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3. Communicating Research – Planning, Challenges and Lessons from Policy Roundtables

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The main goal of WP 9 – the final WP in YOUNG_ADULLLT – is to wrap up the knowledge produced in the previous Work Packages and deliver it to relevant stakeholders and decision-makers. Therefore, it is very much focused on one of the four features that Mårtensson and colleagues identify as a ‘quality model’ of research: the fact that it is *communicable* (Mårtensson *et al.*, 2016). That is to say, research outputs need to be consumable, accessible and searchable.



In order to achieve this goal, Policy Roundtables were implemented in each participating country (one per functional region). Policy Roundtables were instrumental for the production of national policy briefs, which will later inform the drafting of a European policy brief. As such,

the greatest challenge of WP 9 is to provide policy briefs that highlight the most relevant or pressing matters in each country, and present them in clear, informative manners that aid policy-makers in deciding over future courses of action. To do so, a fine balance between structure and flexibility was achieved through the organisation of the Roundtables. Organization of these Roundtables required structure to ensure comparability through a common framework and flexibility to accommodate regional and national specificities. We sought to strike this balance by acknowledging the cumulative nature of the process of data gathering and interpretation along the project's timeline and geographical layering (regional, national, European levels).

A strategy paper was elaborated to assist all partners in planning the Policy Roundtables. This strategy paper, while theoretically-informed, followed a pragmatically-oriented approach and defined guidelines for organising, scheduling, implementing, recording and documenting the roundtables. Yet, it is well-advised to recall Bardach's (2012, p. xvii) cautionary statement that "Policy analysis is more art than science. It draws on intuition as much as on method". Therefore, it would be unrealistic to expect that a tight and thorough grid for the preparation, implementation and documenting of the policy roundtables would be the optimal approach; that is why the strategy paper offered guidelines, not a straitjacket. These guidelines provided partners with a framework that enabled them to outline the main findings of the project and deliver them to an audience of stakeholders and decision-makers, encouraging them to reflect on the ways in which lifelong learning policies are being implemented, as well as to enunciate what would be necessary for things to work out well in each functional region, rather than offering one-size-fits-all solutions or best practices. In a way, the policy roundtables also played the role in the final moment of data collection or, at least, provided a moment to ponder on the findings with the assistance of relevant agents.

Two rationales informed the invitations of such agents. The first was previous contact with YOUNG_ADULLLT, as this enabled furthering the relationship and developing a sense of continuity in the analysis. Therefore, invitations were sent to people/organisations who had previously been involved in the project (namely by having been interviewed for WP5 and WP6) as well as to members of the National Advisory Boards. The second rationale was broadening the scope of the stakeholders involved. Thus, we invited a wide range of stakeholders, including public and private institutions providing professional education, training and employment; universities; students' councils; local trade unions; companies; business associations; governmental agencies; municipal and inter-municipal agencies; local development agencies; commerce chambers; youth organisations; experts (academic, high- and street-level) in lifelong learning, labour market, education and migration; and, finally, policy makers in the three sectors of lifelong learning that were included in the project: educational, employment and social/youth policies. Not all those who were invited actually attended: the success rate of the invitations was 50%, and ensuring that people will come inevitably poses some challenges. Planning well in advance, offering potential participants clear guidelines for the session and materials for preparation, and following email contacts with phone contacts are important strategies for achieving an adequate success rate. Ultimately, given that a total of 206 participants from a broad range of organisations attended the 20 Policy Roundtables that were held (average of

10,3 per meeting), the final result was very satisfactory. Indeed, hopefully this wide range of participants has enabled a more thorough understanding of the issues at stake, namely regarding debates that are stimulated during the Roundtables. During the debates, participants had the opportunity not only to express their views but also to both agree and express disagreement with the views of others. It should be pointed that the diversity of participants involved in the Roundtables may sometimes pose specific challenges, such as monopolisation of the debate by one or a couple of more ‘powerful’ participants, or moments of heated discussion between antagonists. While professional facilitators may be hired for moderating events like these Roundtables, all YOUNG_ADULLLT teams opted for doing the moderation themselves: in retrospect, this seems a sensible choice, given the previous acquaintance of team members with some of the participants and the practice in managing interpersonal relationships that social scientists almost inevitably possess because of their research and teaching experience.

A major challenge faced in the planning and implementing of the roundtables was their scheduling. If contact is established ahead of time with parties involved, there are good chances of finding a suitable date to hold the meeting. The actual duration of the Roundtable proved to be an unsurmountable challenge. Indeed, while it would have been ideal to have a full-day for debate, the participants’ busy agendas rendered this impossible. The Roundtables lasted between 2 and 4 and a half hours, which nonetheless provided room for lively and enlightening debate throughout the 20 Roundtables.

At the moment of writing this piece, the national Policy Briefs have not yet been elaborated. A preliminary analysis of the summaries regarding the 20 Roundtables has revealed that they contain promising data regarding the main messages put across, emerging topics and leads for future research. Let’s wait (that is, *work*), and see!

References and further readings:

Bardach, E. (2012). *A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis: The Eightfold Path to More Effective Problem Solving*, 4th ed. London: Sage & CQ Press.

Mårtensson, P., Fors, U., Wallin, S.-B., Zander, U. & Nilsson, G.H. (2016). Evaluating research: A multidisciplinary approach to assessing research practice and quality. *Research Policy*, 45(3), pp. 593–603.



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