# Annex 6: Focus groups report

## A1. Method

Focus groups are an effective way of getting a group of participants to share thoughts, feelings, attitudes and ideas on EU materials and activities targeting young people. In this instance, the focus groups were set up to explore the results of the survey amongst users in Member States, as well as to gain personal views on the EU in general and EC materials specifically in more detail.

Focus groups have enabled us to gauge to what extent the target groups already engage with EC youth materials, as well as the reasons why young people may not engage with particular materials. Overall, this exercise has been useful to assess the attractiveness of the materials (and their different formats) targeting youth in a more in-depth way than other data collection methods. The focus groups have allowed us to further explore differences in opinions across Member States, although the findings are not generalisable given the small sample size.

The groups addressed some of the strategic questions on relevance and effectiveness of EC materials in particular. First, the focus groups have provided insights into how relevant the EC materials are for youth groups in terms of anticipating their needs and enabling them to find relevant information about the EU and how it can provide them with opportunities.

Secondly, in terms of the effectiveness of the materials, the focus groups have helped us explore to what extent the materials are effective in achieving their objectives of reaching and engaging with their target audience and delivering their intended outcomes and impacts. The groups have also contributed to better understanding on whether materials should be produced in consultation with youth to develop a feeling of “owning” the content. Specifically, the groups have informed us of why particular EC materials are particularly effective or fail to meet needs of young people or in engaging with the young audiences and how they can be improved and the extent to which online materials vs. offline materials are more or less attractive and effective in engaging youth.

In addition to this, the results of the focus groups have also contributed to inform the assessment of the perceived EU added value of EC materials, their production and distribution, and explore how this could be maximised in the future. Specifically, the focus groups will also be used to explore:

### A1.1 Organisation and Composition of the Focus Groups

Ecorys organised three different focus groups that were held with different age groups on the 25th and the 26th of June 2018. The three focus groups were divided by the following age groups: 15-19 year-olds, 20-24 year-olds, and lastly 25-29 year-olds.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The participants were sampled through the use of social media. Ecorys posted invitation messages on different Facebook groups of youth living in Brussels, targeting groups such as student exchanges, foreigners living in Brussels and youth organisations. The youngest group was held in an international school in Brussels while the other two groups were held in the Ecorys office in Brussels after working hours to increase attendance of young professionals. All groups lasted 1.5 hours.

The groups covered various MS nationalities: British, Italian, Spanish, Belgian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Irish, Swedish, Cypriot, Portuguese and Hungarian. The 15-19 year old group had ten participants (five female), the 20-24 year old had six participants (five female) and the 25-29 year old had 12 participants (seven female). The low male participation in the 20-24 year old group was due to two male participants cancelling on the day of the group. The groups also included a mix of more engaged young people who had higher levels of awareness about what the EU is and does and less engaged and informed people. The distribution of engagement showed that the younger participants (15-19 years old) were the least engaged and aware.

### A1.2 Content of the focus groups

The discussion guides for each of the three focus groups were designed by the Research team, based on the draft included in the Inception report. These three guides were tailored by focus group in terms of language to adapt to the different age groups, as well as to the material that was being assessed.

The discussions explored their thoughts and opinions about the EU in general, before proceeding to collect their views on selected key EC communication materials. The structure for the group discussion was:

*General perceptions of the EU, what it stands for and how it communications*

* Explore views and opinions of the European Union more generally
* Explore the youth’s concerns, needs, levels of information and motivation more generally

*Explore young people’s expectations regarding EC communication*

* Outreach of EC material: Awareness and effectiveness in communication- explored generally
* Discussion of EC communications materials potentially seen by participants
* Discussion of whether the EC material addresses their needs and priorities. If yes or no, why/why not and how could the EC materials better address their needs

*Content offer- examine users’ opinions through examples of EC materials*

* Discussion of how relevant/useful the materials are for them and how well they address their needs (e.g. if materials cover all relevant topics) and if participants like the material and why
* Enquire how participants think materials can be improved to be more relevant for them
* Enquire if and where participants have /may have seen the materials and where they would like to see them in the future (EC website, social media, billboards, etc.)
* If participants haven’t seen any materials, discuss how their reach can be improved and how materials can be made easier to find
* Discussion on whether the discussion has changed their ideas about the EU
* Discuss which of the materials used the participants enjoyed using the most for learning about the EU.

*Role of target audiences in improving materials and recommendations*

* Discussion of potential ways to improve communications material and what type of content they would like to see more/less
* Discussion of the role youth can take in helping the EC improve their communications and if they would be interested in further promoting the material they have contributed to
* Enquire whether participants would share the messages in the materials with their friends.

Each focus group followed a predefined methodology, encouraging both personal viewpoints and group discussions. The contributions of each member were systematically recorded and written up internally to allow for the categorisation of responses and reactions by age and sub-segment.

### A1.3 Materials used in the focus groups

An initial list of potential materials to evaluate in the focus groups was selected by using the findings from the mapping exercise, the scoping interviews, the stakeholder interviews and the initial findings from the user survey. Several selection criteria were considered for the choice of materials. A finalised list was selected consisting of between five and seven materials per group based on how well the content and formats of the materials helped the flow of the groups. Assessment of EC ‘activities’ was excluded as they could not be recreated during the focus groups.

The selection of materials for each group included a mix of online and offline materials, with a varying degree of interactivity (paper, audio-visual, games, etc.). Each group had a selection of two materials targeting youth more generally and three more specific materials targeting the specific age segment of each group, based on the mapping exercised finalised during the interim stage.

We mostly included materials of well-known EC initiatives such as, for example, Erasmus+, as well as newer initiatives such as the European Solidarity Corps to explore the extent participating youth is aware of these brands and willing to engage in these initiatives considering their own history of engagement. Smaller initiatives have also been included as the perception that youth has of them is also relevant in terms of finding the best communication approach.

All materials shown during the groups were in English. Materials that have been discontinued were excluded from the selection.

The final list of materials used by group is reflected in the table below.

**Table A1.1: Suggested materials to use in the focus groups**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Name | Author | Online and/or offline | Type of material |
| **Focus group with 15-19 year olds** | | | |
| European Solidarity Corps | DG EAC | Offline | General communications materials in brochure |
| Travelling in Europe | DG COMM | Offline | Paper publication and PDF |
| Cinema advertisement: short film (#EUEducationEmpowers) | DG COMM | Online | Video |
| #EUEducationEmpowers campaign: social media: Facebook and Twitter (DG ECHO accounts) | DG COMM | Online | Social media |
| European Solidarity Corps | DG EAC | Online | Video |
| European Day of Languages - educational tools | DG EAC | Online | Interactive tool |
| **Focus group with 20-24 year olds** | | | |
| Erasmus+ 30 years | DG EAC | Offline | Leaflet |
| Come to Study or Teach in Europe | DG EAC | Offline | Brochure |
| Faces2Hearts campaign | DG DEVCO | Online | Online contest |
| Cinema advertisement: short film (#EUEducationEmpowers) | DG COMM | Online | Video |
| #EUEducationEmpowers campaign: social media: Facebook and Twitter (DG ECHO accounts) | DG COMM | Online | Social media |
| EU Career Student Ambassador | EPSO | Online | Website |
| **Focus group with 25-29 year olds** | | | |
| European Solidarity Corps | DG EAC | Offline | General communications materials in brochure |
| Come to Study or Teach in Europe | DG EAC | Offline | Brochure |
| Your First Eures job/drop'in | DG EMPL | Online | Website |
| European Youth Portal | DG EAC | Online | Website |
| Young Europeans | ESTAT | Online | Online data visualisation tool |
| European Solidarity Corps | DG EAC | Online | Video |

Amongst the materials presented in online format, the focus group facilitator used a projector to show the materials on a screen and discuss them afterwards. These materials included different formats such as going on a website and discussing its format and content or watching a video and discussing its format and content while comparing it to other materials.

It is worth noting that a few materials were used in all three groups for comparative purposes. These included a brochure explaining the European Solidarity Corps as well as European Solidarity Corps videos of volunteering experiences available on the website. Other materials that were shown in more than one group included “Come to study or work in Europe” as a print material and the #EUEducationEmpowers promotional video showed in cinemas.

## A2. Findings from the Focus groups

### A2.1 Relevance

**1. To what extent are the EC materials relevant for their anticipated target audiences and in light of policy priorities of the Commission and its various services?**

**1.a. To what extent are the EC materials relevant for the needs of their anticipated target audiences and allow them to find relevant information about the EU, its benefits and opportunities? (specific to material)**

In order to explore the relevance of EC materials for youth, researchers explored the degree of engagement with the EU and the knowledge of EU related materials in the focus groups. The groups showed that, despite having a clear idea on what the EU is and what it means for them, participants were often not familiar with most communications materials we presented or could rarely recall any other materials.

The facilitator opened the focus groups asking participants about their general perceptions on the EU and what the EU means for them. Some of the elements that were mentioned across all groups were freedom of movement, traveling and free trade. The more engaged participants could mention more specific elements such as specific institutions, values or initiatives that the EU is involved in. For instance, when asked, the participants in the group aged between 20-24, who were considerably engaged, mentioned cooperation and stability, increased regulation, negotiation of problems between member states and cultural diversity.

When prompted about what the EU “does for them”, the youngest group did not have a clear idea in what to answer. While the group aged between 20-24 mentioned things like the EU providing jobs and opportunities to move and study or work abroad.

“*I didn’t know that the EU did anything for me*”.

Female participant aged between 15-19

The 25-29 aged participants had a fairly big divide between engaged participants and less engaged participants. The engaged ones mentioned the importance of the EU repeatedly and were aware of several campaigns, whereas the rest were not familiar with the campaigns. It is worth mentioning that overall there was an agreement amongst engaged participants that what is most relevant for them is to know about the opportunities that the EU provides them. The less engaged ones are less demanding and stated they would already be happy if they knew what it is that the EU does.

Engaged youth were more familiar than the rest and some participants mentioned they were familiar with websites such as **Erasmus+, the European Youth Portal or the EPSO website**. However, some participants claimed that even when they were looking for specific information, they either struggled to find it or were unsure on where the information would be available.

In addition to this, amongst those engaged participants, hardly any participants were familiar with any EC communications campaigns, although they were familiar with DGs.

In terms of outreach, the group with participants aged between 15-19 showed that awareness of campaigns and outreach with that age group was very low. Participants mentioned that the best way to reach them and inform them would be through school as well as social media, but that they hardly ever came across any EU related content. Other groups were better informed and had been reached, often through university as students or online when looking up opportunities to travel, study or work.

Once participants in the focus groups had been shown a series of different materials in different formats and become slightly more familiar with what the EC does in terms of communications, they were asked about whether the content of the materials was useful for them. This varied significantly across age groups. The most engaged participants thought that most materials were relevant, but this often depended on the clarity of the message.

For the least engaged, once they saw the materials, they had a similar opinion of specific materials as the more engaged group had (this is, they all seemed fairly relevant as long as the content was clear), but were generally more interested and positive on whether their information needs were covered now since they were initially less informed.

The material that came across the best in all three groups were the **European Solidarity Corps videos** showing the experiences of individuals who volunteered through the programme. All groups had participants who were interested in the content because they were considering volunteering. In addition to this, they also found the format engaging. In addition to this, they were all surprised by the quality of the format and thought that the video was very meaningful and well produced, with less critical comments than for any other group.

Overall, the idea that content and format are intertwined and that one depends on the other was shared by most participants in all groups.

### A2.2 Effectiveness

**3. To what extent do the EC material reach out efficiently to its youth target group and its sub-segments? (specific to material)**

**3.a. To what extent is the material effective in connecting with them?**

During the focus group discussions, the researchers found that for young people there are many different dimension to consider before assessing whether a material is effective in connecting with them. Some of the recurring elements that came up throughout the groups were the clarity of the message and how engaging the material is. The way each one of these elements is examined and considered by users, in this case young people, depends on the format the material is in and whether it is online or offline and the content of the material.

#### Clarity

First, one of the main findings of the groups is the shared understanding by most participants that the effectiveness of a material in connecting with them depends on whether a communications material has a clear objective and if this is reflected in the message, which in turn have to be understood by the viewer. In this sense, most participants appreciated less the materials that came across as purely promotional and lacking a clear message. Examples of this are the **#EUEducationEmpowers** advertisement used in cinemas and the leaflet promoting the **Erasmus+ 30 year anniversary**.

Despite the format of both materials being accepted by the participants and found adequate for what they seem to try to transmit, the lack of clarity of what the objective of the material is makes them more critical of the material and less effective in connecting with them. For instance, the **Erasmus+ 30 year anniversary** leaflet was described in the 20-24 year-old group as either promotional, informative, showing the benefits of the programme or commemorative, but fails to show one objective clearly to make the material relevant.

“*I like the visuals and pictures, but the content is unclear on what it aims to achieve- is it to commemorate E+, show the benefits… Need to combine quality information that is presented in a clear way with a good design.”*

Female participant in the 20-24 focus group

In terms of print, **Come to Study and Work in Europe** was seen as a bad example of a print material for most participants as it looked too institutional, vintage, not engaging enough and not clear in its content.

This perception was shared by the 15-19 year old group when they saw the **#EUEducationEmpowers** advertisement that some of them labelled as lacking content and a clear message while only using emotional music. Only one participant in the 20-24 year-old group appeared to find the video engaging and considered that it was a good format to share in a cinema and that it was justified for it to be “over dramatic”.

#### Engagement

In terms of what materials were considered as most engaging, the preferred material by all groups were the **European Solidarity Corps videos** that share experiences of volunteers. The format appealed to all age groups and the quality of the production, of the content and the length were considered appropriate by most participants. They particularly liked the length of the video, and the personal stories conveyed across the different clips.

*“I really loved it and was impressed with the visuals and how it is filmed. EU spots are usually a bit old school and this one really spoke to me. I think it will be inspiring for a lot of people.”*

Female participant in the 20-24 focus group

Overall, all participants had a preference for online materials and did not highlight offline materials as the most engaging, although some of the older participants understood their importance in terms of outreach. One participant in the 25-29 focus group noted that in her country schools are not yet all equipped with computers and tablets nor the young people with smart phones so she particularly underlined the importance of disseminating printed materials. She shared that she had received a flyer on Erasmus+ while in school and that this inspired her to engage in a mobility scheme during her studies. She subsequently mentioned that this triggered her continued mobility following the completion of her studies, highlighting the impact of the flyer on her life.

Some of the ways highlighted by participants as to how materials can be made more engaging varied from group to group. The youngest group wanted to see more promotional sponsored content on social media (Instagram and Twitter) that would catch their attention and incite them to look up more information. Notably, the youngest age group mentioned that they do not use Facebook, so if the Commission wants to reach them they would need to focus their efforts on newer media outlets such as Instagram. Increasing social media outreach was also noted as important by some participants in the 20-24 groups when seeing the Faces2Hearts Campaign:

*“It’s such an old format. It looks like old blogging. I don’t understand why it isn’t introduced through a video on Instagram. I wouldn’t read the blog straight away.”*

Female participant in the 20-24 focus group

Notably, the 20-24 focus group shared a clear appreciation for a recently launched DG REGIO campaign named the ‘Road Trip Project’ where they felt the blogging and format were engaging and interactive in nature.

The two oldest groups had a preference for websites as well as videos and thought that a way to make these more engaging was by improving the layout. The **European Youth Portal** was praised by the oldest group as the structure and where information is available appeared to be very clear to them in comparison to the **Eures website** or the **EPSO website**. Notably, this group indicated that they consult websites predominantly when looking for information on particular initiatives, rather than searching through social media.

Participants aged between 20-24 and 25-29 gaged the importance of finding a balance between a branded and institutional look when necessary, but also, as engaged people did not appreciate that many EU websites looked the same visually.

**4. To what extent does EC outreach material disseminate key messages on EU priorities, developments, policies and programmes (EC corporate communication)?**

**4.c. Are there differences to be catered for depending on the Member State or sub-segment of youth?**

The focus groups showed some insightful differences not only between age segments but also between less engaged and more engaged young people. Some of the variance amongst age groups was in terms of their preference in communications formats (online vs. offline) and communications channels (websites, social media and in person). In terms of differences based on levels of engagement, the main finding was the importance given by participants to content versus format depending on their level of engagement, but also based on age segments.

In terms of the preferences in terms of formats, the majority of participants made the point that communications is moving away from print to digital and that if an institution hopes to reach young people, the easiest way of doing this is online. A few participants in all groups emphasised the importance that print has, particularly in areas and with groups where digitalisation is not complete. However, most of them defended that the objective of print materials cannot be informational as then young people will not engage with them. Instead, print materials can be promotional or a guiding document to send you to the right places online. However, it was underlined that it is important to share the relevant information on the printed materials, particularly by clearly showcasing the manner in which more information can be retrieved on particular topics or programmes.

*“Booklets and brochures can be useful: if they are there available, it may encourage you to look into it even if it isn’t the brochure itself.”*

Female participant in group aged 20-24.

All groups were highly positive of the use of videos. The youngest group was critical of the use of games and quizzes online, as they felt that do not serve a clear purpose. They felt that these would be aimed at school children, rather than for teenagers, and could potentially be used in classroom settings rather than for personal use. The oldest group was critical of the use of apps as they are usually not well designed enough and take up too much memory space on the phone. Instead, they advocated for more mobile-friendly websites. The group aged between 20 and 24 had a preference for infographics as an online format. It was noted by this same group that the Council of Europe (CoE) and International Organisation for Migration (IOM) were particularly effective at producing communications materials, particularly in the forms of videos that subsequently act as a ‘hook’ to further information. They highlighted, for instance, that they enjoyed the CoE posts on Member States’ national days, as it acted as an engaging way to learn more about another Member States’ culture and traditions.

The only group that made a point about the importance of in-person communications without being prompted was the group aged 25-29. Some participants in this group emphasised the importance of engaging in person to reach the harder-to-reach groups and to direct them to the right communications channels afterwards. This was also the only group that emphasised the importance of giving more power and materials to national offices to disseminate information. They mentioned that it was important for the EC to “go to the people directly” for instance by having stands at relevant festivals where young people gather as well as at university events.

“*If I want information on the initiatives I go through the national information points (social services in municipalities, information points…) because they are the ones who have the information on how I can be a part of an initiative*.”

Female participant in group aged 25-29.

In terms of preferred channels, amongst those participants that thought the preferable way of engaging with young people was online, there was diversity in what the best channels are to do so. The youngest group highlighted the importance of social media but was very specific about what type of social media, with a strong preference for Instagram and Twitter over Facebook. The group also supported the use of sponsored posts on both Facebook and Instagram. The group aged between 20 and 24 suggested creating YouTube channels for different EU initiatives and promoting content there, but also events not associated with the EU.

*“Messages just come across better and easier on Instagram: give me a catchy video in an Instagram stories and I might swipe to get more information. But don’t give me a long blog post with a lot of information because I won’t read it.”*

Female participant in group aged 15-19.

*“Instagram is a great platform to link to official websites. In websites, it’s very difficult to reach the information. I never find what I am looking for. Make practical information clearer. Like “You need to contact the information point” But they never say where it is.”*

Female participant in group aged 20-24.

*“They also need to think outside the box and use the money they spend ads to put them in places that you don’t associate with official offices. For example, in music festivals and have a pop-up store that makes it look attractive.”*

Male participant in group aged 20-24.

Differently, participants in the group aged between 20-24 and 25-29, despite preferring materials to be online, partly because they were more engaged and better informed, partly because of preference, liked information to be available on websites best. This is because they were more informed of existing initiatives and more aware on how and where to find information, while the youngest group were less engaged and more interested in just finding out what initiatives or campaigns the EC is involved in.

The two older groups considered several ways in which this information could be reached by young people. On social media, there were mentions to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram but a general agreement that the type of social media should depend on the type of content. While Facebook allows for more lengthy and detailed content, it relies on viewers already being engaged. Instagram and Twitter can be used for more promotional purposes to try to reach less engaged audiences.

Finally, it is worth emphasising that as a result of the different levels of engagement, there was a clear divide between participants whose focus when assessing different materials was the format and elements such as the choice of font, colours, the choice of images… Whereas the most engaged focused on the content a lot more. The most engaged, for example, paid attention to whether a pdf document that can be found online (e.g. **Spotlight on European Solidarity Corps** or **Come to Study or Work in Europe**) and if it includes clear information on where to apply, how to apply and more practical elements rather than just a presentation of an initiative.

**4.d. Should the material be prepared with a view of young people themselves "owning" it in order to promote it?**

When young people in focus groups were asked about their role in helping the EC reach youth and make materials relevant to them, the participants did not have a clear idea on what they wanted their role to be. Some participants in the younger group mentioned that fast consultations, for example on social media, could ask young people whether they liked a proposed format and how it could be improved.

In terms of how young people could take on a role in promoting existing materials, the younger group showed willingness to share content that they find engaging on social media and spreading the word with friends if they come across anything that they find useful, in terms of information (for example on volunteering opportunities or travel).

The group with participants aged between 20 and 24 mentioned that a way they could contribute would be by volunteering, although the group had mixed opinions on whether volunteering is beneficial and some participants were reluctant to engage in that way. The older group with participants aged between 25 and 29 mentioned that youth organisations should be involved in the decision making of how to communicate with youth. One of the participants used the European Solidarity Corps as an example where youth had been consulted and an example of best practice.

### A2.3 Added Value

**7. What is the EU added value in developing, producing and distributing EC materials promoting the EU, its benefits and opportunities to youth and sub-segments of youth target group compared to those that may have been developed by other relevant stakeholders? In what ways could this EU added value be maximised and enhanced?**

**7.a. What is the EU added value of EC communication materials targeting youth compared to other materials on EU, its benefits and opportunities that may have been made available to youth and different segments of young people on national, regional or local level?**

**7.b. In what ways could the EU added value of the EC materials targeting youth and different segments of young people be maximised and enhanced considering the information needs of this target group as well as information multipliers?**

The added value of the EC tailoring their communications directly to young people is that they are able to reach out to a large segment of the population, share the European values and principles, promote European programmes and potentially even engage future European leaders and multipliers. The EU invests heavily in programmes for young people, and it was seen as important that young people across the continent were made aware of all the opportunities (e.g. in the field of education, employment, mobility, etc.) on offer to them. Particularly opportunities in relation to mobility were appreciated, whether in relation to travelling across the continent for fun (e.g. using an Interrail), for studies (e.g. Erasmus+), for work (e.g. EURES) or for social activities (e.g. European Solidarity Corps). By tailoring communications materials specifically to reaching out to young people, the EC ensures that their target audience engages with the messages that they are seeking to convey and acts on them. The young people also noted that an added value of such communications are the increased awareness of the EU and its Member States.

The three groups shared an appreciation for the EC directly targeting young people in their communications activities and felt that this should not only be continued (and potentially even intensified). Particularly the youngest group was unaware of the fact that the EC had initiatives that were relevant to their age group, and by the end of the focus group expressed their interest to learn more by engaging with the EC social media platforms. It was underlined, however, that the added value would be enhanced if the EC could more actively engage young people with their communications activities. It was mentioned that it was imperative that the language was tailored specifically to engage young people and include more personal accounts (thus sounding less formal and corporate than in many EC communications) and that the formats were user-friendly. There should be a communication strategy in place where the EC firstly shares shorter communications (e.g. through a video on Instagram or a Tweet) that acts as a hook and redirects young people to other, more detailed communications where they can fund practical information on EU programmes and initiatives.

1. It needs to be noted that youth is by no means a homogeneous group. Because of the differences between the two age segments of the target group, ideally these should be consulted separately. This would help the young people to feel more at ease and free to voice their opinions in the focus group setting. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)