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YOUTH GUARANTEE MALTA

BEST PRACTICES FOR PROFESSIONALS WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE YOUTH GUARANTEE
PROGRAMME

FACULTY FOR SOCIAL WELLBEING
University of Malta



Youth Guarantee Malta

Best practices for professionals working with young people in the

Youth Guarantee programme

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Abbreviations

CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
EACE	Education, Audio-visual and Culture Executive Agency
MEDE	Ministry for Education and Employment
NEET	Not in education, employment or training

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1. Introduction

1.1. Objectives of the research study

Young people who stay out of education and employment for a long period of time risk going through social exclusion, dependency, feelings of powerlessness and distress (EACEA, 2013). Such situations are also linked to risk behaviours which contribute to bad health conditions and further social exclusion (Eurofound, 2012). The effects of social exclusion on the quality of life and wellbeing of young people may be various, such as possessing a lack of resources to afford good healthcare, adequate housing, quality education and training and professional therapy in cases of psychological issues, amongst others (EACEA, 2013).

Access to appropriate and good quality support and guidance is vital for socially excluded youth or youth at risk of social exclusion. In order for professionals and other people who offer front-line support to significantly reach and impact the wellbeing of such young people, there must be effective and efficient strategies, resources and practices in place. One way of enabling this is through the sharing of positive and challenging experiences of professionals with their peers (Cedefop, 2010).

The Faculty for Social Wellbeing of the University of Malta was entrusted by FSS Ltd. to conduct a research study with the aim of developing a set of best practices for professionals who work directly with youth at risk of social exclusion through the Youth Guarantee programme. The results of the research study are based on an in-depth consultation, via qualitative focus groups conducted with the protagonists of the services offered through the Youth Guarantee programme, ie. the professionals themselves. The content of this report is

based on the data collected from five focus groups conducted with the aim of gathering feedback from experienced professionals working in the Youth Guarantee programme. The focus groups' discussions delved into the challenges, successful strategies and best practices from the professionals' perspectives.

1.2. The Malta Youth Guarantee programme

The Malta Youth Guarantee programme targets young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). NEETs are considered as vulnerable youth who lack skills and experience, thus standing at a disadvantaged position in the labour market. Such a cohort risks social exclusion and other repercussions, such as long-term unemployment. Through the Youth Guarantee programme, these youth are given the opportunity to be well-prepared for further education and eventually for sustainable future employment. The overall aim of the Youth Guarantee programme is to equip such young people with the necessary skills, knowledge and experience to facilitate a smoother transition from education to employment. This is made possible through the provision of effective educational and training opportunities along with opportunities aimed at self-development and personal growth. Young people engaged in the Youth Guarantee programme are also provided with personalised assistance to overcome challenges and difficulties. The long-term targeted effects of the Youth Guarantee programme are the enhancement of the quality of life, social inclusion and integration of NEETs. The Youth Guarantee programme is based on a continuous and collaborative effort between professionals, such as psychologists and youth workers, to assist young people on a journey that brings together personal and educational development along with work exposure (MEDE, 2016).

2. Methodology

2.1 Research questions

The research questions underpinning this research study are:

1. What are the challenges that professionals face when working with young people in the Youth Guarantee programme?
2. What strategies can be used to overcome such challenges?
3. What are the critical success factors adopted within the Youth Guarantee programme?

2.2 Data gathering instruments

Data for this research study was generated by means of five (5) qualitative focus groups with professionals working with the Youth Guarantee cohort. Focus groups were held in Maltese, given that it was the preferred language by participants. The focus groups were held at a time and place that suited the largest number of participants. Each focus group followed an Interview Schedule specifically prepared for the purposes of this research study.

2.3 Gaining access

One of the most fundamental stages in most research studies is gaining access to the particular target population of the study, in this case, professionals working with the Youth Guarantee cohort. The gaining access process involves communication with gatekeepers of the relevant entities who are in direct contact with the participants. In this research study:

- The Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE) provided access to Employment Advisors, Job Coaches and Monitoring Officers (referred to as ‘professionals’ throughout the report) working in the Youth Guarantee programme;
- FSS Ltd. provided access to Profilers, Teachers and Youth Workers (referred to as ‘professionals’ throughout the report) working in the Youth Guarantee programme.

2.4 Sampling strategy

Stratified purposive sampling was utilised for this research study. This is a form of non-probability sampling where the researcher decides who is included in the sample as participants based upon particular characteristics (Patton, 2002). In this case, potential participants were chosen on the basis of their professional roles with the Youth Guarantee cohort. An invitation e-mail was sent to all Employment Advisors, Job Coaches, Monitoring Officers, Teachers, Profilers, Youth Workers and Administrators working in the Youth Guarantee programme, inviting them to participate in a one-time focus group. The invitation e-mail, containing all relevant information on the research project, was sent to thirty-one (31) potential participants.

2.5 Fieldwork

Subject to the participants’ positive response to the invitation e-mail, twenty-one (21) participants participated in the focus groups. The first four focus groups were conducted at the Catholic Institute in Floriana on days and time that best suited most participants.

However, the last focus group was conducted at the University of Malta since the location was the most convenient to bring all participants together.

2.6 Data analysis

The qualitative data collected via the five (5) focus groups was analysed using thematic analysis to identify relevant thematic concepts and / or categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method of analysis consists of identifying salient patterns of themes within the qualitative data that has been collected, whilst interpreting such themes in light of the research questions at hand (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

2.7 Ethical considerations

Participants were provided with all necessary and true information about the research study. Prior to the focus group sessions, the participants were presented with a recruitment letter and a consent form which included information on the nature and scope of the research study and also the intended use of the data and results of the study. The participants were also informed about the voluntary nature of their participation, while promising and anonymity. With regard to the General Data Protection Regulations, the participants were informed that they have the right to access, modify or erase any and all data that concerns them personally. Participants were reassured that all data will be kept in a secure place and that only the research team will have access to the raw data. The participants were also informed that all data relating to them will be destroyed in 2022.

2.8 Potential shortcomings and mitigating measures

2.8.1 Response rate

The research design of this study included a number of measures to maximise response rate. Most importantly, participation was anonymous. English and Maltese versions of the tools were made available for participants to choose from. Furthermore, all tools were formulated in an informative manner. Finally, further to the participants' positive response to the invitation letter, inviting them to participate in the research study, all efforts were made to accommodate the participants' busy schedules when planning the focus groups' dates, time and venues.

2.8.2 Quality control

Before the initiation of the focus group sessions, participants were given clear instructions, through the research tools and also through a verbal explanation by the research team, with the intention of lessening any varied interpretations. During the focus groups sessions, efforts were made by the research team to see that participants are comfortable and that all information and instructions are understood.

3. Results

This section is comprised of a presentation of the data analysis results derived from the five focus groups conducted with professionals working with young persons participating in the Youth Guarantee programme. The following sub-sections address each of the research questions mentioned in the Methodology section above.

3.1. What are the challenges that professionals face when working with young people in the Youth Guarantee programme?

3.1.1. Combining different personalities, backgrounds and experiences

Due to the nature of the Youth Guarantee programme and its targeted cohort, young people in the programme often have financial, psychological, intellectual, educational, addiction, behavioural and/or other background issues that are brought along into the programme. Young people participating in the Youth Guarantee programme have different personalities, different backgrounds and have been through a wide range of experiences. There are cases where youth may be passive and not independent and there might also be sub-groups within the same group of young people. Nevertheless, professionals working in the programme, such as Youth workers and Tutors must combine and work with all youth in the same group.

3.1.2. Lack of cooperation and collaboration

One of the major challenges highlighted by participants during the focus group sessions was the lack of cooperation and collaboration amongst the different parties involved in the Youth

Guarantee programme, such as the MEDE, FSS Ltd., employers, professionals, the young persons and their families. Even though the fact that the young persons are in touch with a number of professionals during the duration of the Youth Guarantee programme is vital from a holistic approach, this would also mean that the young persons would need to share and repeat their story, background and past experience a number of times. Moreover, the lack of collaboration between the different entities involved may result in the aim of the Youth Guarantee programme not being clear enough for the young persons and this may have negative effects on the youth's motivation.

Furthermore, not all parents of the Youth Guarantee cohort offer the necessary encouragement to their children. This and the lack of cooperation from the parents act as further barriers for communication and collaboration throughout the Youth Guarantee programme.

3.1.3. Employers

Professionals also lack effective cooperation and collaboration from employers. Focus group participants continuously emphasised the importance of having well-meaning and understanding employers participating in the Youth Guarantee programme. Participants also note the importance of the programme not being used by employers for their own needs and exigencies. Therefore, professionals insist that there must be a system in place that thoroughly scrutinises and continuously monitors employers/companies acting as employers for the young people within the Youth Guarantee programme. The programme must ensure that employers do not exploit and further stigmatise the youth.

Furthermore, employers sometimes restrict the sharing of information on the youth's progress and are sceptical of giving out information to professionals. Building a good relationship with the employer would also work well for the young person. Nevertheless, it is also vital that the employers' perspectives, needs and interests are taken into consideration as well. On the other hand, professionals praised particular employers who take the initiative of noticing good attributes within young people and decide to engage them permanently.

The role of the employer is crucial within the Youth Guarantee programme. Accordingly, professionals also recommend that employers meet with the young persons prior to the start date of their placement and that the employer stipulates what will be offered to the young person. Professionals also suggest that employers are informed about the young person's situation, such as the lack of experience, specific needs and limitations and other issues that are worth highlighting. In this way, employers are well prepared, and their expectations remain realistic.

3.1.4. Commitment

The young participants may not always be committed and cooperative and this can have negative impacts on their relationship with the participating employer. However, commitment is also vital from the professionals' end. During the focus groups, some professional participants voiced their concern over the fact that the Youth Guarantee programme does not have its own group of resident tutors. As a result, tutors provide their services on a part-time basis in the evenings whereas ideally a group of full-time tutors are specifically employed with the Youth Guarantee programme and can conduct the sessions in the morning.

3.2. What strategies can be used to overcome such challenges?

3.2.1. Communication

‘Communication’ was the most commonly used word when professionals participating in the focus group sessions were asked about the way the above-mentioned challenges may be addressed and overcome. Continuous communication amongst all the parties involved, such as the MEDE, FSS Ltd., the employers, professionals, the young persons and their families, seems to be the key strategy to overcome the main challenges encountered by the stakeholders of the Youth Guarantee programme.

3.2.2. Adaptation

The individuality and particularity of the young persons’ situations calls for continuous adaptation of sessions and meetings with youth. Being creative and utilising innovative methods for delivering a message rather than traditional methods is crucial for the Youth Guarantee professional. Professionals claim that using activity-based methods works very well with low-motivated youth. Furthermore, in cases of low motivation, professionals need to continuously guide and push the young people forward. Professionals, particularly tutors, find it useful to use the Youth Guarantee curriculum as a guide, gauge the mood of the group and then adapt the sessions accordingly. The Youth Guarantee professionals also suggest having access to a common reservoir of resources¹ which is continuously topped up with material and ideas by the professionals themselves.

¹ See http://actforyouth.net/youth_development/professionals/manual.cfm

3.2.3. Revising the programme

Professionals participating in the focus group sessions stressed the need to revise the Youth Guarantee programme. For instance, the profiling questions need not be too personal and intrusive, considering the aim of the Youth Guarantee programme. Instead, more emphasis should be put on the young people's talents and aspirations, while including a social element. Thus, the profiling system should not only be used to categorise youth into different groups. Even though a number of professionals claim that there is a good profiling system in place, others are concerned by the fact that different categories of youth (externalising; normative; and internalising) are grouped together due to a lack of youth attendees. Furthermore, other professionals also note that the categorisation of young people into the different groups may also act as a source of labelling and stigma within the programme itself.

In order to target the issue of commitment from the young persons' end, professionals suggest a modification in the way the young person receives payment during the programme. Professionals claim that by receiving a payslip every session, youth may be able to understand the scope of sessions in a more tangible way and have an initiative to attend the sessions. It would also be a good idea to make course sessions shorter in time as professionals claim that youth do not stay focused during long sessions. Professionals also believe that as it is, the programme is too crammed up and as a result very often youth workers do not have enough time to meet with the young people as much as needed. With regard to the placement, professionals insist that twelve (12) weeks are not enough for the young persons to gain enough work experience. It sometimes also takes a long time for psychologists to see youth when this is necessary.

Finally, it is crucial for the aim of the programme to be reached, to ensure that a placement is found for each young person by the end of the programme. Furthermore, some of the employment posts offered by the employers for the job exposure placement are not attractive to youth. The professionals urge the Youth Guarantee programme to strive for more appealing posts from employers so that the job exposure experience will be a motivating and enriching one for the young people.

3.3. What are the critical success factors adopted within the Youth Guarantee programme?

Planning for sessions with the young persons in the Youth Guarantee programme is an important aspect for professionals. However, professionals also insist on the good practice of securing an adequate amount of time for dealing with underlying issues that might feature throughout the programme. Professionals also highlighted the success of using different and unconventional methods to deliver the course content. The nature of the Youth Guarantee programme is hands-on rather than based on formal education, which is generally well-received by the participating youth. Due attention is also given to basic life skills, explaining the basics of education such as punctuality and saying 'Please' and 'Thank you', thereby attempting to create a work environment during the session. The work environment is sometimes further enhanced through the use of role-play during sessions. Professionals claim that basic sessions on the self, during which youth can get in touch with themselves, work very well with the Youth Guarantee cohort.

Empowering young people and giving them different responsibilities works better than imposing roles with the Youth Guarantee cohort. Above all, young people in the

programme need to be listened to and given the chance to open up without being forced to do so. In cases of youth with a lack of commitment, professionals find it beneficial to present a variety of options to the young person. Finally, professionals insist on the importance of following feedback on youth and referring youth to other professionals when needed.

4. Interpretation and reporting of research results

4.1. Who is the young person in the Youth Guarantee programme?

As explained above, due to the targeted cohort of the Youth Guarantee programme, it is common that the young persons involved in the programme are in difficult situations due to various reasons such as vulnerability, experiences of labelling and exclusion by the system, having a lack of guidance and past experiences of stress and bullying, amongst other reasons.

Furthermore, all young persons are different. Some may have low self-esteem and lack aspirations. Others may be mature and capable with high aspirations but cannot develop further due to financial constraints. Some may have high expectations and make particular demands, such as the desire to find employment close to home. Others may lack an educational and/or a social background that is conducive to engaging in stable employment. Whatever the case, the young person should be guided to the right place of work from the beginning of the Youth Guarantee programme. Professionals would then need to adapt their approach and the sessions' content according to what the particular youth are working on or going through in their personal lives and also on their placement. This shows the importance of including all professionals involved from the beginning of the youth's journey in the Youth Guarantee programme.

4.2. Keeping the young person in the loop

The young person has the right to be kept in the loop throughout the Youth Guarantee programme. It is vital for the youth to understand the aim of the programme from the very beginning. Youth should be briefed before attending the profiling session to know what they

are there for. Moreover, it is also important for the youth to be aware of the situation as from the initiation of the programme, that is, that the employer providing their placement may or may not offer them employment at the end of the placement. It would also be a good idea for the youth to be aware of the feedback from the employers of their placement. This requires continuous communication and consultation amongst the different professionals, so that they are aware of the situation and are thus able to explain the situation to the young people.

4.3. We are all in this together: the importance of collaboration and cooperation

Collaboration and cooperation amongst the different entities and organisations involved in the Youth Guarantee programme is crucial for creating a sense of continuum of services for the young persons, wherein the latter would not need to repeat their story at every stage of the programme. Furthermore, collaboration and cooperation amongst the different entities will also help to combine the right employers and youth before the placement is settled. If professionals are given constructive feedback from employers, they can then work on particular difficulties, such as a lack of confidence, with the young persons. On the other hand, professionals may give tips and feedback to the employers in relation to the youth's particular situation. Some professionals suggest a file for each young person that is shared with the professionals involved. Nevertheless, there needs to be a balance between the sharing of information and confidentiality.

Professionals would also do well to share good practices and resources they find useful and effective with the targeted cohort. Multi-disciplinary team meetings, including different

professionals in the Youth Guarantee programme should also be held as soon as a young person is assigned to a group of professionals, wherein professionals discuss current challenges and clear out any misconceptions about the different roles each professional has vis-à-vis the young person, for instance who shall be the professional to refer the youth to a psychologist if the need arises.

4.4. The role of parents

During the Youth Guarantee programme, parents are involved at the profiling stage, since the programme takes the young person's social ties into consideration. Nevertheless, even though each case is different, some parents of the Youth Guarantee cohort may be in denial of their children's situation. On the other hand, other parents may exert an excessive amount of control over their children. Telling the parents to "stay out" (of sessions) might not work in every case. Professionals shared examples of how to deal with such situations. For instance, the professional may tell the parent that the young person needs to prepare for an interview scenario. However, this might work better if the parents are convinced that they can trust the Youth Guarantee professionals. Thus, gaining trust with the young persons and their parents should be one of the first tasks of the professionals working with the Youth Guarantee cohort. Nevertheless, it is appreciated that building trust may take some time.

4.5. Taking care of ourselves

Successful professionals in the Youth Guarantee programme are ready to go out of their way and take on more than one role throughout the programme to assist the young people.

However, professionals must also be physically and psychologically protected, through support and cohesion from the involved entities and also through organised supervision in the form of individual and group therapy sessions. Professionals participating in the focus groups also recommended that professionals do not meet with young persons at the latter's home but instead at public places. This is recommended for the professionals' own safety and also to instigate a sense of independence within the young person.

4.6. Making the Youth Guarantee programme a sustainable one

Empowering youth to set their own goals to attain from one session to another helps to motivate youth throughout and beyond the programme. Furthermore, working on closure with the young person in the Youth Guarantee programme might not stop at the end of the programme. The young person might not be offered employment beyond the programme, since employers are not obliged to provide employment to the youth beyond their placement. Thus, youth would require further support from the Youth Guarantee professionals, since while retaining employment beyond the programme has positive effects on the young persons' self-esteem, not being offered employment may have negative effects. Therefore, youth must be made aware of the fact that they may not be engaged in the same employment once the placement is over as from the beginning of the programme. That way, youth will not put their hopes too high and will not be demotivated if they are informed that their post will not be retained. Moreover, having follow-up meetings between the young person and all involved professionals after the programme is over is also considered as a potential good practice by professionals. Furthermore, young people may not be in a situation wherein they can pay to continue personal therapy beyond the Youth Guarantee programme due to a lack

of finances. In such cases, professionals may advise the young people to join group therapy instead or refer them to any free therapy services that they can make use of.

5. Best practices

This section is comprised of a list of main best practices for professionals working with young people participating in the Youth Guarantee programme. The list of best practices derives from the data analysis results presented above.

5.1 Do not assume that all participating youth have already learned basic life skills

Some youth may have had experiences of interrupted schooling (Carol H., 2013) or have lacked direct life experiences which help to acquire basic life skills (British Council, 2019). It is therefore important that professionals are mindful of this, by taking the time to understand each young person's existing skills and knowledge and adapting their training programmes accordingly.

5.2 Tailor sessions that combine and include all participating youth

Each young person is unique and has been through a particular journey. Approach these young persons with an open heart and mind for a healthy and effective learning and working environment (Carol H, 2013).

5.3 Be creative

Creativity is known to engage the mind, enables alternative ways of thinking and frees the mind in such a way that enables the young person to absorb knowledge more easily and effectively. When using creative methods and different learning styles, youth are not

passively listening but instead they explore, discover and communicate. Creativity can support young people to be more active as members of the community (Carson, 2019).

5.4 Offer guidance and support to youth

Youth face a number of choices and options and this could be overwhelming for them (Cedefop, 2010). While it is beneficial for young people to be free to choose, they also want and need a framework offering guidance and support (Stokes, 2000). This might not stop at the end of the young person's Youth Guarantee programme. It would be good to have follow-up meetings between the young person and all involved professionals after the programme is over.

5.5 Empower the young person

Empowering youth is a process wherein young people are encouraged and motivated to take the lead in their own lives. One way of fostering leadership qualities in youth is to give them different responsibilities and help them set their own goals (Curtis, 2008) while keeping them in the loop with regard to their performance in the programme.

5.6 Listen to the young person

Young people have the right to express their ideas and feelings without being judged. Some young persons may feel that they cannot talk to their parents or other adults in their life because the adults will not understand. When a young person tries to open up, be patient,

show interest and respect, allow silences and seek help from other professionals if needed (NAPCAN, 2010).

5.7 Refer youth to other professionals when needed

Working in interdisciplinary teams enables the possibility to refer young people to other professionals when necessary (Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ, 2016) and to follow feedback and advice from such professionals.

5.8 Be committed

The value of commitment is one of the main values that underpins good and strong relationships. Professionals who are committed go out of their way and do their very best, even outside their comfort zones (People Builders, 2019).

5.9 Communicate, cooperate and collaborate with all parties involved

Communication, cooperation and collaboration are the three (3) C's for success. Communication is based on one's capability to exchange information; cooperation is one's ability to work in a group for a common goal; and collaboration is one's ability to work with other persons to create something (Vaughn-Furlow, 2017).

5.10 Develop positive relationships with parents

Developing positive relationships with parents of participating youth helps the young person's learning and development. Communicate your intention of helping the young person develop and succeed. Mistrust can make it hard for the young persons and their parents to adapt to the system (Carol H., 2013).

5.11 Build good relationships with the participating employers

Building and sustaining good and strong relationships across the collaborating entities of the Youth Guarantee programme, such as with participating employers, that is based on trust and confidence is the key to collaborative success (Community Door, n.d.).

5.12 Share resources and good practices with your colleagues

Sharing resources and ideas, and learning from one another's best practices are other basic values for success. Moreover, when sharing what one knows and what one has learned, one will allow him/herself to process own experiences while helping oneself and others gain fresh perspectives and avoid future pitfalls (Sieczka, 2014).

5.13 Seek professional support

Professional supervision offers professionals the opportunity to engage in a reflective process on work practices in a supportive space. Supervision is based on learning from experience

and reflective practice and aims to support professionals identify solutions, improve practice and understand professional issues better (Jenkinson, 2010).

6. Limitations of the study

The research team lists the following limitations of the research study:

1. Had it been possible, the research team would have opted for one-to-one in-depth interviews with a sample of professionals rather than focus groups. This is because the focus group methodology has its own limitations, such as the common tendency for socially accepted views to emerge and for particular participants to take a dominant lead (Smithson, 2000). Nevertheless, the research team has taken all the necessary measures to reduce such limitations, for instance, through the way the focus groups were moderated and by keeping these limitations in mind while analysing the data;
2. The initial plan was to group participating professionals according to their specific roles for the purposes of the focus groups. However, there were two occasions when, due to difficulties in combining participants with the same role in the same focus group because of the lack of availability and also due to the limited period of time stipulated for the research study, focus groups were comprised of a mixture of professionals, including superiors of the same professionals and other members of the management. Even though having a combination of participants with different roles and backgrounds in the same focus group may act as a positive facilitator for an insightful discussion, professionals may have not felt completely free to discuss particular issues in the presence of their superiors and vice versa;
3. Even though the protagonists of this research study are the professionals working in the Youth Guarantee programme, the main protagonists of the programme are the

young people themselves. Unfortunately, this research study was not able to consult the young persons participating in the Youth Guarantee programme. Further research would do well to delve deeper into the young persons' experiences in the Youth Guarantee programme.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this research study was to develop a set of best practices for professionals who work directly with youth at risk of social exclusion through the Youth Guarantee programme. The above results, based on data deriving from focus groups conducted with professionals involved in the Youth Guarantee programme, illustrate a number of challenges faced by professionals such as dealing with different personalities, backgrounds and experiences in the same group of youth and dealing with a lack of cooperation, collaboration and commitment amongst the different parties involved. The above report also delved into successful strategies and good practices to overcome and prevent possible challenges, such as communication, adaptation and revising certain aspects of the Youth Guarantee programme.

In conclusion, professionals working with the Youth Guarantee cohort are to approach youth and their different situations with an open frame of mind. Building strong relationships with all involved parties is pivotal for professionals within the Youth Guarantee programme. Furthermore, communication, cooperation and collaboration must be at the base of such relationships for continuous reflection and monitoring of practices. Apart from this, professionals are to take care of their own selves, both personally and professionally.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is to balance the needs of all the parties involved in the Youth Guarantee programme. Nevertheless, the young person participating in the programme must remain at the centre of the network of involved entities. The latter are to understand the young persons and involve them throughout the programme with the intention of providing a positive and sustainable experience for the participating youth.

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