

International youth projects benefit most those with fewer opportunities

European research¹ shows that participants in international mobility projects report a clear positive impact of their participation on their competences, their behaviour and their values. But what's more, these international projects have a significantly higher effect on young people with fewer opportunities (YPFO). Compared to 'well-off' young people with most opportunities (YPMO), those with fewer opportunities systematically rate the effects of an international youth project more positively. The data of the RAY research project indicates that the Youth in Action programme (now Erasmus+ Youth) is a good tool to reach its 'equity and inclusion' aims.

Measuring the effects of mobility

The European Commission has had international programmes for young people since 1988. Thanks to EU funding, young people and youth workers from different countries could meet and enjoy a **non-formal learning programme** together (learning by doing, learning by fun). Such an international experience would enrich young people and strengthen their European values. The participants would gain competences, open their minds and hearts and become active European citizens. Causes worth investing in.



But do these fun projects deliver what they promise?

Over the years, several evaluations of the EU youth programmes have been carried out. But the most extensive project investigating the impact of the European youth programmes has been RAY – **Research-based Analysis of 'Youth in Action'** (the name of the 2007-2013 EU programme for youth). Research partners and National Agencies from 20 countries asked thousands of former participants how international youth projects have affected them.

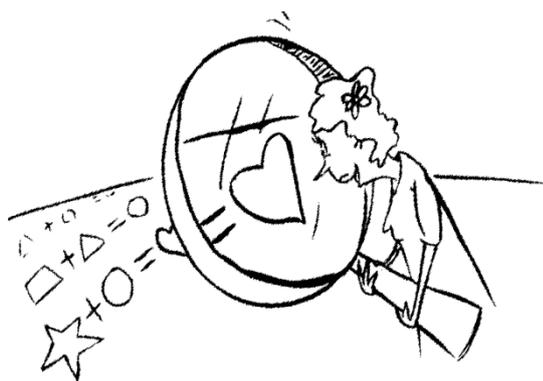
The RAY research reports at www.youthresearch.net show the **clear effects of international mobility** on young people. Youth in Action projects do contribute to participants' personal and professional development, the projects stimulate interest in European issues, they help participants appreciate cultural diversity and include young people with fewer opportunities. To name but a few. You will find data that documents this impact online.

¹ This article is based on an inclusion analysis of the data provided by the RAY Network (Research-based Analysis of Youth in Action) with partners in 20 European countries (status 2014). The respective research instruments were developed by the University of Innsbruck, Austria, in cooperation with the RAY partners.

What about young people with fewer opportunities?

The European youth programmes have always wanted to be **inclusive of ALL young people**, also (and especially!) those at the margins of society. Many efforts are undertaken to offer international mobility to these disadvantaged young people – or ‘young people with fewer opportunities’ (YPFO) as they are referred to. Approximately **one out of four** participants in the Youth in Action programme had fewer opportunities, according to European Commission statistics.

Is everybody equal before non-formal learning in mobility projects? Or are some more equal than others?



Do young people with fewer opportunities get as much out of the international opportunities offered by these mobility projects as ‘well-off’ youth? Or do we see a **Matthew effect**? Meaning: do the most privileged participants also get the most benefit out of a mobility project (accumulated advantage), whereas young people with fewer opportunities benefit less? Data from the RAY research suggests exactly the opposite.

Young people with fewer opportunities gain more from international youth projects than their privileged counterparts.

This evidence suggests that mobility projects are **more effective for young people with fewer opportunities** than for well-off youth (who also easily find international opportunities elsewhere). Including more YPFO in European mobility projects, would not only increase the impact of the programme, it would also contribute to **the inclusion and development of young people with fewer opportunities**. We will back up this point with some numbers.

Most and fewest opportunities

‘**Young people with fewer opportunities**’ are defined in the Erasmus+ programme guide as those young people who are at a disadvantage compared to their peers because they face one or more of the seven exclusion factors: disability, health problems, educational difficulties, cultural differences, economic obstacles, social obstacles or geographic obstacles. These factors can pose barriers to young people’s inclusion in society (e.g. education, labour market, housing, health, community²). However, it is clear that the mere fact of coming from a minority or using a wheelchair, does not automatically limit your opportunities.

² See ‘Finding a place in modern Europe – Mapping barriers to social inclusion of young people in vulnerable situations’, Youth Partnership.

The comparative disadvantage (compared to peers) is important and context-dependent.

Labelling someone as ‘having fewer opportunities’ is not straightforward (nor desirable). Still we needed to distil a group with fewer opportunities from the RAY respondents. We did so based on a **mix of objective and subjective criteria**. The educational levels of the respondents and of their parents are generally accepted as objective indicators of young people’s resources that influence their chances in life. Other questions asked the participants to (subjectively) indicate which obstacles they faced or whether they got a fair share of opportunities in life. This brought us to a set of 4 exclusion indicators: two subjective and two objective.

The researcher team used a threshold approach to determine subgroups.

To be sure that we only included truly underprivileged participants in the ‘fewer opportunities’-sample, just having one disadvantage or obstacle was not enough. A respondent had to have **at least three exclusion indicators** to be in the ‘fewer opportunities’ subgroup (2,823 fit in this group). This procedure makes sure that in the group of ‘fewer opportunities’, people have at least one subjective and one objective disadvantage. We created a contrast group of ‘young people with most opportunities’ (YPMO), who did not present any of the exclusion indicators above at all (5,467 in total). These were the two groups we focussed on in the inclusion analysis of the European-wide RAY data (total sample size 15,009).

Young people with fewer opportunities, but with stronger results

*Many differences emerged between the respondents ‘with fewer opportunities’ and those with ‘most opportunities’. It is remarkable that these differences in self-declared impact are as good as always in favour of the project participants with fewer opportunities. But even though the **discrepancies are statistically significant** (the difference between the groups cannot be attributed to chance), the absolute differences are not always that big. This shows that the perceived mobility effects on our two contrasted groups is different, but that the actual differences are not extreme. We’ll list these **systematic differences** between the answers of our two contrasted groups in decreasing order.*

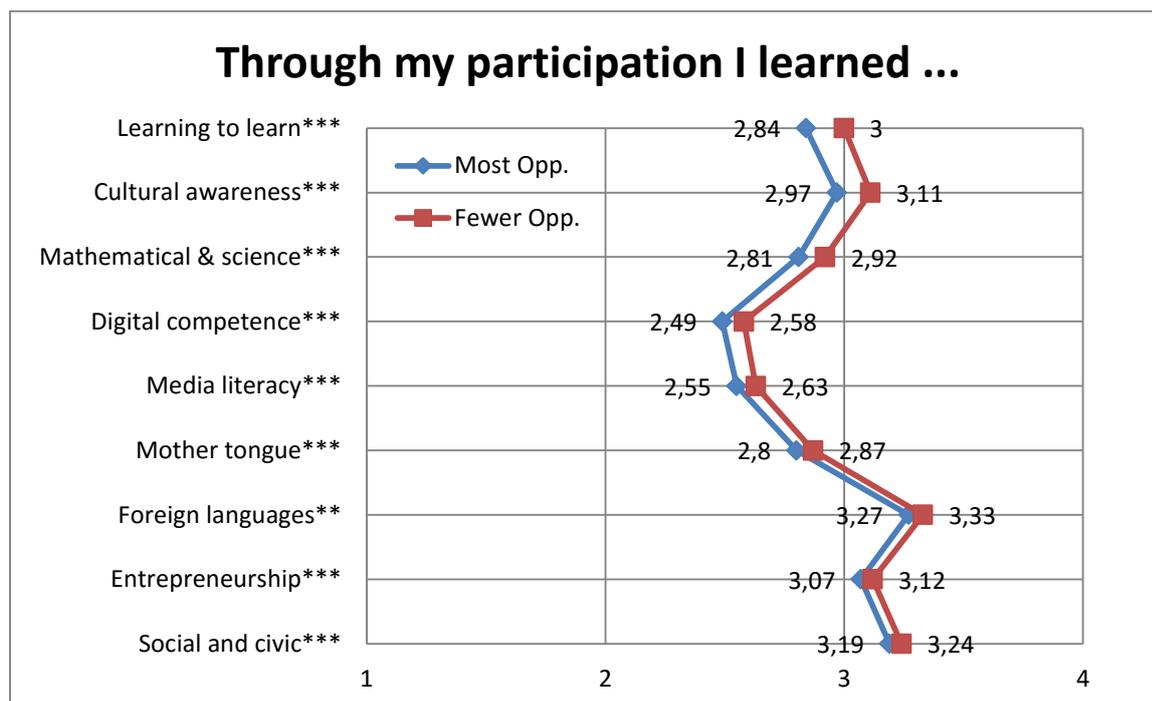


Lifelong learning starts young

The European Commission developed a framework of ‘**key competences for lifelong learning**’ that they consider fundamental for each individual in a knowledge-based society. They provide added value for the labour market, social cohesion and active citizenship. So the RAY researchers checked whether international youth projects also contributed to these competences. And they did. Generally, participants indicated that the project contributed to some extent to these competences (with a more mitigated result for ‘digital competence’).

Young people with fewer opportunities learn to learn more

When comparing our two groups, young people with fewer opportunities consistently indicate a higher gain in competences than the participants with most opportunities (graph 1 below). The difference with the 'well off' group of respondents is highest for 'learning to learn' (a mean score on a scale from 1 to 4 that lies 0,16 higher for YPFO compared to the mean score of YPMO). But the project also strengthened their cultural awareness and expression considerably more compared to the contrast group (+0,13) and their mathematical-scientific competences (+0,11). Also the differences for the other competences are significant, but less pronounced in absolute terms.



Graph 1: 1=absolutely disagree, 4=absolutely agree, *** highly significant ($p \leq .001$), ** significant ($p \leq .01$)

A brighter outlook to the future

So how do participants see themselves after the project? What change did they notice in themselves? (Table 1 below) Participating in an international project and meeting people from different cultures is a **boost for one's self-confidence**, even more so for young people with fewer opportunities who maybe never were abroad before, compared to well-off youth (3,6% more YPFO said they became more self-confident). This goes in line with for example a higher confidence to travel among YPFO as a result of the project, more so than among the contrast group (see graph 4 below 'Where you affected in other ways?').

Mobility projects give young people with fewer opportunities self-confidence

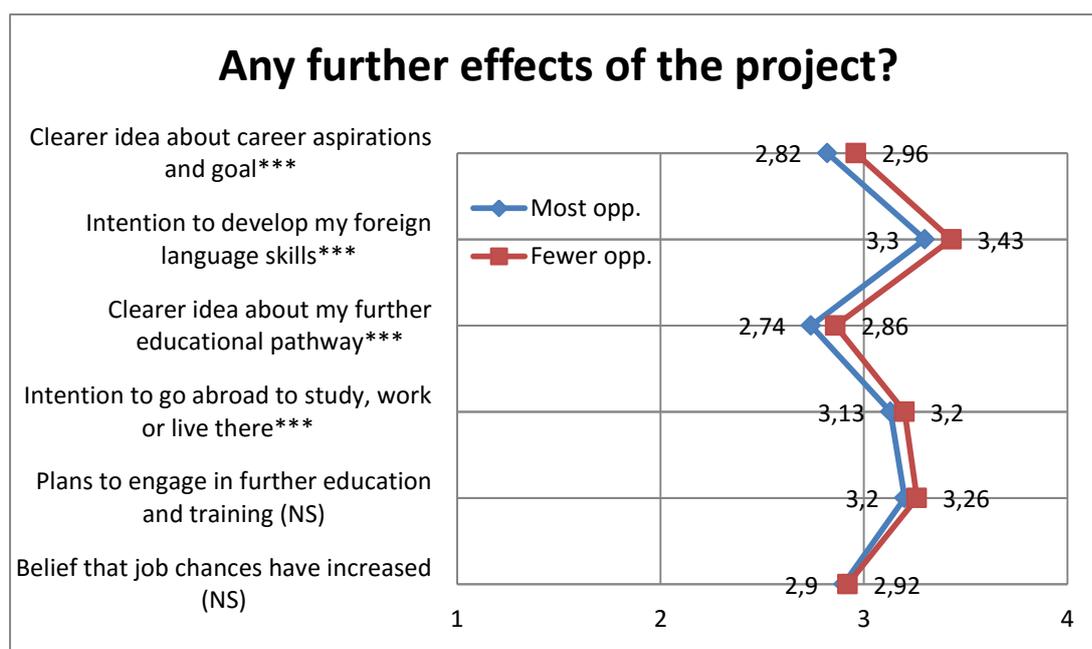
An international project is also a **discovery of oneself** (table 1 below). It shows yourself how you behave in new situations and with new people. This element of self-discovery is stronger for young people with fewer opportunities than for young people with most opportunities (+2,5%).

| After participating in the project, I have noted ... [multiple response] | Most Opp. | Fewer Opp. | Fewer-Most Opp. |
|--|-----------|------------|-----------------|
| ... that I am more self-confident. | 45,7% | 49,3% | +3,6% |
| ... that I learned more about myself. | 40,8% | 43,3% | +2,5% |
| ... that I can better empathise with others. | 22,5% | 24,9% | +2,3% |
| ... that I can now better express my thoughts and feelings. | 28,8% | 29,6% | +0,9% |
| ... that I am more self-reliant now. | 28,3% | 29,0% | +0,8% |
| ... that I can deal better with conflicts. | 21,4% | 21,8% | +0,4% |
| ... that I can deal better with new situations. | 47,4% | 47,4% | +0,0% |
| ... that honestly speaking, participation in the project did not have any particular effect on me. | 9,3% | 7,7% | -1,5% |

Table 1: Pearson Chi-Square. $p \leq 0.01$ ** significant difference between groups

International youth projects are a springboard to the future

Many participants come back from an international experience with the solemn intention to dedicate **more time and effort to foreign languages** (graph 2 below). The intercultural project gave them an appetite for improving communication across borders. But such projects also help young people to decide what they want to do with their lives. They can serve as a compass to the future. For young people with fewer opportunities this is even more the case than for well-off youth. A mobility project gives YPFO a clearer idea about further education (a mean of 0,13 higher on a scale from 1 to 4) and career goals (+0,14), compared to the well-off contrast group. YPFO also consider going abroad as one of the options, more so than for privileged young people (+0,7).



Graph 2: 1=absolutely disagree, 4=absolutely agree, *** highly significant ($p \leq .001$), NS = not significant

Youth projects change people's lives

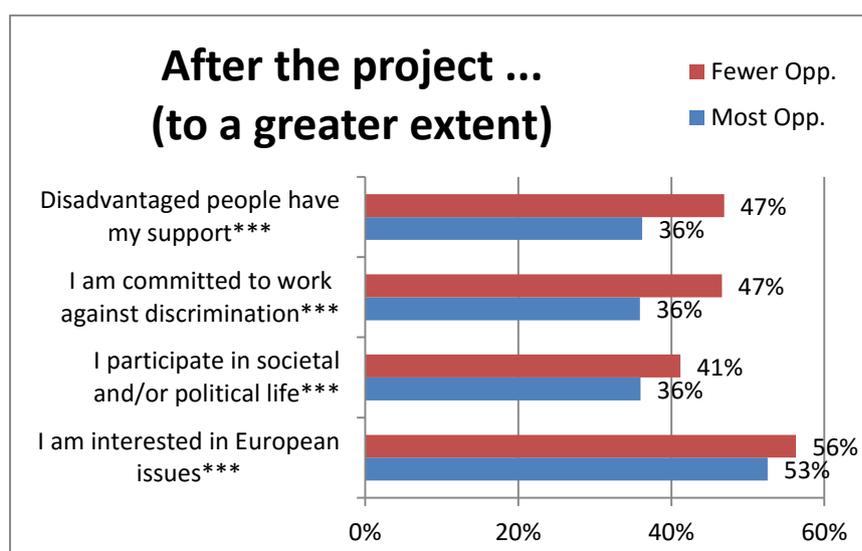
From the RAY results it is clear that international youth projects cultivate an **interest in European issues** for the majority of young people. But these projects are also beneficial to raise support for disadvantaged people or to combat discrimination. And as with the competences, more young people with fewer opportunities undergo a more positive effect during their mobility project, compared to participants with most opportunities.

Disadvantaged people more committed to fight against exclusion

And even though all the results are significantly higher for the underprivileged group, the most beneficial influence of an international youth project lies in the **support for disadvantaged people** and the **fight against discrimination, intolerance and racism** (graph 3 below). It seems that these projects increase their commitment to fight the injustice that they are most likely exposed to themselves, more so than is the case with 'well off' participants. Could this be due to a greater identification with the victims of disadvantage, discrimination and intolerance?

Young people with fewer opportunities participate... in their own way

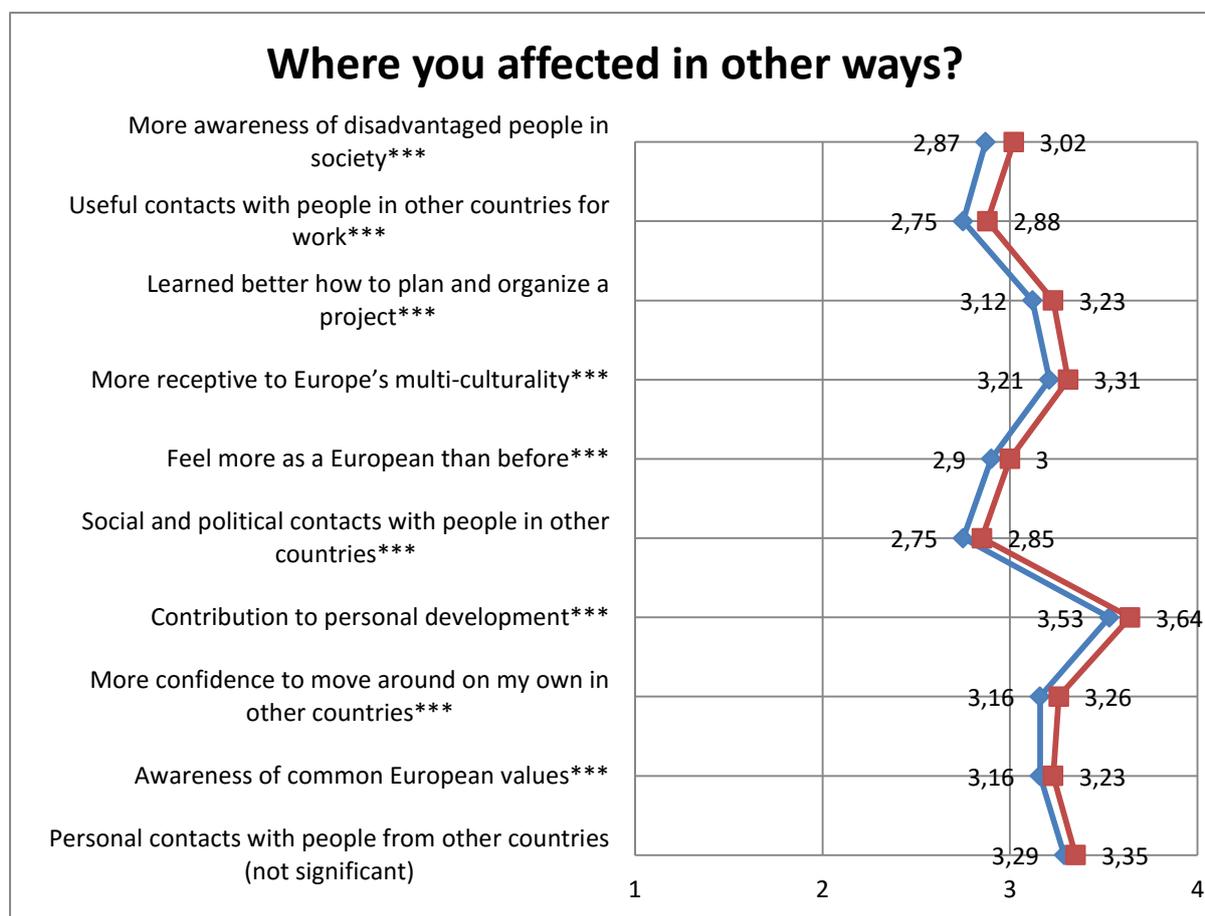
But also the declared increased **participation in political life** was a little bit stronger for young people with fewer opportunities as compared to the contrast group (5,2% more YPFO said the project influenced them 'to a greater extent'). Youth projects did raise disadvantaged young people's interest in European issues more than for well-off youth (even if only +3,7%). This is an interesting finding to feed the 'participation debate', where often policy makers complain about a lack of interest or the underrepresentation of specific (minority) groups. Could this be that non-formal methods (as used during youth projects) are more favourable for participation, as opposed to the formal political debate-style types of involvement?



Graph 3: *** highly significant ($p < .001$)

Undeniable impact in many spheres of life

When sounding out what other effects young people experienced thanks to their mobility project, it is surprising that young people with fewer opportunities are more positive than those with most opportunities. You can find the list of effects in graph 4 (below), going from raised awareness and openness to **personal and professional development**. The one thing that YPFO don't differ in compared to YPMO, is the social connection to people abroad. Both groups are equally positive about the people they got to know from the other countries.



Graph 4: 1=absolutely disagree, 4=absolutely agree, *** highly significant ($p \leq .001$)

Mobility project as an incubator of values

RAY asked former participants how their appreciation of a number of values or concepts has changed as a result of participating in an international youth project. In general, **a mobility experience reinforces the importance young people give to values** such as respect, tolerance, solidarity and many others. However, for a majority of participants, a European project only has a limited impact on their adherence to religion or rule of law.

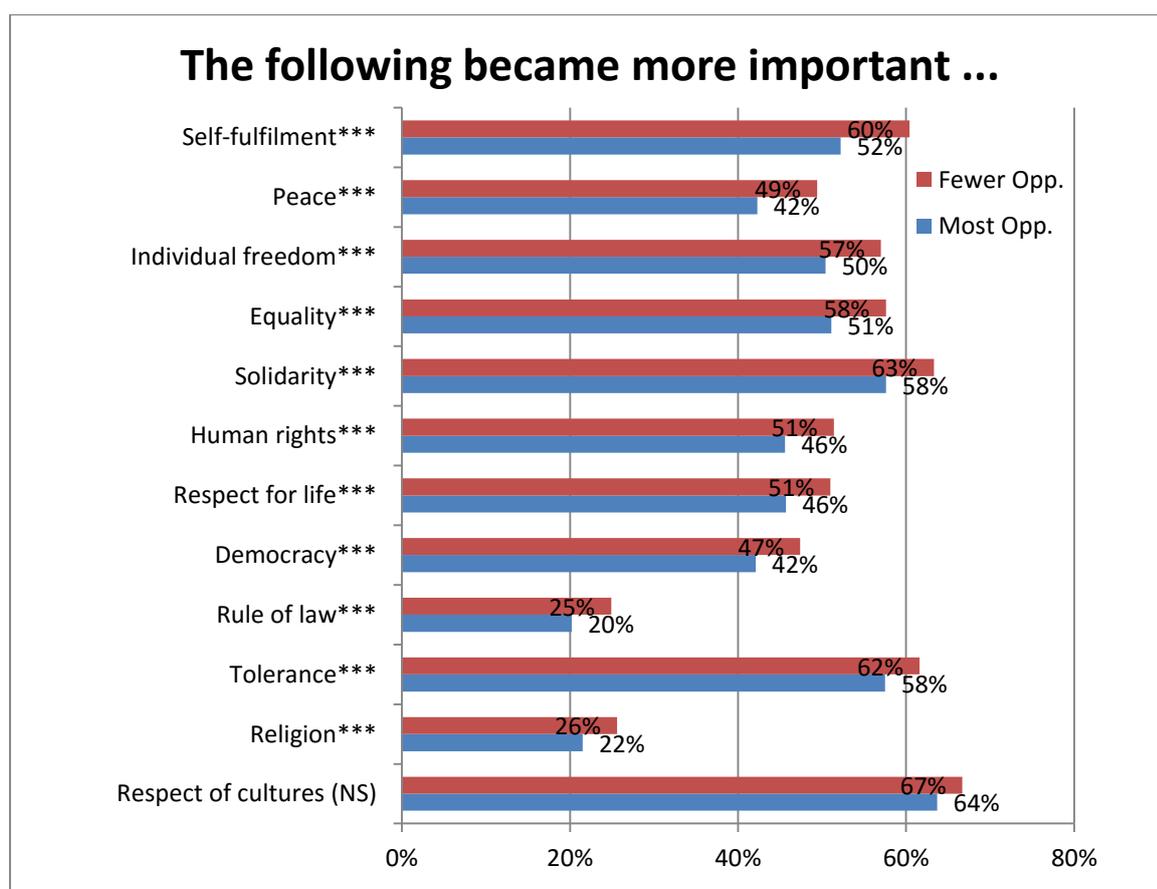
Different importance given to self-realisation

But here again, we see that international projects have a bigger impact on the values that young people with fewer opportunities cherish (or start cherishing) compared to the contrast group (graph 5 below). Self-realisation refers to becoming what one wants want to be, within the possibilities of

one's character or personality and without external coercion. It is interesting to see that the difference between YPFO and YPMO is biggest for **self-realizing values** such as **self-fulfilment** (+8,2%) and **individual freedom** (+6,6%).

Young people with high values of self-realisation are probably more motivated to get active in their lives and to take positive steps to reach their goals... The increase of these values is a boost for the group with fewer opportunities to get their lives back on track, on the track they have chosen.

The difference between the fewer-opportunities and the most-opportunities samples is non-significant regarding how the project increased their **respect for other cultures**. Mobility projects increase the perceived importance of this intercultural respect in both groups to a similar high extent.



Graph 5: *** highly significant ($p < .001$), NS=not significant

Underprivileged youth becomes more European-minded

Figures above show that young people with fewer opportunities become more interested in European issues (+3,7%), compared to their privileged counterparts, as a result of an exchange project (see graph 3 'After the project'). They indicate they feel significantly more European (a mean that is 0,10 higher on a scale from 1 to 4) and aware of common European values (+0,08 higher) compared to young people with most opportunities (see graph 4 'Where you affected in other ways?').

So, does such a European mobility project also influence their image of the European Union?

Yes, it does. The fewer-opportunity group admits, a bit more than well-off youth, that it views the EU

more positively thanks to the project (4% more YPFO say their image of the EU has become better compared to YPMO, table 2 below). This is definitely an interesting finding in the light of increasing euro-scepticism and struggles with European integration.

| Through participation in the project, my image of the European Union ... | Most Opp. | Fewer Opp. | Fewer-Most Opp. |
|--|-----------|------------|-----------------|
| ... has become worse. | 1,8% | 2,3% | +0.5% |
| ... has not changed. | 62,4% | 57,9% | -4.5% |
| ... has become better. | 35,8% | 39,8% | +4,0% |

Table 2: Pearson Chi-Square. $p \leq 0.001$ *** highly significant difference between groups

Pondering results and producing conclusions

The RAY analysis of European data indicates that international youth projects have a positive effect on participants in various fields (see www.researchyouth.net). This 'inclusion analysis' of the RAY data however focuses on the impact of mobility projects on young people with fewer opportunities, compared to those with most opportunities. Some conclusions and reflections:

1. If there is a difference in learning and impact, the young people with fewer opportunities generally indicate a **higher impact** of the mobility project than well-off youth.
 - This suggests that the return on investment in participants with fewer opportunities is higher than for project participants with most opportunities. Thus, increasing the proportion of fewer-opportunities participants would **improve the impact** of the European youth programme. At the same time this would be a beneficial investment in the personal and professional development of young people with fewer opportunities at risk of exclusion.
 - But are the answers the results of a stronger impact? Or do young people with fewer and with most opportunities have a **different way of answering questionnaires**? Are socially expected responses more frequent amongst fewer-opportunities respondents or are privileged respondents more critical?
 - The relatively higher impact on disadvantaged youth compared to privileged youth is most likely due to the different starting points. If young people with fewer opportunities enter a mobility project with fewer prior experiences and lower competences than young people who are well-off, then it is only logical that the scope for improvement and development is a lot higher.
2. Young people with fewer opportunities report that projects give them a **clearer view** of what they want to be doing in their lives, more so than young people with most opportunities.
 - This shows that international mobility projects give young people the opportunity to take some time out, away from daily business, and reflect on the options they see for them in life. Maybe these **moments of reflection** are scarcer for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds compared to well-off youth. An international project is a welcome occasion to question themselves and project themselves in the future.
 - Together with an improved 'learning to learn' competence, youth projects seem to be an efficient way to make young people with fewer opportunities **more autonomous and self-assured** for the future.
3. Mobility projects make young people with fewer opportunities **more European-minded**, compared to privileged youth, even if only a bit. The international projects also raise their

commitment to fight discrimination and intolerance more than is the case for the contrast group.

- This indicates that young people's **European identity and activism** takes shape in different ways than what politicians consider participation (e.g. voting turnout, interest in politics, debating,...). The non-formal setting of a youth project seems to be a more suitable environment for active participation (citizenship?), but then in a different format.
4. Fewer and most opportunity respondents differ most regarding their self-declared '**learning to learn**' competence.
- This seems to be an indication that an international youth project is a particularly suitable format for underprivileged youth to **stimulate future learning**. This shows the strength of non-formal learning for (certain types of) young people with fewer opportunities. The collaborative and active (and fun) learning environment seems to be more fruitful for them, more than for well-off youth.
5. The answers to the RAY impact questions differ significantly between those with fewer and those with most opportunities. So the impact **questions for which the results are not different** also become interesting. The social connection with new friends abroad is equally important for both groups, as well as the respect for other cultures.
- It is reassuring that in certain domains, young people with fewer opportunities respond **similarly to mainstream youth**. Despite statistically significant differences, the absolute differences are often relatively small. This makes young people in situations of relative disadvantage less of a separate phenomenon. Each and every young person has similar needs and deserves to get a fair share of opportunities in life.
 - The results show that with **appropriate interventions** (e.g. a mobility project, non-formal learning), young people with fewer opportunities cherish similar positive values, boast equivalent competences and can have equally bright future perspectives.



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SALTO Inclusion Resource Centre – www.salto-youth.net/InclusionResearch/

PS Also read our articles about the impact of mobility projects on different excluded groups, about the effect of thematic inclusion projects and about the collateral benefit of such mobility projects on youth work practice.