

# Ireland

Working Paper

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## **Adult Education as a Means to Active Participatory Citizenship**





## **Adult Education as a Means to Active Participatory Citizenship (EduMAP)**

*EduMAP is a Horizon 2020 research project focusing on adult education among young adults at risk of social exclusion. Particular attention is paid to educational policies and practices needed to foster active citizenship among vulnerable young people.*

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## 1. Challenges in AE provision and access

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The research in Ireland involved two GPs:

1. GP1: a short term one-off informal education project which was hosted at an education a short-term one-off project funded by a government grant linked specifically to themes of education and employment. The main methods of the project were based on youth work principles, involving group work and a residential workshop. Practitioners acted as facilitators while young people themselves were in charge of deciding the focus and eventually the outcome of the project. The project culminated in the production of a video in which young people describe the barriers experienced by ethnic minority young people in education and employment contexts.
2. GP2: a programme involving a range of projects, groups and events run by a volunteer-led non-governmental organisation in the fields of socio-cultural and socio-political informal education and sports education. The organisation works at local, national and international levels, using sports as a vehicle to promote social and cultural inclusion and counter racism and other forms of discrimination. The activities include weekly football activities (some of which are attended in majority by refugee, migrant and ethnic minority young men), with a range of supportive services alongside, including mentoring, personal development, welfare, as well as social and cultural integration support. Other activities involve workshops, sports events and youth exchange programmes. The programme also functions as a 'gateway' to other training and skills development opportunities (e.g. coaching qualifications and ongoing career support for young people playing semi-professionally in clubs).

It is important to note that the programmes are specific examples of informal education in the context of Ireland's (relatively recent) transformation to a more ethnically diverse society and are therefore not representative of the overall landscape of adult community education or further education and training (FET). Challenges and developments in this overall context include significant reforms, responding in part to the aftermath of the economic crisis affecting particularly young people in Ireland. As a general issue affecting young people's access to educational opportunities, one policy maker points out that the system of formal further education funding often does not provide the flexibility of allowing learners to try a course at a certain level, because if they later withdraw they will not be eligible for funding for another course at the same level. For young refugees who are still learning English, this can be a particular challenge.

The GPs researched in Ireland (which can be considered as situated at the broad intersection of informal education, youth work, socio-cultural community development work, FET, through to (youth/migrant) activism) explicitly focus on and seek to address barriers experienced by ethnic minority young people to participation in education, employment and other opportunities. These barriers link with a range of factors, but racism and discrimination are considered important factors by practitioners and young people in both GPs. Young people particularly in GP1 draw attention to barriers within the education system (both at school level and as young people progress to specific career paths), which include a lack of

acknowledgement regarding their specific situations and needs. Additionally, ethnic minority young people may also be affected by a lack of social capital in relation to, for example, getting specific opportunities such as internships – especially in a relatively small country where ‘knowing somebody who knows somebody’ is often quite important. This aspect is also highlighted within GP2, which emphasises capacity- and network-building.

Additional challenges and barriers were reported at the time of research for young people without secure residence rights (e.g. those in the asylum process), in relation to (1) accessing third level / higher education (due to lack of funding entitlements); (2) lacking rights to seek employment; and (3) the very restricted support provided to asylum seekers in direct provision centres (full-board accommodation with limited weekly cash allowances), which pose practical barriers, such as inability to afford public transport fares to attend education.

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## 2. Gender and diversity aspects tackled in the studied programmes

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Addressing diversity is a key feature for both GPs considered in Ireland, as both consider the experiences of ethnic minority and migrant young people in Irish society. Practitioners and policy makers reflect on different approaches towards diversity, with support for an *intercultural* approach (as promoted in some of Ireland’s policies in the field) instead of a multicultural approach (which is seen as having the potential for segregation) or a thinly veiled assimilationist stance in many sectors of society (i.e. the expectation that ethnic minority communities ‘fit in’ with existing customs and culture – which is often meant when people refer to ‘integration’). One of the organisations involved in the programme actively promotes the perspective of ‘*one race - the human race*’, rejecting race as a signifier of difference.

Practitioners and policy makers point particularly towards intersections between discrimination based on race, gender and faith. Muslim young women are in this context considered particularly vulnerable to *gendered racism* which in practical terms often means that those wearing a hijab become singled out (in the media, in day-to-day experiences of racism, through exclusion from participation in sports or discrimination in employment contexts). Both good practice programmes address these issues, for example through GP2 establishing a football team for young women (initially mostly from Muslim backgrounds) in the context of the temporary international ban on wearing the hijab during matches. On the other hand, intercultural peer education is used in the context of Muslim young people acting as role models against the problematic drinking culture which is prevalent among some of Ireland’s indigenous young people. Intergenerational peer education is also used, for example in the context of supporting ethnic minority young people to learn about their own families’ cultures, histories and traditions and thus developing a sense of pride, as an important factor of resilience in the face of experiences of discrimination. On the other hand, young people may also play an important role in supporting their parents and communities with integration, for example through promoting voter registration. The importance of acknowledging that intergenerational diversity (of needs and circumstances) is significant in promoting the participation of ethnic minority people is also highlighted within GP1.

Finally, an issue highlighted among young people, practitioners and policy makers is the lack of relevant data being gathered in statistics among many organisations (including government departments) to allow for the measuring of indicators of inclusion or exclusion. The problem here is that data is reported to often not be separated by meaningful categories which would provide indications of participation as well as of key barriers. Young people in GP1 highlight the point that young people all have different needs which need to be acknowledged by educational providers, rather than assumptions made based on broad categories such as race, ethnicity or gender.

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### 3. The concept of APC as it is defined, understood or approached in the context of the study by different respondent groups

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#### *Policy makers*

Among the small sample of policy makers interviewed as part of the research, APC itself is not a common term, but there are other concepts which convey a similar meaning, for example *promoting social engagement*, *active participation* or *civic engagement*. Among these, *participation* is emphasised within policy makers and practitioners associated with GP1 as a key concept linked with a particular approach (conceptual and practical) of engaging with young people, namely *hearing the young person's voice* and treating it as *central and to the fore*. In this context, it is very important that participation is *meaningful* and not *tokenistic*. *Citizenship*, on the other hand, has a complex and somewhat contested meaning in work with young people from ethnic minority, migrant and refugee backgrounds, because many of them are not Irish citizens in a legal sense. Active citizenship in the sense of mobilising volunteering used to have a greater political agenda some years ago but more recently has become less of a focus point of policies (even though voluntarism is still very relevant within society).

#### *Practitioners*

The responses of practitioners interviewed in Ireland largely correspond to the perspectives of policy makers, in that APC is considered through its different components. As with policy makers, several practitioners question the relevance of the *citizenship* concept in the context of their work with migrant and refugee young people, considering as potentially *discriminatory*. The focus for practitioners is instead on more practical concepts, such as *integration* or *community engagement*. The focus here is on involvement in Irish society or local communities, with the aim of sharing skills or experiences, as well as providing a context which allows solidarity to develop. In relation to participation, practitioners from GP1 highlight this in relation to participatory approaches in youth work / informal education, emphasising the importance of genuine rather than tokenistic participation opportunities, but also stressing that it is important for practitioners to support young people in developing an understanding of the meaning and possible effects of participation. At the heart of this approach is encouraging *critical thinking* which raises young people's awareness and supports them in considering the most effective and meaningful ways of trying to influence change, while also protecting them from overwhelming or severely disappointing experiences.

#### *Young adults*

For young people in the two GPs, APC is related to a range of themes, and borne out in examples of APC practice which are a cross-cutting theme for both programmes themselves. For many young people, APC is first and foremost associated with equal rights and *an even playing -field* in terms of opportunities. Because many have experienced discrimination and other barriers (e.g. in employment or education

contexts) based on their ethnic minority status, participation is often linked with *changing things* – not just for themselves but for younger generations, so that they might not have to face the same difficulties. Several young people also reflect on the citizenship aspect of the term in relation to their feelings of belonging which can sometimes involve ambivalence.

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#### **4. Elements that are critical and or significant for enabling learners to become active citizens, or to develop APC competencies in the studied programmes**

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In many ways, the programmes researched in Ireland can be seen as good practice examples of APC in action. Thus, relevant competences are developed immersively through participation in the programmes. Both programmes are participatory in their approaches and methodologies.

GP1 used an open-ended, fluid and process-oriented approach starting from the level of young people's own concerns rather than prescribing an agenda or target outcomes, with practitioners acting as facilitators supporting young people to voice their concerns and experiences. The eventual outcome of a video resource produced by the young people in the project provided a timeless and tangible outcome, opening up debate and allowing other young people to express their own similar experiences. In a wider context, the project's outcome has also led to engagement and dialogue with policy makers, practitioners and other organisations (e.g. prospective employers), leading to what promises to be a lasting legacy both in terms of young people's engagement in APC activities and in terms of the improvement of policy and practice.

In GP2, the development of APC competences is a key thread running through the organisation and all of its activities. Competence development takes place at a variety of levels, with learning processes often being implicit and informal: young people may not actually realise that they are developing skills such as teamwork or leadership until the point where they are reflecting on this. The low access threshold involves practical or cultural barriers being broken down continuously through the organisation's work (e.g. providing football boots for asylum seekers who have no means to purchase them; or visiting families and communities of Muslim young women to address any concerns they might have about the appropriateness of young women's involvement in sports). The programme promotes gender equality, diversity and social inclusion, while also utilising a capacity building model that encourages the intergenerational transfer of skills based on mutual learning and respect. Another key element of good practice is that the programme addresses not only ethnic minority young people or other specific groups, but works on the basis of a one race - the human race ethos, working against sectarianism and other forms of exclusion. In that sense it addresses not only Irish society overall, but also has an important international development dimension, based around principles of peace building, solidarity, equality and human rights. This ability to work from the macro through to the micro level, addressing a vast array of skills and competences, under the umbrella of a strong equality ethos, sets the programme apart from schemes which might only address one of these aspects.

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## 5. Competencies and qualifications possessed, represented and/or cultivated through by the AE practitioners who contribute to the design, development and delivery of APC programmes for VYAs

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In the GPs considered through this research, practitioner competences are first and foremost related to the need for a comprehensive understanding of the issues affecting ethnic minority young people, especially *issues around racism, identity, culture and gender*. In terms of specific qualifications and forms of professional development, these are diverse across the GPs, with GP1 particularly relying on skills and methods of youth work (both in group contexts and in individual work), while in GP2, a range of coaching-related, group leadership and capacity-building skills as well as community and cultural development (with a focus on anti-sectarianism and peace building) play a key role.

Overall, however, while competencies may be supported particularly on particular forms of training or qualifications, there is an emphasis on skills and attributes that relate, above all, to capacities of self-reflection and awareness, along with being able to support building the same capacities in others. The main project worker for GP1 emphasises the importance of practitioners to both have the capacity for critical thinking about structures that support discrimination and racism, and the ability to support young people in engaging in such critical thought processes themselves. Rather than imparting knowledge, the focus is on facilitation skills – *meeting the young people where they're at*, supporting them to critique structures and systems surrounding them and *giving them the tools to be able to do something about it*. Providing a *safe space* is essential for these processes, preventing young people from feeling overwhelmed by their experiences and realisations, but also from backlash when they speak out against racism and discrimination.

Further key skills for practitioners include flexibility, along with a degree of persistence and personal resilience. Being able and prepared to continuously update one's knowledge (e.g. in relation to immigration or social issues affecting particular cohorts of young people, such as those in the asylum process) is also considered as very important. Practitioners, in this context, need good listening skills and be able to embrace *not knowing everything* as opposed to taking the role of experts. Having direct experience of what it means to be a member of an (ethnic) minority group can be a key advantage in this context.

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## 6. Critical factors and conditions (favourable and unfavourable) that affect the potential of AE policies to cultivate APC for VYAs

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A key critical factor highlighted in both Irish GPs is the changing nature of Irish society, particularly the increasing diversity through migration over the past decades. At the same time, the AE sector has benefited from a strong community focus, emphasising social inclusion, volunteerism, as well as active citizenship. Within the youth education sector, there is a clearly developed framework promoting participation (both in terms of guiding principles and practices). These structures are considered as *favourable conditions* for enabling young people to engage and articulate their concerns. Youth work has also undergone increasing professionalization, becoming more focused and succeeding in involving a greater range and number of young people in participation opportunities.

*Unfavourable conditions*, on the other hand, are highlighted by research participants in both GPs, but as a focus in GP1. This links with shortcomings in structures and conditions which would enable the full participation of ethnic minority young people (including asylum seekers and refugees) in society and which would be effective in preventing discrimination. A key issue raised in this context are gaps in policy implementation and between the rhetoric of policies and the reality of young people's experiences. Examples include the following areas:

(1) Discrimination in employment contexts despite equality laws (as highlighted by young people in GP1), for example when submitting a job application with a 'foreign sounding' name or in form of racist or sexist comments at the work place. Young people and practitioners considered that despite an employment policy context that promised equal treatment, this was not borne out by their experiences, with barriers sometimes both subtle and ingrained in societal structures.

(2) Mismatches between a rhetoric of 'open door' policies and participation structures in education (for example within the informal education and youth work fields) and the perception among ethnic minority young people that such opportunities often require them to conform to structures that fail to recognise or understand their diverse needs. In the youth work field, this is compounded by a lack of professional role models from ethnic minority backgrounds, leading to a tendency of ethnic minority young people to self-organise. In other educational contexts, a lack of understanding or acknowledgement of their circumstances, along with some stereotypical views, was identified as a barrier by young people. Some of the professionals highlighted the need for ethnic minority young people to have both access to integrated and shared participation spaces and to some protected spaces where they can discuss issues and challenges related to their ethnic minority status. However, funding constraints are a problem in this context, with different groups sometimes competing for funding which inhibits their ability to organise in solidary ways.

Funding and resource constraints are also highlighted by research participants in GP2, which as a small volunteer-led organisation needs to continuously promote its



work on a variety of national and international platforms, as well as through extensive participation in networks and initiatives.

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## 7. Lessons learnt from laws and policies that contribute effectively to cultivating APC for VYAs

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As mentioned above, Ireland's robust youth participation strategy is considered a key effective policy factor. The backbone of this is the *National strategy on children and young people's participation in decision-making*, published by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2015. A youth policy expert describes this intergovernmental strategy as being based on the notion that *nothing happens that impacts on young people without hearing the young peoples' voice*. Specific strategies have also been developed to support the participation of Roma and traveller young people, and another for *LGBTI-plus* young people was in development at the time of the research. Other successful participation strategies include Irish strategies for contributing to the European Structured Dialogue, particularly as they focus particularly on including *the voice of the most vulnerable* young people. Principles of Ireland's youth participation policy framework link to the concept of (1) safe and inclusive *spaces*; (2) the facilitation for young people to have their *voice* heard; (3) the acting upon expressed views as conveying young people's *influence* on matters concerning them.

A further key positive development concerning adult education more generally is the establishment of a new further education and training (FET) agency and a five year (2014-2019) strategy, likely to promote quality and inclusion in FET provision. While this is a key development for the formal adult education sector, given the specific nature of the (informal education) GPs considered in Ireland, this was not at the centre of the research.

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## 8. Existing practices of information access and communication (emerging patterns and tendencies; people/social networks; media/platforms/channels; content/messages) about adult education in the studied programmes

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Both programmes researched rely strongly on a word of mouth principle for recruiting participants, supplemented by social media and using support professionals as mediators. In GP1, which was short term by its very nature, the main project worker played a key role by already being a trusted professional for several of the young people who participated, having had contact with some of them as part of previous similar initiatives. Contacts with other organisations within the field helped establish contacts to other young people, and peer communication (young people telling each other about the project) also played a role. Similarly, within GP2, organisational networks play a key role in the organisation advertising its activities and recruiting participating young people, as do specific events, contact with some key professionals (e.g. youth workers supporting newly arrived refugees) and peer communication.

Over the course of the project, within GP1 the main forms of communication were WhatsApp and email to keep in touch and arrange the face-to-face meetings where the main work took place. The communicative processes were a key aspect of this project, carefully facilitated and *held* (in the sense of providing a *safe space*) by practitioners, but otherwise focusing on young people's voices, sharing experiences and making decisions about the direction and outcome of the process. Both young people and practitioners reflect on the importance of allowing young people to set the pace, structure, aims and decide on the outcome of this project.

Within GP2, communication takes place in a variety of contexts depending on the type of activity concerned – from discussing and maintaining sports-based rules during games, through to one-to-one and group mentoring and involvement of young people in planning events. Face-to-face communication, along with social media platforms and email are key means of communication. The weekly football activities provide an important context for newly arrived refugees to develop their often very limited social network. The organisation's ethos involves a strong focus on capacity building, and therefore young people often become involved in volunteering at activities and events, taking on peer mentoring activities over time. Beyond the organisation's own programme, participants are also encouraged to engage in a wide range of activities which may be linked with raising awareness about diversity and equality, whether in local or even international contexts, for which they are supported by the organisation.

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## 9. Leveraging on VYA's information access and communication practices about adult education

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In both GP1 and GP2, the informal context of the programmes shapes communicative practices, with networks among professionals and young people being instrumental for access to opportunities and resources; overall, both programmes work to increase the opportunities of ethnic minority young people's to increase their 'social capital' – a crucial resource in a country where such links are considered very important.

Some more general issues in relation to communication, particularly communicative mismatches happening at broader societal level, are identified by GP1, which is specifically concerned with some of the communicative mismatches which ethnic minority young people feel affected by in relation to education, training and employment contexts. This concerns mixed messages which the young people feel they receive from various parts of society, including from their families and communities, professionals in the education, careers advice and youth services sectors as well as potential employers. In short, this mismatch can be summarised as an invitation to participate and integrate into Irish society on the one hand and the continued existence of barriers to the structures and opportunities that would facilitate such participation and integration on the other. An example provided by practitioners is that some mainstream educational and participation organisations consider themselves as open and welcoming diversity, but this may not always match the perception of ethnic minority young people who feel they are expected to fit into a certain mould that does not adequately represent their circumstances. A lack of role models (among professionals) representing different ethnic backgrounds is one factor seen as contributing to this, but some practitioners also consider that some of the specialist services existing for refugee and ethnic minority young people could inadvertently be contributing to the dynamics of this situation, on the basis of their own effectiveness and specialism in meeting the needs of young refugees (while more mainstream organisations might be afraid of lacking experience and knowledge). Overall, these factors are seen to contribute to a situation where ethnic minority young people feel excluded from some of the mainstream spaces and services and seeking support from specialist services which they have come to trust. As a result, they may be underrepresented in more mainstream participation programmes, while efforts to make services and organisations more inclusive may also be hampered. Young people participating in GP1 echo some of these points, adding intergenerational issues - for example that different generations within ethnic minority groups will have different needs (also depending on how long they have lived in Ireland), but also that the mood for change within education and participation structures is in their view often most pronounced within their own generation (young people in their late teens and 20s). Some of the young people who have participated in other projects internationally consider this 'readiness for change to happen' to be a trend across Europe.

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## 10. Information accessed and used during the design of AE for APC programmes

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As both programmes researched in Ireland are informal and participatory in nature, their design can be described as evolving and involving collaborations of practitioners and young people. In both contexts, practitioners are mostly facilitators, although this takes different forms for each of the programmes. In GP1, the broad idea of a project involving ethnic minority young people and focusing on issues related to education and employment formed the basis (e.g. for funding purposes), but the direction, processes and outcomes of the project were led by the young people (based on the principle of enable[ing] them to have their voice heard). Young people appreciate this confidence and trust they were given by the practitioners and consider that this allowed their creativity and work to flow in the best possible way. The young people conducted research for their project by interviewing service providers and other organisations, as well as considering statistics (for example on youth unemployment). A key challenge in this context was an absence of meaningfully disaggregated data (for example by ethnicity): it's like young people are taken as a whole genus, like a group, and it's like we're all the same – no we're not, we all have different needs and those needs need to be taken into consideration to get a bigger and clearer picture that would inform on policies and the methods, the practice that we use [young person participating in GP1].

In GP2, on the other hand, there is a strong emphasis on ongoing capacity building and skills transfer whereby longer-standing and more experienced members (taking the role of 'educators' in an informal sense) support younger members to take on more responsibility – for example leading parts of the sports-based training sessions or organising activities as part of a youth exchange programme. This promotes the development of 'soft skills' which young people may not be conscious of. At the time of the research, GP2 was also developing their participation in a European initiative linking sports with employability skills for young people not in education, training or employment. The aim of this was to structure and strengthen the focus on employability skills and career planning support that already exists within the programme's current activities. In terms of the information and data accessed in the process of designing activities, the extensive networks maintained at local, national and international levels play a crucial role. Relying on and strengthening networks with like-minded (in the sense of promoting inclusion and human rights) organisations and actors supports the informal information exchange and capacity building, both within the programme itself and in the sense of identifying and supporting young people with access to other opportunities (e.g. coaching qualifications or team leadership skills).



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