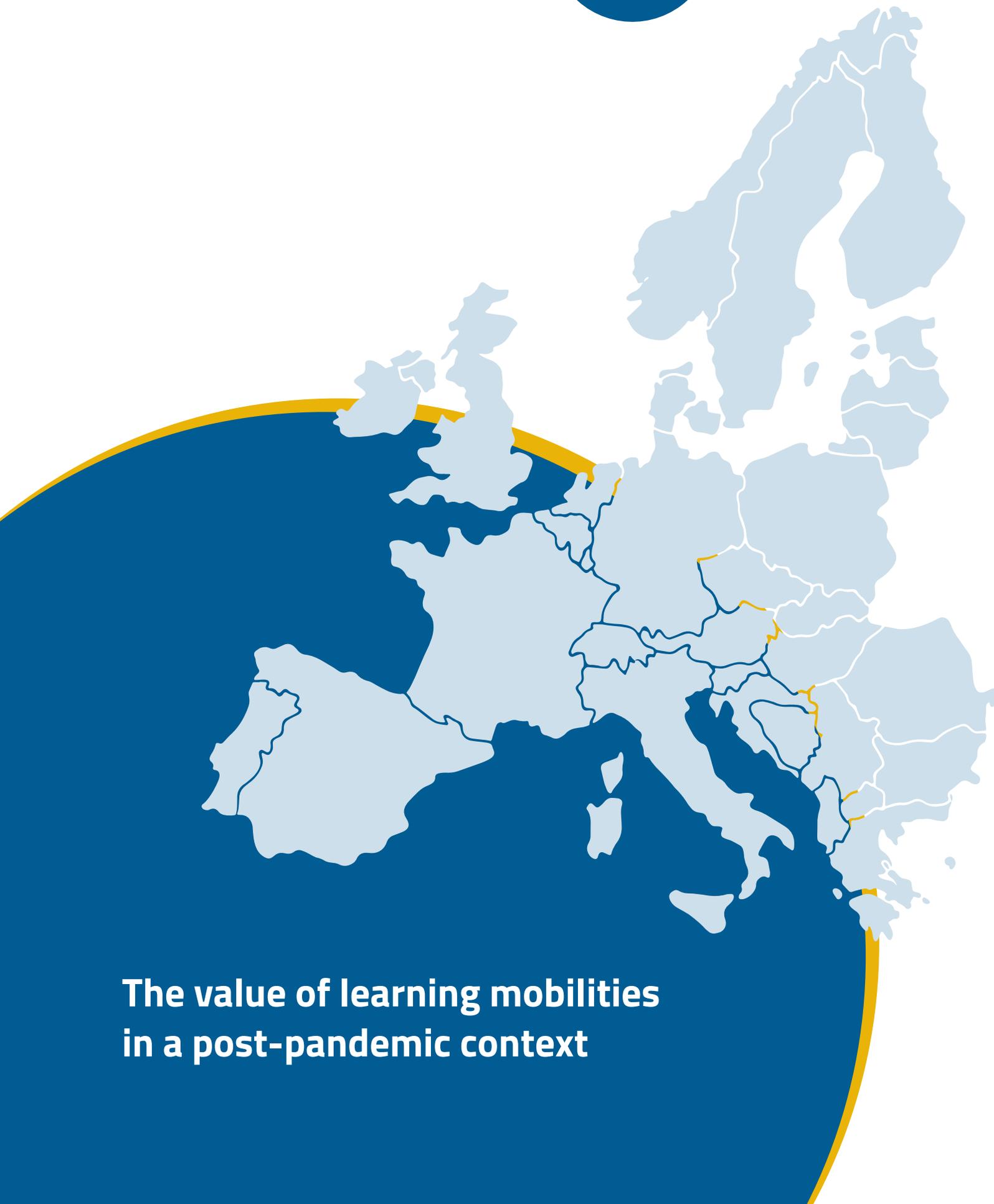




Empowering  
young people



**The value of learning mobilities  
in a post-pandemic context**

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October 2022



**Co-funded by  
the European Union**

This publication has been funded by the European Commission's ESF+ Social Inclusion operating grant (EuroPower-101059198).

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## **About the YES Forum**

Founded in 2002, YES Forum is a European network of organisations working with and for young people facing challenging situations. By promoting their social inclusion and developing their professional skills, we act to improve the life chances of vulnerable young people. YES Forum aims to create an environment where young people and youth professionals have equally accessible learning and work-related opportunities in Europe and beyond.

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## Introduction

According to the European Platform on Learning Mobility (EPLM), learning mobility in the youth field is defined as a mobility “(transnationally, regionally or online) undertaken freely and voluntarily for a specific period, consciously organised for educational purposes, to have impact on the local community or to acquire new competences (knowledge, skills, attitudes or values)” (Council of Europe, 2022). Learning mobilities “encompass a wide variety of project formats and activities, and can be implemented in informal or non-formal education settings” (Council of Europe, 2022).

The interest in taking part in learning mobilities has been rising in recent years. Through numerous programmes and initiatives (e.g., Erasmus+, EVS, ESC), annually thousands of learners are able to travel worldwide and gain new learning and work experiences. Such mobilities constitute a vital step for learners to increase their motivation for further learning and to build an international professional profile, while also being “an unprecedented space for self-realisation” and “self-development” (Krzaklewska & Şenyuva, p. 20).

In the current report we focus on learning mobilities taking place in the non-formal education context. More specifically, we take a deeper look into internships, trainings and work-related experiences of the YES Forum members and into projects that took place during 2022. This report starts with a literature review to highlight the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning mobility projects. In the second part, the YES Forum adds to this data pool its own perspective, resulting from several interviews with young people and youth workers that had the opportunity to get involved in at least one type of the above-mentioned learning mobilities.

The testimonies were collected in 2022 during different events organised by or in collaboration with the YES Forum. We acknowledge that the sample is limited and therefore is not fully representative. However, it serves the main purpose of this report: to have a first insight into how young people and professionals experience learning mobilities in a transition to an almost post-pandemic context.

## Learning mobility is put on hold

The increasing trend in learning mobilities was disrupted in 2020. Isolation became a keyword in most political agendas, as policy-makers worldwide had to deal with an unprecedented health emergency. Containment measures, such as gathering restrictions, curfews, travel limitations, reintroduction of internal border controls in the Schengen area, among others, impacted learning mobility projects considerably. The youth work community was heavily affected. Young people, youth workers and youth organisations had to adapt to the new reality from one day to the other.

Surveys conducted by the Council of Europe and the European Union youth partnership confirmed the negative impact COVID-19 had on mobility projects. Among the most prevalent obstacles youth work encountered were project cancellations, funding delays, limited financial support from both private and public institutions, lack of outreach and visibility, etc. (n.d.). Their impact was significant for all types of

learning mobilities, with international short-term mobility (e.g. research visits, conferences, etc.) being affected the most (Grothus, 2021).

To face the ongoing health crisis, public and private funds were allocated to the healthcare sector, inevitably reducing investment in other sectors and priorities. Private donors focused their attention on supporting the near-collapsing medical systems. Especially at the local level, projects managed and funded by local governments and authorities had to be cancelled or postponed (European Union - Council of Europe youth partnership, n.d.). Organisations that mainly relied on mobility projects had to pause their activity or redefine themselves and their working methods (Krzaklewska & Şenyuva, 2020). Organisations also faced great difficulties to finance their everyday work, which led to cuts in projects and staff (Krzaklewska & Şenyuva, 2020).

The uncertainty of the first year left many organisations anticipating better times to continue their work as before. Subsequently, a lower number of learning mobility opportunities was planned, and a few learners had the opportunity to apply for, or participate and, eventually, complete their mobilities, especially in the first year of Covid. A long-lasting effect of the continuous obstacles put in mobilities created much concern as regular contact with young learners and youth professionals was progressively lost (Krzaklewska & Şenyuva, 2020).

An equally important aspect that should not be overlooked was the pandemic's effect on learners' mental health and well-being. Undoubtedly, the pandemic pushed learners to change their priorities, as well.

Even if young people, which are essentially the most frequent participants in mobility projects, were not amongst the highest risk age categories, they had to deal with a lot of stress and anxiety about the well-being of their loved ones, their studies and generally about their future, which seemed uncertain. Besides the pandemic itself, the imposed lockdowns put extreme stress on young people's shoulders (Krzaklewska & Şenyuva, 2020). Young people had to reinvent their priorities while dealing with the economic impact of the pandemic, as well. A rather long-lasting result of the pandemic still affecting a great number of young people across the globe is the "small jobs" crisis. Numerous young people lost their jobs and failed to get hired again after the end of the lockdown measures. An important source of income assisting young people to gain international experiences through mobilities was lost, and these types of opportunities became less inclusive and accessible (Krzaklewska & Şenyuva, 2020).

## **Digital and distance learning become the rule**

Technology was the solution offered to minimise the inevitable distance created between people. Online meeting rooms replaced traditional classrooms and conference rooms. Learners were able to be in virtual contact even if they were separated by hundreds of kilometres. The previously popular physical learning mobility gave its place to virtual mobility and online learning had great growth in several countries (Mouratidis & Papagiannakis, 2021).

The response of the educational institutions in both formal and non-formal settings had to be fast. As expected, the digital infrastructure of each establishment was vital for the implementation of this new type of mobility. Some institutions were more prepared than others and were able to provide quality opportunities to learners very fast. Others had to struggle and put more effort to catch up with the changes in the sector (Strielkowski, 2022). Several institutions tested the hybrid model of activities through a combination of offline and online methods, providing training on virtual methods to their young people and youth professionals (European Union - Council of Europe youth partnership, n.d.).

A lot of research has been conducted to investigate the success of virtual mobility and learning in the past few years. Drawing from the European Commission's "Survey on the impact of COVID-19 on learning mobility activities" (2020), the majority of participants were generally satisfied with their virtual learning experience. Nonetheless, the respondents showed by a large majority (81%) that they preferred and missed physical interaction, or missed the physical presence in certain education facilities (69%) (European Commission, 2020).

## **A new era for learning mobility?**

In 2022, learning mobilities are again physical, but the virtual mobility impact is still relevant for youth work. COVID-19 has undoubtedly been "the disruptor that forces the digital transformation process to accelerate" (Strielkowski, 2022). The digitalization of learning has shown institutions a new way of achieving results. By now they have invested much time and money into creating virtual classes and virtual workspaces. They have created business models based on virtual tools that facilitate their work and remotely reach learners and professionals from everywhere. It is a rather expected outcome to see those tools being used long-term, in combination with the "traditional" on-site learning and physical mobilities.

Looking at the ecological impact of virtual mobility, it is wise to consider the long-term environmental benefits. We should not forget that Europeans have committed themselves to turn Europe into the first carbon-neutral and resource-efficient continent by 2050 (European Commission, n.d.). Due to lockdowns and restrictions individuals have dramatically reduced their daily trips (Mouratidis & Papagiannakis, 2021). Even when lockdown measures were suspended, more sustainable options such as walking and cycling, gained much popularity (Mouratidis & Papagiannakis, 2021). According to the same research, the general reduction of travel, with all transportation means, contributed to significant reductions in urban noise and air pollution (2021). It became obvious that every little action matters. The deceleration of life in the past years gave us a glimpse of societies' destructive habits for the environmental well-being. It also gave much-needed rest to people who partially enjoyed the slowing-down pace of their lifestyle (Shanahan et al, 2020). Besides the environmental impact of physical mobility, all learners can enjoy a learning experience from the comfort of their homes, saving time and money.

There is no doubt that physical mobilities serve purposes virtual mobility could never serve (e.g. human contact, cultural exchange, new environments, etc.). As long as learning can efficiently occur online, learning mobilities can take place partially or wholly virtually. However, the pandemic has also taught us that to achieve the learning outcomes an activity is designed for, it is not always necessary to physically move to other places.

## Benefits reassured

In 2022, on-site activities were slowly resumed as travel and meeting restrictions loosened. This allowed the YES Forum to gather input on how participants were experiencing the reactivation of these activities in a still uncertain atmosphere. We collected reflections from six young people and eight social and youth work professionals. Even though the learning mobilities were carried out in different contexts, some common trends could be observed and are displayed below.

### Young people: improving future perspectives

The young people consulted for this report participated in international internships or short-term trainings. They came from France, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands and travelled to Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom. In general, they all share similar motivations to take part in these opportunities: to gain useful knowledge for their careers, and improve their language skills, international connections and *"maturity"*.

This answer of a 25-year-old woman who experienced a year studying and doing an internship abroad summarises the motivations exposed by all the respondents:

*"I wanted to participate in a learning mobility to:*

- *Have better job opportunities afterwards*
- *Get to know new people and the culture of my host country*
- *Broaden my horizons and grow*
- *Explore the academic possibilities and find my call regarding to choosing my master's" (sic)*

Building links with people from different backgrounds is also mentioned by most young people. To *"learn about new cultures"*, to *"communicate with different people with different experiences and professions"* or to meet *"people from different backgrounds"* are some examples of how this is expected to manifest.

When asked about the outcomes of their learning mobilities, it was revealed that in most cases the previous expectations were fulfilled. Young people's reflections show a positive outlook on mobility experiences. Their testimonies highlight the successful output of their exchanges, focusing on the relations built with other young people. The international side of the experiences is also underlined, as could be seen in the testimony of a 24-year-old woman: *"I think [the international environment is] an added value rather than participating [in] something like this in your own country. Because in your own population you*

*will have more or less the same experience, but the differences between countries and therefore international students are eye-opening”.*

The pandemic's impact on these experiences varies in each case. The concerns about the COVID-19 situation decreased according to the period the mobilities took place. Mobilities organised before or in the beginning of 2022 were directly impacted by the pandemic, as some of the respondents referred to it as a turning point and as an obstacle.

*“I was enrolled in a tourism master's degree and due to the pandemic, two classmates and I decided to take a gap year in order to think of what we really wanted to do (...). If this pandemic had not have happened, I'd still be enrolled in this master's degree. I'm not longer interested in (...),”* explained a 23-year-old woman doing an internship at a youth organisation in Italy.

For a 24-year-old man the health context in a prospective host country would affect his decision whether to go there *“depending on how the destination handled the situation”*. This statement reflects that some worries remain even after the most concerning phase of the pandemic has been overcome.

A 20-year-old woman reported her interest to participate in international learning mobility in the future since she *“hasn't had the chance to participate [before] because of the pandemic restrictions in other countries”*.

For the mobilities that took place throughout 2022, the fear of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic decreased. The main issues that remained were related to “travelling and transportation” or concerns due to the ongoing transition between strict and more loose measures.

*“The pandemic context always leaves a small shadow of concerns, but the workshop was really well organised and planned”*, mentioned a 22-year-old participant in a 4-day long training organised by the YES Forum. She also added that *“travelling was more complicated than usual, but all in all it was handled pretty well with distance and feeling for the individual situation”*.

The participants in activities organised in September do not show any concern regarding the health situation and do not perceive that it has any impact on their experience. By then, travel and meeting restrictions had already been withdrawn, and gatherings were executed rather normally.

The experiences collected for this report show that learning mobilities are highly valued by participants and that usually their outcomes fit young people's motivations. Moreover, the pandemic has not had a dissuasive effect to participate in these international experiences once they resumed.

### **Social and youth work professionals: inspiring inputs**

Study visits helped professionals to broaden their knowledge and to learn new tools to improve their daily work. Carrying out these activities in an international context adds the value of getting familiar with different social and welfare systems which could be inspiring. The next insights belong to 8 social- and youth work professionals coming from Sweden, the Netherlands, Austria and Italy. They participated in trainings, exchanges and study visits organised in Sweden, Italy and Germany.

The main reasons for them to get involved in international study visits were professional exchange with colleagues and new learning they could gain to enrich their expertise. These motivations support the relevance of lifelong learning and upskilling initiatives for professionals.

For instance, a Swedish youth worker and youth centre manager decided to participate in a study visit in Italy *“to have perspective on things and an authentic experience, to be inspired and to bring new ideas”* to her work. Another Swedish youth worker pointed out that participating in another study visit in Germany *“was very useful, and it is a really good learning experience to see and meet organisations and youth workers from outside Sweden”*.

The professionals also focused on the *“networking”* opportunities that these activities offer. They are *“good to create new ideas”* or to *‘share experiences, perspectives and knowledge while working together’*. As an international network, one of the YES Forum’s main goals is to benefit participants and support them in broadening their networks.

Thanks to these exchanges, participants learnt new approaches to social and youth issues that can be applied in their working context. *“I will use some of the knowledge I acquired in my daily job, while developing project ideas and initiatives”*, assures an Italian professional. *“I always take these experiences into my daily work one way or another”*, confirmed another youth worker.

Study visits or work-related experiences also offer inputs about new matters that can expand organisations’ working fields. A social organisation’s manager, who participated in an intergenerational learning exchange focused on knowledge transfer between senior and junior colleagues emphasised that *“this is an issue that concerns me and my own organisation, and it has a high relevance for many social work organisations. I’m discussing these topics with my colleagues and we’re looking for our own way to manage it”*.

At the same time, participants in professional mobilities also gained new perspectives on their work. This allows professionals to be more critical of their performance, and get inspired by other initiatives that could be applied to their field. *“It is also a humbling experience and you look at your own job a bit differently when you are home”*, reported a youth worker.

In a similar way to young people, the professionals’ concerns related to the pandemic eased as 2022 went on. The respondents, who participated in activities organised in the first semester of the year, highlighted the need to re-start organising on-site learning activities after all the restrictions. explained another professional. An Austrian colleague mentioned this as the main reason to participate in an exchange.

Those attending activities during the second semester of 2022, when daily life was already coming back to normal, did not emphasise this need, nor relate any problems or concerns regarding the health situation. *“The pandemic has become a part of our daily life”*, pointed out one of the respondents, while another claimed that she would *“have joined [the study visit] either way”*.

The notion of going back to normality was reflected not only in the way new activities were implemented, but also affected the topics covered: *“The pandemic has overshadowed all issues in such an overpowering way that it is good that we can now also devote ourselves to the important challenges of this time again”*, one of the inquired professionals noticed.

## Conclusions

One of the core activities of the YES Forum is the capacity building of its members and the young people they work with. We aim at helping organisations learn new practices and methods from each other, recognise which parts of them could be applied in their own context and be able to adapt them. As part of lifelong learning, we believe that further training of professionals ensures high quality in the various work fields with young people. Tailor-made assistance to young people helps in breaking the intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.

In parallel, the YES Forum organises quality learning mobility opportunities for professionals and disadvantaged young people. In our activities, we connect young people, especially those who otherwise may not have had the possibility or motivation to meet other cultures. In this way they can develop the right soft skills that would later improve their chances of employability, while flourishing their talents, developing self-esteem and confidence in their abilities, as well as critical thinking and a better understanding of the European Union and the value of active citizenship.

By combining capacity building and learning mobilities we increase their benefits. As one of the young participants pointed out, the international environment adds an extremely positive value to learning and exchange activities.

Once the learning mobilities got back to normal, the YES Forum wanted to know if the pandemic had a deeper impact on participants and their experience with these activities. Taking into account the opinions and reflections of young people and youth and social work professionals involved in different mobilities, we found three main conclusions and one further challenge.

### **The on-site experience cannot be replaced**

The COVID-19 pandemic put in-person learning mobilities on hold and forced us to implement them in new ways, mostly online. These alternatives made it possible to keep the capacity-building side on while exploring other dynamics. It is easier to gather more participants from different countries, if they can participate from their homes, online. This way learning experiences become more inclusive, even though the digital gap and inequalities cannot be ignored. However, in online activities the international and intercultural aspects are mostly lost as the interaction between participants was limited.

The on-site aspect adds value to the experience. Working in a different environment with people from all over Europe allows going deeper into intercultural exchange. Moreover, the informal parts of the learning programme like coffee breaks and meals are as important as the content. Participants share more relaxed, informal moments that can serve to strengthen knowledge, gain new skills and build

personal connections that online events do not allow. The networking opportunity is, in fact, one of the main reasons why people decide to attend in-person events, as the answers of both young people and professionals show.

Thus, although on-line events and activities open a new window for international social and youth work and help to overcome some barriers, they do not permit participants to fully benefit from the intercultural exchange, as face-to-face events do.

### **The positive impact remains**

The gathered testimonies provide reassurance that learning mobilities have meaningful benefits for participants. Both young people and professionals stress the skills and learning they could obtain as decisive factors to get themselves enrolled. This potential growth was especially highlighted in relation to their careers.

Besides for professional reasons, they also acquire personal soft skills since they get out of their comfort zone, especially when referring to international mobilities. This contact with people from different countries and backgrounds enriches the experience, especially when it is carried out face to face and participants have more time to get to know each other, as explained above.

However, international learning mobilities must become more accessible. Young people facing disadvantages are less likely to be involved in such activities, as they face more barriers, including both social and economic ones (Allinson, Gabriels; 2021). Consequently, they miss the chance to benefit from the positive impact of learning mobilities.

### **Strengthening the feeling of European belonging**

International exchanges have a deeper impact that goes further than their effect on individuals. By bringing people from all around Europe together, they help reinforce the feeling of being European. Participants enrich their knowledge on various issues by being exposed to diverse perspectives. Moreover, during this process, they develop a shared sense of belonging.

Identifying common topics and developing strategies to overcome them together is the very first step to creating an inclusive and social Europe. Initiatives that link civil society produce a strong basis on which institutions and organisations can rely.

Building bridges among individuals is essential in a context where extreme nationalism, xenophobia and speeches that threaten human rights are rising. The COVID pandemic showed that solidarity is a core principle that allows us to successfully deal with unexpected, global issues. International exchanges contribute to bringing European citizens together.

### **The remaining challenge: environmental protection and international mobility**

Despite all the benefits of learning mobilities, international exchanges have significant environmental impact that needs to be addressed. The current European transport system is still far from the climate-neutral objectives set by the Commission in the European Green Deal.

The pandemic has demonstrated that there is no need to travel to take part in all activities. For example, meetings focused on activities' organisation and logistics can be done online, with no further impact on their outcomes. However, the on-site experience of learning mobilities is still needed so that participants can fully benefit from the experience.

The challenge now is to find ways to combine climate protection without having to renounce the advantages of on-site transnational exchange. Sustainability needs to become a central topic in international learning activities. Organisations should plan carefully their activities and consider seriously what format fits better to their objectives, thus reducing the number of long-distance travels and making a better use of their resources.

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