatory overall: whether they took an active part and had a say in shaping it, rather than simply attending activities decided by others.

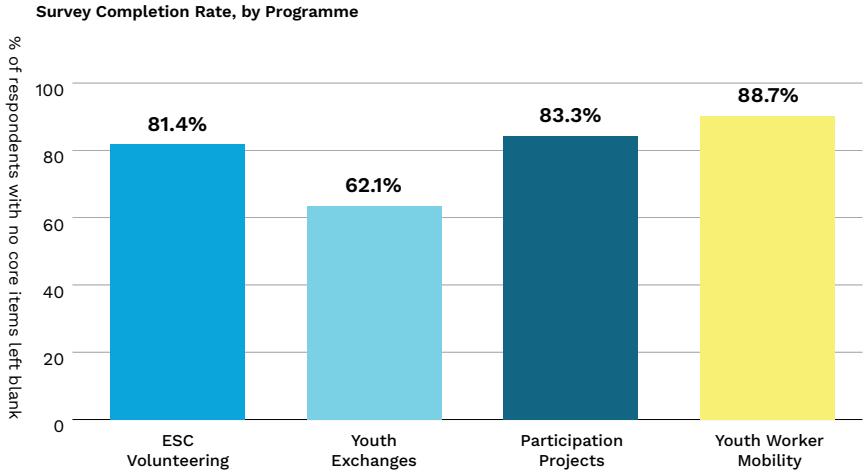
The survey results show that participatory outcomes hold up across groups. Participation Projects performed strongest on cooperating with others (87%) and turning ideas into action (80%); neither outcome was linked to any measured participant characteristic. In Youth Worker Mobility, 89% said the activity had a genuine impact on their day-to-day practice, with results consistent across roles (85% of youth workers, 92% of trainers and 97% of managers). Across the four datasets, most tested subgroup differences were not statistically significant, suggesting that the programmes reach the groups the surveys could measure fairly evenly.

The interviews show how participation is built into delivery. Group activities and adventure challenges helped participants mix “straight away”; unstructured evening time let them socialise across countries; and culture nights gave each group a chance to share food, music and dance, strengthening participants’ appreciation of their own identity. Partnerships supported reciprocal learning: “We go somewhere, we learn something. People come here and they learn off of us as well.” In ESC hosting, careful matching of volunteers’ motivation and skills to organisational needs, alongside role descriptions, induction and supervision, gave volunteers a meaningful role.

One aspect of participation presented a clear challenge: young people’s involvement in providing feedback through the RAY survey.

Completion was generally good across the four datasets (Figure 1). Youth Worker Mobility had the highest completion rate, with 188 of 212 respondents leaving no items blank. Participation Projects had the most missing responses (around 17% across a cluster of items), concentrated among 10 of 60 participants and linked largely to one project. Missing answers did not track closely with demographics.

FIGURE 1: Survey completion rate by programme (% of respondents with no core items left blank)



Youth Exchanges figure based on the 161 participants with valid residence data; Participation Projects figure reflects the inverse of the 16.7% missing-data cluster described in the text.

Interviews show, however, that survey completion often depended on staff. One organisation had previously received "*zero*" responses from its young people. It then brought participants together on a Saturday morning to complete the survey as a group, with staff available to explain the wording. Others sat with participants, printed the survey, or required partner organisations to commit to survey completion before young people could attend. For ex-

changes involving under-18s, the survey sometimes went to project leaders instead.

Email delivery was a recurring barrier. Some young people had no email address, were locked out of their account, or had created an account only recently to apply for jobs; some had no phone number. WhatsApp, not email, was their usual channel. This matters for the RAY evidence base: without facilitation, young people with the fewest opportunities are least likely to be heard, which may partly explain the survey's apparent skew towards participants in higher education.

KEY MESSAGE

Projects are experienced as highly participatory, and benefits are spread evenly across groups. The main challenge is participation in evaluation: whose voice reaches the RAY data depends on whether organisations have the time to facilitate it and on the channels young people actually use.

6. Being Active

The evidence shows that the programmes lead to more activity after the project at three levels.

For young people, interviews traced progression from one opportunity to the next. Repeated participation led young people to take on more responsibility and, in some cases, move towards leadership roles or employment.

One participant credited Youthpass with opening the door to further exchanges, and another described how the experience helped her get into college. Two former ESC volunteers went on to find jobs and continue living in Ireland. Interviewees were also candid about limits: in one case, a targeted placement did not change a young person's longer-term situation, a useful check against over-claiming impact.

For youth workers, 89% of Youth Worker Mobility respondents reported a genuine impact on their day-to-day practice, consistently across professional roles (85% of youth workers, 92% of trainers, 97% of managers) and levels of experience.

For organisations, European programme work has become part of how they operate. Interviewees pointed to organisational policies, guidelines and toolkits developed through international work, cultural programming introduced into local youth sessions by volunteers, and wider partner networks across Europe. Practice also changed with experience: one organisation stopped taking 18-year-old volunteers after finding that their needs were a poorer fit.

"Erasmus has made our organisation what it is today."
(Organisation leader)

Interviewees readily identified benefits to their organisations and volunteers, including “a different skill set that can bring something to us” and volunteers modelling good practice. Direct evidence of staff themselves developing new skills, rethinking their practice, or gaining mentoring and leadership opportunities through hosting was largely absent. This was the least developed theme in the interview material.

KEY MESSAGE

The programmes lead to further participation, progression and professional capacity, and they shape the identity and practice of the organisations that run them. The evidence on whether, and how, individual staff develop professionally through hosting remains limited.

7. Using Digital Technologies for Democratic Participation

Digital is the clearest and most consistent finding in the evidence: it was the lowest-rated quality dimension in each of the four programmes.

- **ESC Volunteering:** digital quality scored a mean of 4.15 out of 10, the lowest of all quality dimensions. Only 16% reported learning digital skills, and 8 participants (12.5%) felt less digitally engaged in democratic participation after the project. Those who did learn digital skills rated the project's digital priority more positively.
- **Youth Exchanges:** digital quality was rated low across most projects, and only 15% reported digital-skills gains. Rural and urban participants rated it similarly.
- **Participation Projects:** digital skills were among the lowest-rated learning areas (24–28%), with no concentration by age or education.
- **Youth Worker Mobility:** digital quality scored 5.79 out of 10, well below every other dimension; those who rated it higher reported a significantly stronger impact on their practice.

The interviews suggest that the issue is partly one of recognition. Digital activity was usually embedded in ordinary project work (searching online, preparing presentations, taking and sharing photos, and making podcasts and videos) rather than taught as a subject. Young people often assumed that "digital competency"

meant they had to have “made something”, and staff worked to broaden that understanding.

“What we kind of say is, when did you use your phone at any time to translate anything? … And they’re like, oh yeah. And we’re like, yeah, that’s digital.”

The practical barriers were basic: no email address or access to one, no phone number, WhatsApp rather than email as the main channel, and, for hosted volunteers, whether their accommodation had internet access.

KEY MESSAGE

Digital is the lowest-performing area across all four programmes, both in quality of delivery and as a learning outcome. Digital activity already happens in projects but remains informal and is rarely recognised as learning. The answer is not simply more technology, but more intentional, accessible digital learning delivered through the channels young people use.

8. Conditions for Participation: Safety and Resources

The six themes describe what participation looks like. The evidence also identifies what must be in place for participation to happen at all. Two conditions stand out: keeping participants safe, and ensuring organisations have the funding and capacity they need.

8.1 SAFETY

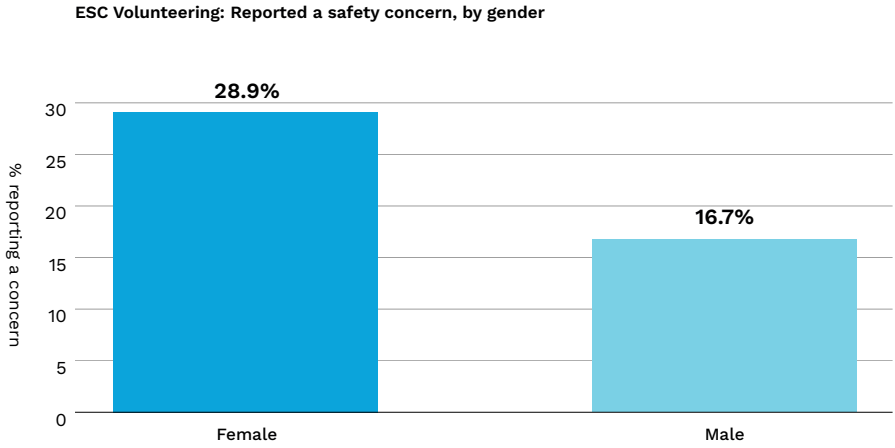
Safety was generally rated highly. Youth Worker Mobility rated safety higher than any other quality dimension (mean 9.21 out of 10), consistently across roles and experience levels (Table 2). The small number of policymakers means their higher average should not be over-interpreted.

TABLE 2: Youth Worker Mobility: safety rating by professional role (0–10 scale)

ROLE	N	MEAN SAFETY SCORE	SD
Researcher	8	9.00	1.41
Youth worker	114	9.20	1.68
Manager	37	9.30	1.02
Youth leader	54	9.41	1.27
Trainer	41	9.44	1.57
Coach	11	9.45	1.04
Administrator	23	9.61	0.66
Policymaker	3	9.67	0.58

Strong averages, however, can conceal the experiences of a minority. In ESC Volunteering, female participants reported safety concerns more often than male participants (28.9% compared with 16.7%; Figure 2), although the difference was not statistically significant. Among the 15 participants who raised concerns, ratings of how well they were addressed varied widely (median 7 out of 10). In Youth Exchanges, an initial reading suggested that non-binary participants raised concerns at a much higher rate, but fuller analysis showed that none of the seven non-binary or queer participants reported a concern, and gender was not significantly associated with safety concerns. Participation Projects had no dedicated safety measure.

FIGURE 2: ESC Volunteering: participants reporting a safety concern, by gender



Interviewees described safety as managed through formal safeguards (Garda vetting, first-aid cover, emergency contact numbers, GDPR, behaviour commitments, curfews) and clear routes from

mentor to supervisor for raising concerns. Accommodation was the main concern: whether the area was safe, whether alcohol exposure was likely, and whether there were enough staff to supervise minors. Good practice included student accommodation with gate security, advance inspection of venues and home visits to host families. Safety also depended on trusted relationships, including a designated person back in Ireland "they have the strong relationship with". Interviewees also identified risks: youth workers in some countries adding young people on social media, against guidelines; and the need to rule out countries that might not be safe for an LGBT volunteer.

One account shows why monitoring must be continuous. When a host family's situation changed, the organisation acted by removing the volunteer and arranging new accommodation, but "it took about 6 weeks more than it should have to sort out. We only found out afterwards that things had changed." The problem was not unwillingness to act, but late detection.

8.2 FUNDING AND ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY

Interviewees' clearest request was for more predictable funding. One organisation planned for five volunteers on a budget of about €200,000, received €85,000 and had to cut back to two. Fixed travel allowances also lagged behind costs: "We might get an allowance for €350 per person for the flights. The flights have now gone up to €500." Organisations absorbed the difference, alongside the additional reapplication and reporting work needed to secure resources.

Capacity affects all the other themes. Facilitating survey completion, making Youthpass meaningful and monitoring placements all take staff time, which is squeezed when funding is uncertain. Interviewees also asked for stronger links between schools and Erasmus+, including on subsidies, and for feedback channels such as WhatsApp that reach under-18s. Their advice to new organisations was consistent: choose partners carefully and "not just for the sake of doing something"; prepare over six to eight weeks; induct volunteers as employees would be inducted; build in mentoring and escalation routes; and treat safeguarding as an ongoing responsibility.

KEY MESSAGE

High-quality participation rests on safe placements and stable resources. Average safety ratings are high, but a minority of participants, and the speed at which changes are noticed, need attention. Funding instability reduces the number of young people organisations can support and the time they have for reflection, recognition and feedback.

9. Discussion

Taken together, the survey and interview evidence point to four broader conclusions.

First, the programmes work well and deliver benefits fairly evenly. Ease of contributing, participatory quality, intercultural learning and impact on practice are consistently strong, and most tested subgroup differences did not reach statistical significance. The programmes appear to benefit the groups the surveys could measure fairly evenly, rather than concentrating benefits or risks in particular subgroups.

Second, the gap in civic learning is about knowledge, not engagement. Participants report strong critical thinking, cooperation and ability to turn ideas into action, and interviews describe young people progressing into further participation and leadership. Yet only around one in five to one in three report learning about democracy or how the EU works. The programmes build civic skills and dispositions more consistently than knowledge of democratic institutions.

Third, averages can conceal who is missing. Strong average ratings for safety and experience sit alongside a minority who raise concerns, and survey responses depend on who is reached. The interviews show that, for young people with fewer opportunities, both taking part and being heard depend on organisations doing additional work that is often unfunded. Analysing change by starting point, as this report has done for European identity, provides a clearer picture beyond headline averages: smaller average gains may reflect an already-engaged group rather than a less effective programme.

Fourth, the evidence identifies two areas for further research: gender-related differences in safety experience, and the extent of staff-level, as opposed to organisational, professional development through hosting. Both findings are based on modest samples and merit more targeted study, ideally including young people's own voices directly.

10. Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, the evidence presents a positive but nuanced picture. Irish participants report strong experiences and meaningful benefits that are spread fairly evenly across groups, particularly in ease of contributing, participatory quality, intercultural learning and impact on practice. Challenges recur in digital participation, civic knowledge, the use of Youthpass, and the organisational conditions of funding and safeguarding. The priority is targeted improvement in areas where the most consistent challenges arise, not wholesale redesign.

1. **Make digital participation an intentional part of programme design.** Set clear digital-learning objectives, help participants recognise the digital learning they already do, and build practical skills in creating content, using information critically and engaging safely online. Support organisations to communicate through channels young people use, such as WhatsApp, alongside email, and treat connectivity as basic participation infrastructure. Because the gap is consistent across all four programmes, address it at programme and policy level rather than leaving it to individual organisations.
2. **Strengthen civic and democratic knowledge.** Build on the programmes' strength in civic skills and dispositions by giving more explicit attention to how democracy and the EU work, especially in Youth Exchanges and ESC Volunteering.
3. **Close the Youthpass last-mile gap.** Embed short reflection activities in preparation, mid-way review and closing sessions; complete Youthpass during the project, with a visible ceremony;

and show participants how to describe their competences in applications and interviews. Keep this proportionate so that it does not add to the administrative burden.

4. **Make participation in evaluation easier.** Recognise and resource the facilitation that survey completion requires, offer accessible formats and channels other than email, and review how under-18s are reached so that young people with fewer opportunities are represented in RAY data.
5. **Provide more predictable funding.** Longer-term, more predictable allocations and a mechanism for exceptional cost pressures, such as flight prices, would let organisations plan, retain staff and support participants who need additional help.
6. **Make safeguarding continuous.** Set clear responsibilities, escalation routes and response timelines for accommodation and host-family concerns, with regular proactive check-ins throughout placements, so that strong average ratings do not obscure the difficulties experienced by a minority.
7. **Build the evidence base.** Share these findings, particularly on gender and safety and on staff development, and include young people's own reflections directly in future research.

The overall picture is one of strong foundations and clear opportunities for improvement. Retaining what participants already value, while making digital and civic learning more intentional, embedding Youthpass reflection, giving young people with fewer opportunities a fuller voice, and securing the funding and safeguarding conditions on which participation depends, offers a practical route to higher quality without losing what works.

References

- **Braun, V.**, & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101.

Notes

Notes