

CROSS BORDER COLLABORATION: EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY AND SUPPORT FOR UNACCOMPANIED MINORS

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Abstract

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors face particular challenges since they leave their child-specific surroundings and experience a significant reduction in social support. Hence, it is crucial to better understand the measures and opportunities for their protection and social inclusion and systematically improve assisting their acculturation and inclusion. Hence, professionals working with the UASC should be provided with the necessary tools to support this specific population group in their transition to adulthood. Consequently, a cross-border cooperation of six European partners, a research institution and 5 grassroot level organisations (non and for profit) jointly develop a training program based on a systematic gap assessment. The latter consists of a mixed methods approach. How the different partners are involved in implementing the project and, especially, how they jointly implemented the assessment part is in the focus of this paper. In the conclusion, the authors provide an outlook on some major findings as well as an overview on the next steps.

Keywords: unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors, integration, cross-border collaboration

1 INTRODUCTION

Better integration of unaccompanied minors

For refugee minors, the migration process constitutes a unique challenge; all the more so, if they are unaccompanied. Without their familiar surroundings at their place of origin, unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors (UASCs) are confronted with novel cultural norms, rules and regulations, often times with little or less social support than before (Menjívar and Perreira, 2019). The EU-funded project “4OneAnother” (Funding program: Erasmus Plus) is dedicated to investigate measures and potential actions to be taken for protecting and to further smoothen the adaptation and social inclusion of this specific group.

Major Challenges, such as psycho-social and cultural differences between country of origin and host country as well as additional facets of the migration context in the national and European legal framework, affect the individual and collective experience that migration constitutes. Therefore, professionals that work with UASCs as persons of reference or

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confidants shall ultimately be provided with complementary advanced training offers (see e.g. López Peláez et al., 2020), so that their training portfolio matches even better the needs of UASCs and contingencies of the migration situation in EU countries today. In order to develop a training program, a solid gap assessment is necessary that this paper focuses on.

This project contributes to the attainment of the strategic goals of “Erasmus+”, an EU program in support of training and education, sport and youth. Erasmus+ is designed to provide mobility and cooperation opportunities in e.g. school and adult education, vocational training or higher education (EC, 2022).

The consortium of the project

The project is jointly developed and implemented among a cross-border consortium of the following six partners from six different European countries (USB, 2022):

The University of Applied Sciences Kufstein Tirol (FHK), located in Austria, offers economic and technical degree programs for over 2000 students from more than 50 countries. Collaborative R&D and learning projects ensure applied research on a competitive level. The Greek non-profit organization United Societies of the Balkans (USB) focusses on projects centered around human rights and intercultural dialogue with the aim to support youth empowerment and mobility, voluntarism and engagement. The Italian Fondazione Albero della Vita (FADV) aims to increase the awareness of children and adults in the context of their social network, such as their family, school and local community.

SGS Tecnos SA (SGS) is based in Spain and focusses on inspection, verification, analysis, certification, consultancy and training services across a range of industries, while the Belgium NPO Pour la Solidarité (PLS) addresses the economic and political embeddedness of the European Social Model with the aim to promote solidarity and sustainability. PLS offers research activities, consulting, project and event management in different fields. Lastly, Lidi Smart Solutions (LSS) is a Dutch private company that offers web-based educational elements in different fields. It develops e-learning platforms and employs blockchain, AI technologies and content synthesis.

Each partner brings different strengths to the project. The leading partner at the Kufstein Tirol University of Applied Sciences provides a sound research background in issues related to diversity and sports with a key focus on acculturation and integration, and a solid background in applied innovation and technology management. USB brings in their experiences in projects related to the defense of human rights and intercultural dialogue, such as youth exchanges and common training courses.

FADV brings in their background in developing training packages for working with unaccompanied migrant children and previously worked on transfer of knowledge and share of good practices from more experienced countries to less experienced ones on promoting foster care for UASC. While SGS brings in experiences in developing training materials, PLS

has experience in the coordination and implementation of network promoting apprenticeships for vulnerable young people. LSS provides an expertise in providing technical solutions.

Consequently, FHK and FADV were leading organisations in the first phase of the project, the gap assessment. SGS is the leading partner in developing the training and LSS in implementing the open access learning platform.

2 METHODS

In the first phase, the gap assessment, the needs and current practice of professionals working with UASC as well as the needs and further challenges of UASC and former UASC who turned 18 were assessed. Qualitative and quantitative approaches were applied. The research instruments were based on previous research on working with migrants, such as Stura (2019) or Schick et al. (2016).

Both, the gap assessment with the professionals as well as the UASC, followed a systematic approach involving all partners (Fig. 1):

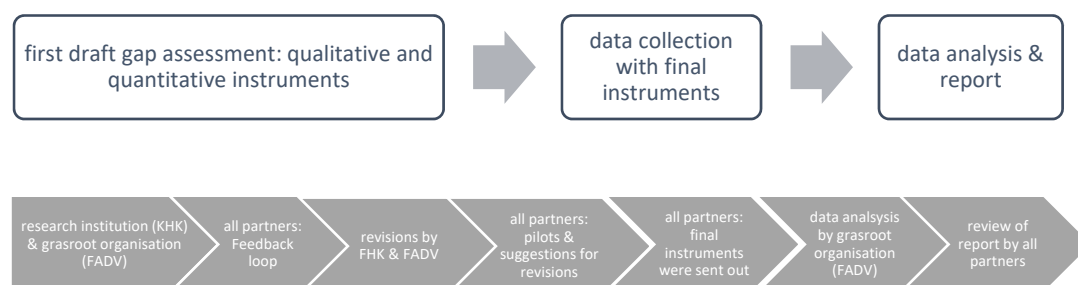


Figure 1. Research phases & management procedure involving all partners.

FADV and FH Kufstein developed the research instruments. After the feedback loop from partners and the pilot studies, both instruments were revised. The steering committee, consisting of national coordinators, agreed on the designs of the instruments and on the adaptation to the national contexts.

The qualitative approach with key professionals included in-depth interviews (about 40 per country) and the quantitative assessment an online survey (about 100 per country). Cultural mediators, social operators, psychologists, heads of department at local social services or other professionals were part of the samples - depending on the structure of the national reception system. Data was collected in Austria, Belgium, Italy and Greece.

The gap assessment with UASC and UASC turning 18 was conducted through a qualitative approach. It included interviews and focus groups with UASC and UASC who turned 18.

About 4 focus groups with 5 to 8 participants each (UASC and UASC turned 18) and at least 15 interviews per country were conducted. FADV, PLS, USB, Kufstein carried out this action.

The report with the results on the current gaps and needs from both perspectives, the professionals as well as UASC, forms the basis for the development of the training programs. It is currently developed.

3 CONCLUSION

A major finding referred to the challenges of the UASC. They perceived stress due to strong cultural differences between their new social surrounding and their home cultures. Many professionals working with UASC also emphasized that the detachment from their home communities and staying in touch with their families at home was perceived as a major stressor across the participating countries. Balancing the integration process was perceived to be especially stressful while in transition to adulthood.

Main coping strategies referred to sports activities, peer-to-peer support as well as support by professionals, such as care givers or social workers. An environment similar to their primary family constitutes a refuge for most UASC. In this regard, they referred to a welcoming community and the need to be supported in communication with home. In addition, most of the professionals stated they had not received trainings on intercultural communicative competence while considering it extremely important.

Based on the results, the training program for employees working with UASC and young adults will be developed to better meet the necessities of this population. All major results plus experiences from previous work from the different partners and aspects that were identified in previous studies in similar fields will be considered in developing the modules. For example, factors impacting the UASC integration process, knowledge of psychological support and detection of psychological vulnerabilities as well as support for the specific phase of transition to adulthood. Included will also be different gender and new media technology approaches, several forms of alternative care and special programs, such as sports, will also be included.

One partner, SGS, will provide a first draft of modules that could be developed for the professionals. It will be discussed with all partners. In addition, all partners will contact the main stakeholders in the sector in order to get their views on the draft modules. Based on all feedback, the consortium will select the contents that best suit the identified needs but also which will be deemed most realistic and practical. Then, the E-learning platform will be developed for employees working with UASC and young adults.

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