



Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership for Youth

The YourEP Experiment

Key Lessons for Inclusive & Accessible Political Simulations

CONTEXT

The YourEP project started from a shared observation: **Citizenship has become yet another area of exclusion**, especially for youngsters with fewer opportunities. Active citizenship, EU and political awareness, and Social inclusion are indeed closely intertwined issues in the field of youth.

Furthermore, while these issues can only be tackled altogether, **youngsters with fewer opportunities are still underrepresented in initiatives promoting political participation** and political awareness. This is why the YES Forum, together with its partners, designed the YourEP project.

More about the context

Citizenship has become yet another area of exclusion, especially for youngsters with fewer opportunities. As highlighted recently, the lack of social inclusion among youth has tragic consequences: the low turnout of young people in elections, experienced at both the EU and national levels, has for instance played a key role in the Brexit referendum outcome.

Active citizenship, Political awareness, and Social inclusion are closely intertwined issues in the field of youth: as shown by European data, the older a youngster is when leaving education, the more likely they are to be active in politics and the civil society as a whole. What goes for educational inequalities is also valid for geographical disparities, ethnic background or other exclusion factors.

While these issues can only be tackled altogether, youngsters with fewer opportunities are still underrepresented in initiatives promoting political participation and political awareness. In that context, working toward the inclusion of youth in all its diversity appears more urgent than ever.

Why a political simulation?

Political simulations are an innovative, powerful tool designed to involve youngsters in “make-believe” politics to teach them how political institutions work, while promoting their civic participation.

“Learning by doing” is their key principle: instead of a passive and theoretical learning experience, political simulations let participants learn through interactive methods. By roleplaying as politicians and key stakeholders of the political process, young people get a hands-on experience, ensuring an ideal educational impact.

The educational potential of political simulations is therefore undeniable, and a lot of public and private initiatives offer young people such experiences. However, the underrepresentation of youngsters with fewer opportunities is even more striking in the specific case of political simulations. Indeed, numerous obstacles make it difficult – if not impossible – for youngsters with fewer opportunities to participate:

- Youngsters with fewer opportunities lack information and awareness about such opportunities;



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- Most events are designed for students, de facto excluding young people out of secondary or higher education;
- Participating fees – and very often, travel expenses as well – prevent youngsters with financial difficulties to participate;
- The required level of English to take part in such events, when organised at the international level, is systematically too high for youngsters with fewer opportunities;
- The organisation of these events itself, its complexity, and the level of knowledge required to take part, also make them inaccessible to many youngsters.

By involving youngsters with fewer opportunities to design their own simulation of the European Parliament, the YourEP project provides a new, innovative and inclusive political simulation method and, in the long-run, aims to inspire new organisations to make it their own.

OBJECTIVES & PROCESS

To contribute to open political simulations, catering for a more diverse audience, YourEP consisted of **3 Transnational Project Meetings and 2 Blended Mobility activities** over the course of 21 months. They allowed partners and their young participants to develop and implement an **Inclusive & Accessible political simulation** of the European Parliament:

- Inclusive - regardless of participants' personal backgrounds and difficulties.
- Accessible - regardless of participants' prior knowledge of or interest in politics and the European Union.

To better suit their needs, the #YourEPsimulation method was designed with the active involvement of **24 youngsters with fewer opportunities from 7 different EU countries**. They were accompanied by experienced youth workers from the partners, while the whole process was supported by the European expertise of JEF Europe.

The YourEP project unfolded into three phases (also detailed in the Timeline on p.7).

Phase 1 - Preparation and Training

Phase 1 focused on the preparation of the youngsters, thus giving them the relevant skills and knowledge to design a simulation method of the EP specifically adapted to their needs.

During the first 8 months, **Online Activities and Local Meetings** empowered participants to fully engage in the project. Before they actually met all together, they got to know each other, were prepared for international meetings, and learned the basics on the European Union through a wide diversity of methods, both online and locally.

Afterward, during a **5-day meeting in Brussels**, all young participants and partners' staff gathered to keep learning in the heart of Europe itself. Through interactive and participatory methods, they focused on Europe, the EU and EU citizenship, the European Parliament, as well as intercultural exchanges!

After they got the necessary basic knowledge to do so, all participants **brainstormed about their future inclusive simulation** of the European Parliament, in order to let them decide on as many aspects of the simulation as possible.

You can find more details about the methods and results of the **Brussels Meeting in this Report** (tinyurl.com/y93jqjsb).

Phase 2 - Designing and Implementing the #YourEPsimulation

Phase 2 finalised, prepared and carried out the test of the #YourEPsimulation itself.

Based on the input gathered in Brussels, young participants fine-tuned the design of their future #YourEPsimulation. Until March 2018, they discussed many aspects of the simulation online, and finally **voted to make final decisions**, for instance on the topics to address or the roles to play.

All details of the #YourEPsimulation were then finalised during a Transnational Meeting in Piteå, Sweden, involving both young participants and partners' staff. They also identified methods to prepare all participants before the actual simulation, once again with a **mix of online and local activities**.

After **preparing for their new "YourEP role"**, the young participants and partners' staff finally gathered during a week **in Strasbourg to implement their #YourEPsimulation**. There, they roleplayed as MEPs, lobbyists and journalists to get a real, hands-on political European experience!

You can find more details about the **#YourEPsimulation process** as well as the impressive **results achieved by our young "YourEP MEPs" in this Report** (tinyurl.com/y7lmeegl).

Phase 3 - Dissemination and Advocacy

Phase 3 will now build upon the #YourEPsimulation method and its implementation to advocate for more inclusive political simulations in Europe in the future.

The YourEP project results will be promoted as living proof that it is possible to organise qualitative political simulations while better representing the youth diversity.

Impact

Through their participation in the YourEP project, the **young participants** improved transversal skills such as:

- Social, civic, intercultural, interpersonal and communicational competences;
- Leadership and entrepreneurial skills thanks to their active role in the project;
- Improved EU and general political awareness.

Moreover, the project results will enable the partners to achieve a **greater impact in youth formal and non-formal education**:

- The EP simulation method specifically designed for youngsters with fewer opportunities will be spread to other youth organisations to help them promoting the Active citizenship of youngsters with fewer opportunities.
- Dissemination will also include advocacy work targeting organisations carrying out such simulations on a regular basis in order to advocate for a better inclusion of disadvantaged youngsters by providing a concrete, successful example.

RESULTS | YourEP's Recipe for Inclusive & Accessible Simulations

YourEP's key outcome lies in its own design. To better suit their needs, the #YourEPsimulation method was developed with the active involvement of youngsters with fewer opportunities, supported by experienced youth & social workers.

As a result of this participatory process, the **YourEP Method applied the following key principles** in order **to be Inclusive** - regardless of participants' personal backgrounds and difficulties - and **Accessible** - regardless of participants' prior knowledge of or interest in politics and the European Union.

Participatory Design

To make sure the entire process, and in the end the #YourEPsimulation itself, were adapted to their interests and needs, the young participants were involved in all steps of the project. It also promoted the young participants' ownership of the project, and in turn their motivation to be involved.

Project Management: All Transnational Meetings gathered 1 youngster and 1 staff per partner. When reflecting on methods to learn about the European Union and prepare for international meetings (Phase 1) or brainstorming about and finalising the YourEP Method (Phase 2), **young participants were always represented!**

Designing the YourEP Method: The large majority of the simulation's aspects were suggested by young participants themselves. They **provided a lot of ideas and input** when they all met in Brussels, as well as online later on, when they could for instance **vote on the topics to be debated** during the actual simulation.

Ongoing Support

To reach out to them first, and then cater for all their needs and adapt to their personal difficulties, all young participants were accompanied by experienced youth & social workers from the partners in all steps of the project.

During Phase 1, all partners organised **Local Meetings** with their young participants. They used different methods, adapting them to their participants' profile, to prepare them for upcoming international meetings, and learn the basics about the European Union.

During Phase 2, additional Local Meetings were organised to **prepare the young participants for the #YourEPsimulation** itself, and in particular help them stepping into their new "YourEP shoes", as MEPs, lobbyists and journalists.

In Strasbourg, partners' **staff were even involved as participants in the simulation** to help their youngsters "from the inside" ... and learn as well! To make sure young participants could also **participate on an equal footing regardless of their English** skills, some partners also involved interpreters, or helped their participants through the staff involved in the simulation itself.

Back to Basics! The Blended Learning Experience

To allow all young participants, as well as partners' staff, to take part in the project regardless of their prior knowledge of the European Union, Phase 1 focused on teaching them the basics on the EU and its legislative process. We used a large variety of methods, **blending "physical" and online activities** to adapt to the individuals own learning style.

All partners organised **Local Meetings** with their group, using adapted methods to let their young participants engage with politics and the EU. For example, some visited their town hall, while others did street interviews to gather their fellow citizens' ideas on Europe.

Online, it was decided with the young participants to use a Facebook group instead of creating a whole new platform. As most of them already used Facebook on a daily basis, it was the most accessible online tool to let everybody engage with each other. For privacy reasons, partners chose a closed, secret Facebook group. It was used to:

- **Share accessible, adapted learning material.** We made use of the many great resources available online, such as [EuroparlTV](#) short, educational and subtitled videos or [quizzes](#).
- **Get to know each other**, and **discuss** topics of common interests, besides the design and preparation of the #YourEPsimulation itself.

Finally, the 5-day meeting organised in Brussels gathered everybody to conclude this **preparatory learning phase in the heart of Europe** itself!

Learning the fun way!

Roleplaying in itself is a fun, playful experience. But following its young participants' suggestions, the #YourEPsimulation included other **creative features to make it even more entertaining**.

For instance after a vote by young participants, it was **decided to debate two different proposals** during the actual simulation. One was **realistic** ("Resolution on True Equality in High School") and the other one **not so realistic ... and quite fun!** ("Regulation on the Protection of European Fantastic Creatures"). Though unrealistic on paper, this proposal actually led to funny yet deep debates about how to protect endangered species in real life!

This fun component provided several advantages regarding inclusion and accessibility:

- Making the simulation **more attractive and enjoyable** even for young people who were not interested in the EU at first.
- Helping participants **focusing on the democratic legislative process**: with a funny topic, they could be creative and rely on their imagination to take part in debates, without needing any expertise on specific, sometimes technical issues!
- Introducing participants to **real-life issues through a fun shortcut**, as a parallel could easily be made between our unrealistic/fun topic and actual issues!

Chill Out! Keeping it Simple

Early on, young participants decided to **avoid reproducing the formal social norms often prevailing in politics**. For instance, there was no dress code for the #YourEPsimulation itself, and participants didn't have to use typical ceremonial greetings to address each other (e.g. "*Honourable Members, dear friends and colleagues*").

On the one hand, it **avoided creating "symbolic" obstacles** by forcing participants to mimic formal behaviours they were not comfortable with, or distrustful of. On the other hand, it also helped **focusing on the legislative process** itself by overlooking its most formal, ceremonial and yet not-so-indispensable aspects.

Flexibility is the Key! The Many Ways of Participating

To cater for all participants' different needs and personal difficulties, the #YourEPsimulation process remained flexible.

The simulation relied on several progressive sessions – Political Groups, Committees, Plenary. But its timeframe kept a margin which proved useful: to take **time to accommodate the specific needs of young participants**, but also because in the end, some participants wanted to debate longer than planned!

Moreover, group discussions were a key component of the simulation. However – just like in real politics – it offered **alternative ways of participating** to ensure all participants, even if they were facing social/interpersonal difficulties, could engage in the simulation. For instance:

- Space for individual reflection: The simulation planned specific times to let participants reflect by themselves, and for instance write their own amendments to be proposed to the other participants later on.
- Informal times: Any legislative process revolves around key, unavoidable official steps involving group discussions. But in between, there is also a lot of work! During informal times (breaks, lunch and dinner, evening drink ...), YourEP participants were encouraged to keep roleplaying: participants who were uncomfortable with group discussions could discuss their ideas in one-on-one conversations.
- Lobbyists & Journalists: These roles in the simulation, because they involve more "behind the stage" work than for MEPs, offered flexible ways to engage with other participants, beyond groups discussions.
- Spokespersons: Young participants could also ask other participants, or their responsible staff, to act as their "spokesperson" during the simulation, especially during the group discussions.

A Free Opportunity

Finally, the YourEP project was **entirely free for its young participants** thanks to Erasmus+ funds. All costs were covered: participants didn't have to personally pay for their trips, accommodation or food and could therefore get involved regardless of their financial situation. **Financial support to all partners** also helped them dedicating enough time to support their young participants.

A lot of other public funds are available! Political simulations, especially **with the upcoming 2019 European Parliament elections, have a privileged position to access such funds.**

Besides **Erasmus+**, other EU programmes are relevant, such as [Europe for Citizens](#). At the European, national, regional and even local levels, many other institutions can provide financial support such as, among others, the [European Youth Foundation](#) and other public and private foundations, national initiatives targeted at political education, municipalities, or why not the upcoming [European Solidarity Corps](#) own funds?

YourEP – KAZ Strategic Partnership for the exchange of good practices Project Timeline





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From early 2017 to late 2018, 24 youngsters with fewer opportunities from 7 different EU countries designed their own political simulation of the European Union, in order to create an Inclusive & Accessible method. They were accompanied by experienced youth workers from the partners. The whole process was supported by the European expertise of JEF Europe.

This document is a synthesis of YourEP's results. For more information, please visit the [project's website](http://www.yes-forum.eu/projects/detail/yourep) (www.yes-forum.eu/projects/detail/yourep) or contact us.

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