

**Research-based
analysis of European
youth programmes**

RAY-LEARN

Research project on organisational development and learning organisations in the European youth field - executive summary

National report Belgium-Flemish Community

KATRIEN BOONE

FRANK STEVENS

BRUGES, 2021

howest
hogeschool



1 RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

RAY-LEARN is a research project that aims to explore the strategies and practices used for learning within organisations active in European Union youth programmes. It also intends to explore how this learning further shapes the development of organisations working with young people in Europe.

This research was carried out by the RAY network in 2019-2020. This is an open network of National Agencies and their research partners. In Belgium (Flanders), JINT vzw, the National Agency of the Flemish Community and the Study Department Social Work of Howest University of Applied Sciences are part of this network.

The RAY-LEARN research is a follow-up research to the RAY-CAP research from 2016-2018. This research followed for two years some project leaders who participated in a training activity within Erasmus+: Youth in Action. RAY-CAP was a qualitative research with a longitudinal design. The project leaders were contacted before their departure, three to six months after their participation and one year to one and a half years after their participation. One of the main findings of this research is that individual learning is particularly prevalent among participants in an Erasmus+ course or training activity: Youth in Action. However, **the transfer of what has been learned to a higher level** (to a group of staff members or to the organisation) is much more difficult. From this result, the idea of the research project RAY-LEARN has emerged: How do organisations learn within Erasmus+: Youth in Action? Can organisations participating in the Erasmus+ programme be considered as learning organisations? Which strategies and practices do these organisations use to address learning and transfer of learning within the organisation?

1.1 CENTRAL QUESTIONS

The RAY-LEARN research is being conducted in 14 countries. It aims to **explore strategies and practices of organisational learning** among youth organisations and networks within European youth programmes. The main research questions of this exploratory research are (RAY coordination team, 2019):

- Which explicit learning strategies are used within the youth sector to foster organisational learning and organisational development?
- Which implicit learning strategies are used within the youth sector to foster organisational learning and their development?
- Are there patterns in these learning and development strategies across organisations and which recur in several countries?
- What conditions, both systematic and organisational, promote or hinder organisational learning and development?

The research consists of two parts. In a first, exploratory phase, a qualitative research was conducted in 14 partner countries. In a second phase, based on the findings of the first part, a questionnaire will be developed, carried out and analysed. This summary concerns the findings of the first part (the qualitative research), as carried out in Belgium (Flanders). Therefore, not all central questions are addressed in this summary. The question about recurring patterns across several countries will be addressed in the transnational report. Which circumstances promote learning and development in organisations only can be answered after the quantitative research.

1.2 THE RESPONDENT GROUP

For the selection of the organisations participating in the research, the necessary **diversity** present among the organisations subscribing to EU youth programmes in Belgium (Flemish Community) was considered. In the group surveyed, there are both small organisations that run



entirely on volunteers and organisations that employ professionals. A mix of large and small organisations was pursued. Both governmental and private organisations are represented. Autonomous organisations, but also organisations which are part of a network and/or are a network themselves are part of the respondent group.

Originally, 18 organisations were eligible for the research. Five out of these 18 organisations had already participated in the RAY-CAP research (see Stevens, 2018). As RAY-LEARN is a follow-up to that research and partly overlaps in terms of questions, it was decided not to survey these organisations again. In the end, ten organisations participated in the research. After interviewing one of the interviewees, it turned out that this person was less well informed about the subject of the research. This conversation was not included in the analyses. This means that in Flanders, **nine organisations** participated in this part of the research. The nine interviews were all conducted in the period October-November 2019. The table below gives more insight into the participating organisations and some of their characteristics.

Name in the report	Type of organization	Private/government	Local/national	Member of an umbrella organization/network of organizations	Year of foundation	Number of volunteers	Number of professionals
Organization A	Youth organization	Private	Local	Yes	1970	20 to 25	15
Organization B	Social-cultural education	Private	Local	Yes	1993	5 regular volunteers, number of occasional volunteers depending on activity	15
Organization C	Umbrella organization	Private	National	Yes	2009	No regular volunteers, depending on activity	7
Organization D	Youth organization	Private	National	Yes	1990	30 active members, 30 occasional volunteers	0
Organization E	Youth organization	Government	National	No	End 1970	57 volunteers	45
Organization F	Youth organization	Government	Local	Yes	Respondent doesn't know	Many, but exact number isn't known	20-25
Organization H	Cultural organisation	Private	Local	No	2010	30	5
Organization I	Social-cultural movement	Private	Local	No	2012	150	10.5
Organization J	Youth organization	Private	National	Yes	1958	150	9

Table 1: Description of the participating organisations¹

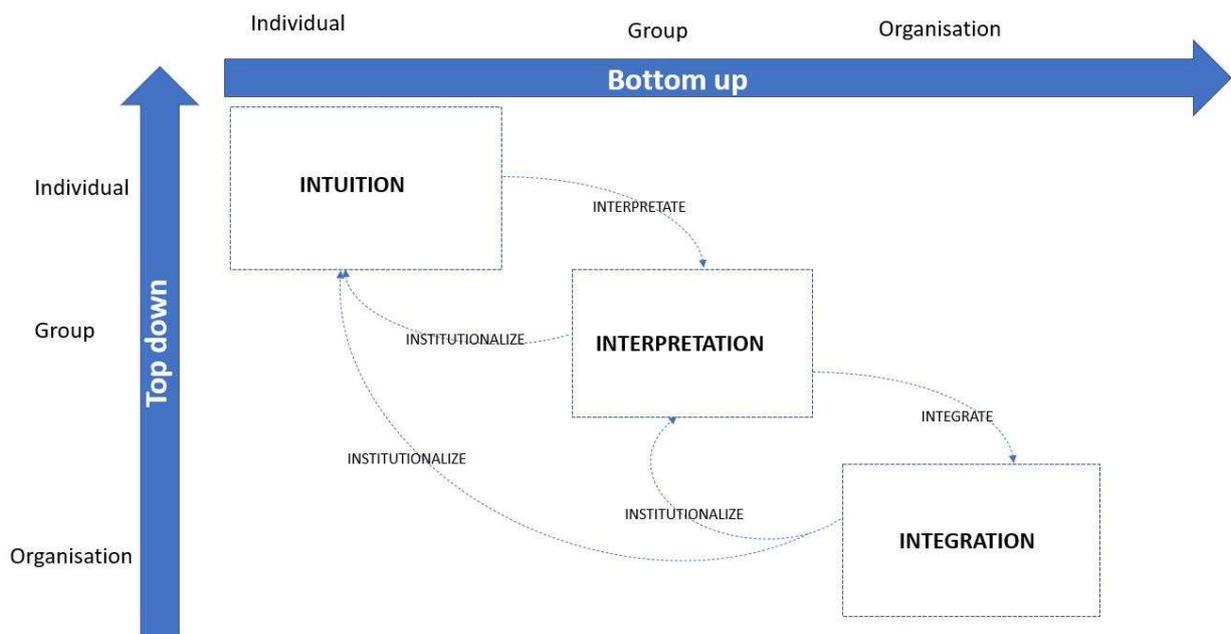
¹ In case an attentive reader should wonder what organisation G stands for: that is the organisation of which it turned out afterwards that the respondent was not so well placed to answer the questions on an organisational level.

1.3 THE MODEL OF CROSSAN, LANE AND WHITE

A learning model by Crossan, Lane and White (1999) has been used to organise the results. There exist several and even more recent models to capture learning in organisations (see Kung et al., 2018 for a recent overview and typology). The model of Crossan et al. is suitable though for analysing the current data as it uses some concepts that sound familiar in youth work. It classifies an organisation according to different levels (micro, meso and macro) and it also considers the direction from which the initiative of learning in an organisation is initiated (bottom-up and top-down).

According to this model, learning always takes place at **different levels** of an organisation. They distinguish learning at the level of the individual, the group, and the organisation. Learning is a dynamic fact in which ideas that originate with individuals and/or groups grow to the higher levels of an organisation through feedforward processes (= bottom-up processes). Feedback processes, in turn, relate to how institutionalised processes influence individuals and groups. It is learning directed from above or top down. As a result, new ideas flow from the individual and the group to the organisation, but at the same time, experiences also influence the thinking and actions of individuals in organisations.

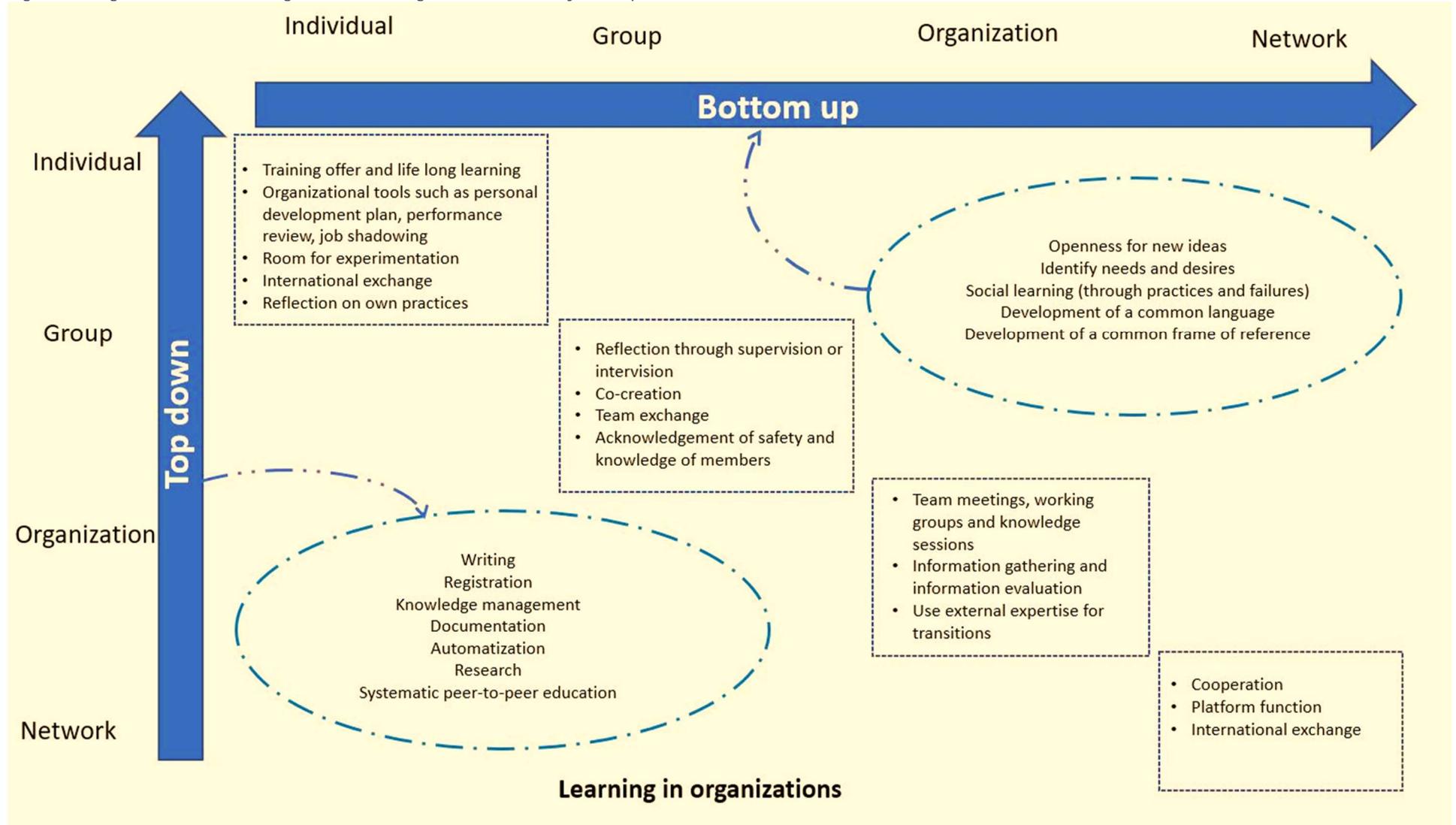
Figure 1: Organisational learning as a dynamic process (based on Crossan et al., 1999). (The terms Bottom up and top down have been added by the authors of this summary).



As stated, this is not the only model in the literature on organisational learning. It provides a heuristic model to map the learning processes within the surveyed organisations. In the present summary, it is complemented by another insight from the literature on learning organisations, namely that learning is not limited to the organisation alone. As Table 1 shows, many organisations are included in wider networks, either in national or transnational (umbrella) organisations. The RAY-CAP research (Stevens, 2018) has shown that umbrella organisations can play an important role in disseminating newly acquired knowledge outside one's own organisation. This meets the view within learning organisations that learning takes place wider than within one's own organisation. Therefore, the model of Crossan et al. has been supplemented in this summary with a fourth level, namely the level of **inter-organisational learning**.

2 FINDINGS

Figure 2: Organisational learning in the nine organisations surveyed as part of this research



2.1 LEARNING ON DIFFERENT LEVELS

*Learning in organisations is first and foremost **individual learning**. The initiative for learning originates to a large extent from individuals in organisations. Indeed, subscribing to courses or training activities, for example, depends very much on individual drive. According to one respondent, there is even an unprecedented hunger for learning among the current generation of young people. This enthusiasm is an important source for organisations, and they try to secure it. In this sense, for example, they support individuals to follow courses and trainings, provided these fit within the financial picture of the organisation and provided they can have a value for the wider organisation. Organisations also support the individual learning process through other means: personal development plans (or a volunteer version of such a development plan), performance reviews, or job shadowing opportunities. They also encourage individual learning by creating spaces where individuals can experiment, practice, and reflect on their own actions. In this last respect, Erasmus+: Youth in Action also plays a role in the learning of organisations. Intercultural and international settings are considered very instructive for exchanging views and reflecting on one's own approach and vision. In this respect, they contribute to a greater openness with individuals in the organisation, but also provide a greater openness with organisations towards activities and new target groups.*

*These same individuals often take the initiative to share their own experiences and ideas with other individuals in the organisation. This **group learning** is also encouraged from within the organisation: reflecting together, creating together and global exchange in group are important ways to stimulate this. A condition for this is that there is sufficient attention for social safety and trust in organisations.*

*At the **organisational level**, team meetings and knowledge exchange (among other things in working groups or project work) are central. Within these exchanges, knowledge gathered from various sources is reflected upon and activities or the functioning of the organisation are evaluated.*

*At the **inter-organisational level**, collaborations, the platform function of umbrella organisations and international exchanges are ways of learning.*

2.2 BOTTOM-UP PROCESSES

*In the organisations studied, various processes can be distinguished in which learning starts from below and affects a broader level in the organisation. **The expression** of individual experiences is important here. In these processes, it is essential to be open to the ideas of young people, to phrase one's own needs and requirements and to collectively reflect on and learn from one's own practices. However, this is not enough. It must be possible to integrate these joint experiences into a **shared understanding**. By working participatively from the bottom up and by developing a common language, a shared frame of reference emerges. Based on such a shared frame of reference, actions can be set up and developed.*

2.3 TOP-DOWN PROCESSES

*This bottom-up dynamic is a valuable aspect for organisations, which is why they also try to get a grip on these processes and try to steer them from the top down. Organisations categorise this as 'professionalization'. In bottom-up processes, phrasing is essential, but in these top-down processes organisations expect a lot from **writing down or systematically capturing** experiences and knowledge. This takes various forms: documenting experiences, registering experiences in step-by-step plans and sheets, automating in digital applications where knowledge can be shared, researching, and registering experiences and systematising peer-to-peer education.*



2.4 OBSTACLES AND FACILITATORS TO LEARNING IN ORGANISATIONS

*This brings us to one of the **hindering** factors of learning in youth work. Indeed, the sector does not have a culture of writing down. Other hindering factors are a too sudden and too strong growth (which poses challenges especially to keeping (learning) manageable in an organisation) and the financial possibilities of organisations.*

*Learning, on the other hand, is **promoted** by the creation of growth opportunities in the sector, good leadership, networking, supportive policies and wider social evolutions. Growth is also identified as a facilitating factor.*

2.5 AREAS OF TENSION

*From the broad analysis of learning in these organisations, several **internal areas of tension** also emerged.*

- *Growth is good, but if this growth goes too fast, it risks becoming unmanageable.*
- *Staff turnover in the youth sector can be both a curse and a blessing. On the one hand, it causes brain drain in the sector. On the other hand, it provides new blood and new ideas.*
- *Professionalization provides structure in the organisation, which is often considered necessary, but at the same time threatens the spontaneous, bottom-up learning that takes place. According to the respondents, this informal culture from the bottom up is often the very source of important changes that occur within organisations.*

2.6 THE ROLE OF ERASMUS+: YOUTH IN ACTION

*With regard to **Erasmus +: Youth in Action**, some reservations have been expressed.*

- *Building a shared frame of reference takes time. Key Action 2 allows for the development of strategic partnerships. The duration of these actions is just sufficient to reach a shared frame of reference between the partners. However, it is too short to take further steps.*
- *According to some organisations, international projects are often the interest of individuals or part of the organisation. As a result, these international projects do not have enough impact to bring about changes in the organisation.*
- *There is not always an offer for older or more experienced staff members.*
- *Several respondents indicate that the training activities within Erasmus+: Youth in Action are not always relevant because of their theoretical content or because they have too little relevance to their own practice.*

The value of Erasmus+: Youth in Action is mainly seen as having an impact on some individual and organisational components such as greater openness or further vision development. It has a lesser impact on growth or further professionalization. These last changes are more likely to be stimulated by the (commitment of) staff and/or specific individuals in organisations. In that respect, the Erasmus+ Programme: Youth in Action has rather an indirect impact on professionalization and growth. It enthuses (individual) staff and that in turn contributes to these aspects of organisational change.

Relevant to mention here is that one of the interviewed organisations within Erasmus+: Youth in Action has an ongoing strategic partnership on the subject of one of the main areas of tension identified in the current research: how to further professionalise/grow as an organisation while at the same time maintaining the original and more informal learning processes in organisations?