



## **Work Package 8**

Framing and Implementing the Transversal  
Participatory Approach

## **Deliverable D8.3**

National Participatory Report

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## Executive summary

The main aim of the CLEAR project (“Constructing Learning Outcomes in Europe: A Multi-Level Analysis of (Under)Achievement in the Life Course”) was to disentangle the dynamics shaping the construction of learning outcomes and (under)achievement among young learners across Europe. To address the complexity of these processes, the project employed a multidimensional theoretical and methodological framework, seeking to overcome one-dimensional and performance-based conceptions of learning outcomes. Targeting this objective, the project was structured to expand the diversity of perspectives and issues under consideration, with particular emphasis on valuing the plurality of stakeholders’ voices in education. Work Package 8 addressed this aim by introducing a distinctive and innovative component: the Transversal Participatory Approach. This methodological innovation enabled the incorporation of participatory activities throughout all stages of the research, enhancing the contextual sensitivity, accessibility, and alignment of results with the principles of Open Science (UNESCO, 2021).

The Transversal Participatory Approach was integrated throughout the entire project life cycle, encompassing the initial research design, data analysis, interpretation of results, and dissemination. Its implementation was structured along two principal dimensions:

- Participatory Actions: Incorporated within the empirical Work Packages (WP3–WP6), these actions enabled collaboration among experts, educational professionals, local stakeholders, and young people in the development of research instruments, data interpretation, and the production of dissemination materials. Five principal actions were carried out, alongside additional locally coordinated Participatory Actions, engaging 97 participants with diverse roles and backgrounds, ranging from educational experts to front-line professionals.
- Innovation Forums: Conducted in the final phase, these forums functioned as deliberative and inclusive spaces for the discussion and development of project findings, involving 210 participants across 11 national forums. These sessions promoted broader reflection and facilitated horizontal dialogue among young people, policymakers, and professionals.

Overall, more than 300 individuals — most of whom were external to academia — participated in these activities, confirming both the positive reception and relevance of participatory engagement within the CLEAR project.

This report offers a comprehensive overview of project partners’ experiences and efforts in the design and implementation of the Transversal Participatory Approach. It focuses on how the Transversal Participatory Approach impacted research in terms of:

- Methodology – the adopted approach enabled the calibration of research tools and procedures, enrichment of data collection, and validation of interpretations in

ways that were attuned to specific local characteristics. The integration of traditional methodologies with creative instruments (e.g., visualizations, posters, narrative scenarios, Padlet) expanded the capacity for inclusion and enhanced the accessibility of research outcomes.

- Data analysis - the Participatory Actions facilitated the identification of issues that were overlooked in the initial analyses, such as, for instance, the relationship between mental health and educational trajectories, or the divergence between institutional indicators and subjective experiences. In several contexts, participation contributed to a more relational and contextual reinterpretation of the data.
- Ethical dimension - The involvement of young people in the Innovation Forums necessitated careful attention to trust, care, and safety. The research teams implemented strategies to mitigate power imbalances and cultivate an inclusive environment.
- Dissemination - Through the collaborative design of visual and narrative materials, project results were rendered into accessible formats and tailored to diverse national contexts. The Innovation Forums created chances for further elaboration of these results, and served as effective dissemination mechanisms, amplifying communicative impact and promoting the diffusion of the knowledge built by research.

Regarding the outcomes, the Transversal Participatory Approach yielded relevant recommendations at both systemic and operational levels:

- Structural reforms, including the development of new models of collaborative governance, formal recognition of non-formal skills, and the advancement beyond standardized metrics of academic achievement.
- Targeted interventions, such as local inclusion initiatives, enhanced support for vulnerable students, and greater integration among educational, social, and urban policy domains.

As cross-cutting evidence deriving from the experience of application of the Transversal Participatory Approach, numerous national reports have underscored the value of a relational and dialogical approach to the analysis of learning outcomes, highlighting its potential in redefining institutional cultures and influencing educational practices, interpretive frameworks, and, more ambitiously, policy makers.

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## 1. Introduction

By a comparative European perspective, CLEAR sought to investigate the dynamics underpinning the construction of young people's learning outcomes (LOs) and educational (under)achievement. The project adopted a multidimensional theoretical and methodological framework integrating insights from Spatial Justice, Intersectionality, and Life Course research, to capture the intricate interplay among individual, structural, institutional, territorial, and relational dimensions. The analysis aimed to highlight how these factors collectively shape academic performance and the quality of learning processes, influencing young people's educational and life trajectories and contributing to both successes and challenges encountered within various local educational contexts.

To enhance the project's capacity to recognize and value the perspectives of diverse stakeholders within educational systems, while ensuring the dissemination of findings in languages accessible to multiple audiences, CLEAR adopted a Transversal Participatory Approach (TPA) coordinated under Work Package 8. This approach incorporated participatory activities throughout all stages of the project development, *transversally* reinforcing its inclusive dimension and communicative effectiveness. The flexible design of the TPA within CLEAR facilitated the integration of participation across multiple phases of research and dissemination, addressing the requirements of a project that was not exclusively based on participatory research, and thus aimed to balance the use of both traditional and innovative participatory methodologies. This adaptability enabled the effective customization of research instruments and enhanced both the dissemination and practical applicability of the findings. Furthermore, the TPA proved *integral* to the entire research process in CLEAR, facilitating the connection of various empirical strands not only from a methodological standpoint but also through the fostering of network development (e.g., managing contacts established at different stages of fieldwork). This integration thus reinforced the internal coherence and coordination of the project.

The TPA coordinated two main lines of action:

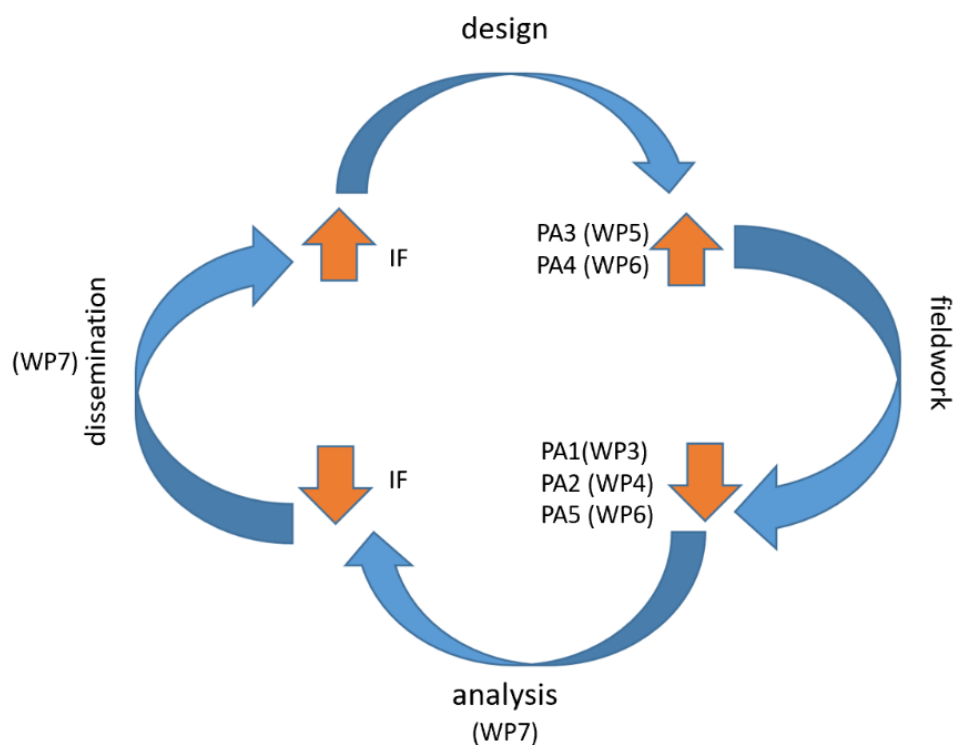
- the Participatory Actions (PAs), which opened the research process for the participation of different social actors who contributed to a better understanding of the construction, application, and evaluation of LOs on multiple levels in the countries involved. The PAs integrated into the empirical Work Packages (from 3 to 6) constituted the *backbone* of the TPA as they engaged educational stakeholders in different moments of the research, aiming at finetuning research tools, discussing raw data, and/or shaping the format of its outputs, that also fed the discussions in the Innovation Forums (IFs).
- The Innovation Forums planned at the final stage of the project. They were participative and deliberative spaces designed to stimulate discussion, reflection, and the exchange of arguments and opinions among diverse participants through



innovative methodologies. The IFs gave a chance to further elaborate on the project’s outputs and discuss them considering the standpoints of stakeholders in education positioned at different level, with particular reference to youths.

Altogether, under the coordination of the five major PAs linked to a particular empirical Work Package, thirteen participatory actions were implemented at local level<sup>1</sup>, and 11 IFs were organised in the countries involved. The following figure schematises the impacts of the TPA on the whole CLEAR’s research process.

**Figure 1 – The impact of the TPA on CLEAR’s research process**



Source: WP8 Team

As introduced in *D8.1 Strategy Paper*, the implementation of the TPA in CLEAR was meant to reproduce an Open Science approach as fostered by UNESCO (2021), thus highlighting social hierarchies and power unbalances not only by means of research results, but also throughout the research processes that question knowledge production and ownership, and challenge the normativity often embedded in more established research methodologies. This aim did not result in a naïve interpretation of participation as a solution for overcoming power relations and social hierarchies embedded in educational environments. Instead, it required acknowledging these imbalances to unsettle the illusion of homogeneity in education, replacing it with dialogical spaces where complexity was not erased but embraced. Although challenging to manage, the heterogeneity of

<sup>1</sup> With the only exception of PA5 that was organised online and allowed for the participation from different countries.



stakeholder profiles engaged in the TPA, and their different power positions, became one of its core strengths.

The PAs were co-designed in a democratic manner by the researchers of the Core Teams responsible for carrying out the tasks within each empirical Work Packages (from WP3 to WP6), while the IFs had a flexible design to match the national teams' expertise, the specificity of each national and local context and the feasibility of their implementation according to the varying teams' resources (in terms of funds, time and human resources).

The WP8 Core Team accompanied the partners throughout the process of design and implementation of the TPA, and all the research teams received methodological support of Codici Ricerche Cooperativa Sociale Onlus, a non-governmental organisation specialised in participatory projects. Synthetically, the WP8 Core Team provided comprehensive support to partners in the design and implementation of PAs from the inception of the project. The team delivered training in innovative research methodologies, operational tools, and ongoing guidance, alongside specific recommendations for the integration of participatory approaches across the empirical Work Packages. Furthermore, the WP8 Core Team developed documents, tools, and guidelines that facilitated the preparation and management of activities and Innovation Forums<sup>2</sup>.

As set in the *D8.1 Strategy Paper*, the overall goals of participation in CLEAR consisted in:

- promoting reflexivity and raise awareness at the institutional/organizational level, to involve youths as critical and meaningful actors, and not merely as an audience to be targeted (or worse as social problems to be addressed). This objective was initially pursued by engaging academics, educational professionals, and experts within the PAs, incorporating their perspectives and insights into the design of the empirical research coordinated by CLEAR and considering their viewpoints in the interpretation of the collected data. Furthermore, stakeholder reflexivity was fostered through debates organized in the IFs, where the participation of young people provided a valuable opportunity for dialogue among actors who, despite their cohabitation within educational environments, rarely benefit from mutual exchange and discussion.
- Questioning the dominant (and often uncritically assumed) understandings of social phenomena such as educational (under)achievement, incorporating and comparing different perspectives and meanings. Within the IFs, debates

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<sup>2</sup> The support for the design of the PAs provided by the WP8 Core Teams is presented in *D8.1 Strategy Paper*. The process of capacity-building and skills sharing with the partner in view of the organisation of the IFs is detailed in *D8.2 Innovation Forum* report. The tools aimed at supporting the design of PAs and IFs are presented on the project's website (<https://clear-horizon.eu/tools-resources/>) and further elaborated in the *D9.2 Guidelines for Using Participatory Methodologies*.

concerning the most established praxis of learning outcomes measurement, alongside discussions regarding the relational dynamics shaping young people's educational experiences, illuminated various potential alternative approaches to the dominant understandings of LOs. These approaches were informed by the needs and aspirations expressed by the young participants.

- Shaping different outputs of research, drawing from the different skills, sensibilities, and standpoints of the participating people to design outcomes able to reach different targets and engage with different communication styles. This task was pursued by means of the PAs aimed at shaping empirical outcomes for their discussion in the IFs, as well as through the debate in the IFs, where dissemination materials were tested and finetuned accordingly.

The PAs have been thoroughly presented in *D8.1 Strategy Paper* and chapter 13 of *D7.1 Comparative Report*, and the experience of design and implementation of the Innovation Forums in *D8.2 Innovation Forums*. This deliverable complements the previous ones by focusing on the National Reports on Participation (collected in Annex 1 of this document), where the project partners yielded a comprehensive reflection about their whole experience in managing participation after the conclusion of all its phases (PAs and IFs). It thus aims to discuss pros and cons derived from this experimentation and consider the contribution of the TPA to the project's results.

Before going into the comment of topics emerging from the National Participatory reports, it is important to stress that the integration of participatory activities within the CLEAR's overall scheme was meant to be an experimentation, as introduced in *D8.1 Strategy Paper*. Therefore, the results presented in this deliverable must be interpreted as the outcomes of a process that progressed by trials and errors, as for most of the project partners it was the first time managing participation.

This report firstly quantifies the participation in CLEAR discussing the implemented forms of participation, and the amount and typologies of stakeholders involved at different levels and stages. Successively, it considers the impact of the TPA on the research process (in terms of methodology, contextualisation, data analysis and ethics). Then it proceeds with highlighting the contribution of the TPA with respect to the project's dissemination and elaborate insights and recommendations for policy makers and future research. Finally, the report discusses the relevance of the TPA with respect to the EU call addressed by the project.

## **2. Forms of participation and stakeholders' profile in the TPA**

Each PA linked to the empirical Work Packages (from 3 to 6) was designed to integrate participatory elements into different research lines of the project and with different degrees of participants' involvement.



PA3 was carried out at an early stage of WP5, before the design of the interview instruments and the choice of the strategy for interviewees' selection. The involvement of experts and street level professionals was very high, and the participants committed to support the research teams and act as key informants and friendly door keepers for access to the groups of young people in vulnerable situations in the relevant regions.

PA4 was also implemented before the fieldwork in WP6 with the aim of developing the survey framework and procedures for national data collection with a similarly high level of contribution from the street-level professionals.

PA2 and PA5 came after the fieldwork in the relevant WPs – at the stage of analysing the research findings. The participants also contributed to the construction of dissemination products such as policy briefs and reports and materials for the Innovation Forums in a design that appeals to a non-academic audience.

PA1 was also implemented at a later stage in WP3, after the production of the Cross-national/Cross-regional Quantitative Analysis Report based on using official statistical data. The experts acted as co-researchers and critical friends in exploring divergent and critical points of view on LO and highlighting the lacks in the statistical treatment of LOs. Regarding the forms of the PAs, the face-to-face meetings prevailed, which were also assessed by the national teams as the more appropriate format to hold such events, due to the greater level of involvement of the participants. Although logistically convenient, the online environment was perceived as less inefficient for the goal of free exchange of perspectives. Unforeseen technical difficulties and language barriers might also hinder the normal process of discussions.

The PAs have significantly improved the quality and relevance of research activities coordinated by the empirical Work Packages. Participatory methodologies have enabled researchers to refine tools, validate approaches, and deepen their understanding of local contexts. Notably, by testing materials and procedures directly with recipients and stakeholders, the results have proven to be not only methodologically sound but also pertinent to the realities of the local educational systems being analysed. For instance, in Portugal, PA4 involved a diverse range of participants' profiles, "ensuring that diverse voices, perspectives, and experiences could contribute to the co-construction of knowledge". This strategy made it possible to calibrate research instruments and objectives to the socio-economic specificities of the areas. In Finland, the use of PA3 was a strategic action to refine and clarify the qualitative interview schedule applied in WP5. This approach was successful in identifying target groups and ensuring participants' commitment for the subsequent phases of the project: "It helped us to appreciate the complexity of the local educational landscape". This approach provided not only more accurate data, but also a stronger relational fabric for future phases of the project. In Bulgaria, PA3 identified structural barriers and the lack of attention to individual needs. They also provided concrete elements for defining the research sample, such as



"compiling a list of vulnerable situations, which supported fieldwork in both regions". Meanwhile, Italy has experimented by PA5 with visual outputs — such as posters created from qualitative interviews — to stimulate discussions in Innovation Forums. These tools have been enhanced with feedback from teachers and street level professionals, aiming "to test, co-design, and improve the graphic output". In Greece, the participants in PA2 validated major recurring issues — like institutional categorisation, emotional exclusion, and the lack of recognition for informal skills —, and they also brought forward fresh perspectives, including the political dynamics of local involvement and how municipal authorities can act as connectors between formal and informal frameworks. Table 1 presents the number and type of the main activities across the process of the project development.

The Innovation Forums (IFs) came at the latest stage on the TPA implementation in the CLEAR project and performed the role of closing the cycle of TPA, as pointed out in D8.2 Innovation Forums report. They were organised by the project partners at the local level as deliberative spaces for open expression of ideas and reflection on the outcomes of the empirical and analytical research work. The local teams prioritized the engagement of young people in the IFs, with particular emphasis on reaching individuals in vulnerable situations—especially those facing challenges in their educational trajectories, such as early school leavers and youths classified in NEET condition. In addition, the invitations to participate in the IFs specifically targeted schoolteachers across different levels and grades. Owing to the project's focus on both formal and informal education, teachers had previously been seldom involved in earlier CLEAR research activities, despite their inclusion in the WP6 survey respondent list. The findings were presented in formats and languages that were accessible to a non-academic audience which stimulated a participatory dialogue between diverse educational stakeholders. The discussions identified critical factors in the process of constructing LOs, highlighted hidden challenges and opportunities within local contexts and identified some innovative approaches to policy making in support of young learners in vulnerable situations.

The 11 IFs implemented diverse forms of group discussions using various participative methods. The forums built upon the results of the previous participatory activities, involving some of their participants and were fed by the dissemination materials developed in the PAs. It is relevant to point out here that the success of the events was ensured by mobilising old and creating new networks of diverse educational stakeholders and by accumulating skills for using participatory and interactive techniques by the academic researchers in the project. The participatory debates during the forums instigated a collaborative mutual learning process challenging previous assumptions, opening eyes for contradictory standpoints and fostering self-discovery.



**Table 1 – Transversal Participatory Approach in CLEAR**

Form of participation	Country	Place of PA	Form of PA	WP addressed by PA
PA1	Austria	Vienna	Co-learning workshop	WP3
PA2	Spain	Barcelona	Online participatory workshop	WP4
	Italy	Urbino	Prompt-based participatory workshop	
	Greece	Thessaloniki	Participatory workshop and World Café discussion	
PA3	Finland	Kainuu	Discussion group	WP5
		Turku	Discussion group	
	Bulgaria	Gabrovo	Discussion group	
		Plovdiv	Discussion group	
	Portugal	Lisbon	Discussion group	
PA4	Italy	Urbino	Group and individual interviews	WP6
	Finland	Turku	Discussion group	
	Portugal	Porto	Discussion group	
PA5	Italy, Portugal, Finland	Urbino, Porto, Turku	Online workshop	WP6
IF	Italy	Genoa	Two plenaries and three working groups	WP3, WP4, WP5, WP6, WP7
		Urbino	Two plenaries and three working groups	WP4, WP5, WP6
	Germany	Hamburg	Two plenaries and three working groups	WP3, WP4, WP5
	Bulgaria	Plovdiv	Two plenaries and three working groups	WP4, WP5, WP6
	Greece	Thessaloniki	Two plenaries and six working groups	WP4, WP5, WP7
	Finland	Turku	Two plenaries and three working groups	WP5
	Austria	Vienna	Two plenaries and three working groups	WP3, WP4, WP5
	Portugal	Lisbon	Two plenaries and two working groups	WP3, WP5
	Spain	Castello	Two plenaries and two working groups	WP5, WP6
		Barcelona I	Plenary discussion	WP5
		Barcelona II	Plenary discussion	WP5

Source: WP8 Team



A prerequisite for the implementation of the TPA in the project was the securing of the involvement of a wide and diverse range of participants outside of the academia. The national teams made efforts to achieve a good balance of stakeholders in education and learning. The total number of stakeholders involved in the different activities in the TPA (besides the academic researchers) is 307 with 97 participants in the five PAs and 210 participants in the 11 IFs. Since the concrete objectives of the different PAs and the IFs were not unified, it is better to comment on the composition of the groups of participants separately. The PAs targeted practitioners and experts for participation in the discussion of research instruments, selection of interviewees and survey informants and intermediate research findings (See Table 2). PA1, PA4 and PA5 aimed mostly at involving experts while PA2 and PA3 relied on the participation of street level professionals, mostly teachers, social and youth workers and activists in NGOs. While the teams aimed at equal gender representation in the participatory activities, women slightly outnumbered men which largely correspond to the general structure of the personnel in the field of social and education policies in the CLEAR countries.

**Table 2 - Participants in the PAs**

PA	Team	Participants				
		Total	Stakeholder group		Gender	
			Experts	Practitioners	Men	Women
PA1	Vienna	5	3	2	4	1
PA2	Barcelona	4	3	1	2	2
	Urbino	4	1	3	3	1
	Thessaloniki	12	5	7	7	5
PA3	Turku	20	-	20	5	15
	Plovdiv	18	5	13	9	9
	Lisbon	7	-	7	2	5
PA4	Urbino	3	3	-	2	1
	Turku	8	8	-	3	5
	Porto	4	3	1	2	2
PA5	Urbino, Porto, Turku	12	7	5	6	6
Total		97	38	59	45	52

Source: WP8 Team

The IFs were presented in more detail in *D8.2 Innovation Forum* report. Here we look at the latest data adding two more events organised in Barcelona which were carried out after the publication of the cited report. The participation in the IFs as a key activity of the TPA was planned to be larger than that in the PAs: between 20 and 40 people in order to



achieve the goal of meeting stakeholders from diverse backgrounds bringing different perspectives and opinions on the topics discussed. The organisation of the IFs was also more demanding in terms of logistics, time and financial resources, than the PAs. Again, the reality proved more complex and despite the intensive outreach work preceding the IFs, the overall numbers of participants and balance between the groups was not fully achieved. The local teams struggled with different barriers in their contexts. At the end, the actual number of participants achieved in each forum varied between 11 in Lisbon and 38 in Thessaloniki (See Table 3).

**Table 3 - Participants in the IFs**

Country	Place	Participants total	Stakeholder group			Gender	
			Young people	Policy makers	Practitioners	Men	Women
Italy	Genoa	24	14	3	7	5	19
	Urbino	15	6	4	5	3	12
Germany	Hamburg	13	2	1	10	7	6
Bulgaria	Plovdiv	21	10	4	7	4	17
Greece	Thessaloniki	38	18	6	14	17	21
Finland	Turku	19	8	5	6	5	14
Austria	Vienna	15	10	2	3	9	6
Portugal	Lisbon	11	2	2	7	2	9
Spain	Castello	24	14	3	7	11	13
	Barcelona I	11	9	-	2	4	7
	Barcelona II	19	10	1	8	8	11
Total		210	103	31	76	75	135

Source: WP8 Team

The implementation of the IFs presented one more challenge, namely the difficulty to ensure a more diverse participation focusing on policy makers, practitioners and young people. The initial idea was to aim at an equal representation of the three main groups of stakeholders. During the preparation some national teams feared that recruiting disadvantaged youth would be particularly difficult, even with gatekeeper support. As pointed out in the Austrian report, a lower involvement of young people in the participatory forums could be expected as it reflects the deeper patterns of structural inequalities and social disengagement. However, young people were the biggest and often more vocal group in most IFs with the exception of IFs in Lisbon and Hamburg. In other local contexts policy makers were the more difficult group to recruit in the forums as a participatory activity. Some pointed at their high professional engagement preventing them from participation in such a lengthy event, others accepted the invitation and then



declined in the last moment. Nevertheless, the likelihood that policy makers might feel reluctant to engage in open discussions with different minded stakeholders should not be overlooked. In Hamburg the icebreaker activities revealed that some educational stakeholders themselves came from multi-disadvantaged backgrounds, which created an atmosphere of mutual understanding and made it easier for the young participants to share their educational and working experiences. The Spanish report highlighted the high readiness of teachers and street-level non-profit professionals to engage in the discussion which is explained by the fact that their voices were rarely heard and their expertise in VET policy was not properly recognised in both Catalonia and the Valencian Community. In terms of gender balance, women significantly outnumbered men reaching 64% of the total and their share was the same among young and adult participants. The final distribution of participants was clearly in favour of young people whose commitment to the issue of learning outcomes and openness to new approaches of discussion proved higher than that of the other groups.

The active involvement of over 300 young people, professionals and policy makers in the PAs and IFs attests to the positive acceptance of the participatory approach in the CLEAR project. The National Reports from the activities underlined the active stakeholders' involvement in the discussions which, despite the initial difficulties, achieved the set objectives.

### **3. The impact of the TPA on the CLEAR's research process**

#### **3.1. Impact of the TPA on the methodological dimension**

The implementation of the TPA was instrumental within the CLEAR project's framework, as it established an *environment* conducive to the collective construction of knowledge and the advancement of empirical research methodologies. As a methodological experimentation integrated into every step of the research process, from tool design to results dissemination and interpretation, the TPA provided a valuable methodological *laboratory* for reconsidering the function of social research in public policy. It fostered a heterogeneous methodological experimentation, tailored to national contexts and the specific phases of each empirical Work Package. In coordinating research fieldwork, the Core Teams steering the empirical Work Packages were further compelled by the integration of the TPA to think carefully about the research tool selection and related capacity to obtain contextually sensitive results by the incorporation of non-standard participatory methods, which implied a necessary methodological *openness* and sensitivity (Greenway et al., 2021).

More specifically referring to the two main components of the TPA, the PAs have been defined flexibly in order to adapt to the research activities carried out. By engaging stakeholders ranging from local practitioners to policymakers, educators and experts, the integration of the PAs aimed at bridging the gap between academia and practice,



improving data collection, and enhancing the accessibility of the research results, increasing contextual awareness, stakeholder engagement, and knowledge co-production. A first relevant impact of the TPA implementation in terms of methodology can be found in the deepening of the capacity to widen the involved research teams' perspective and capacity to understand the social environment crossed with research. Moreover, the IFs were meant to be the peak of the participatory activities. They performed the role of platforms where stakeholders from various backgrounds were able to engage in meaningful dialogue, fostering an environment conducive to mutual understanding and creative solutions. The goal of the IFs was not merely to validate the research findings, but to promote an open exchange of views based on participants' diverse personal experiences and expertise and foster a dialogue based on the diverse subjective experiences and professional skills of those involved. In this sense, tools and methods aimed at co-construction of knowledge among different social actors were employed, challenging the project partners to find suitable solutions.

One of the issues that deserves careful consideration is the assessment of the project's ability to contextualize analysis and interpretation, that is, if the TPA has effectively succeeded in integrating a plurality of perspectives and interpretations into research, pursuing a more context-sensitive approach to the analysis of the LOs construction processes. Indeed, the participatory approach is meant to turn actors from data sources to co-producers of interpretations, at least in specific phases of the research. Here, researchers do not abandon their role as experts, rather they take on the role of knowledge-builders who share a part of the empirical research with the actors. A participatory approach redefines the relation between the scholar and research object: from the observer-field dichotomy to the observer-in-the-field connection (Melucci 1996). It does not claim to produce absolute knowledge, but to build a situated knowledge: a knowledge produced within specific material, social, and cultural contexts. The participatory approach can enrich both researchers and the participants. The former gains a deeper knowledge, as involving actors that are not usually considered implies a redistribution of epistemic power (cf. Austrian National Report), creating space for epistemological diversity. The latter acquire tools to interpret and intervene in their individual and collective trajectories. Consistently, the knowledge production process throughout the TPA did not take place vertically, but turned to be a collective process, involving young people, experts, and policymakers. The participatory setting was designed to be as horizontal as possible, to not reproduce differences in status and crystallised power relations. Furthermore, interactive tools promoted open discussion, allowing everyone to express themselves and listen to the narratives and arguments of others. In CLEAR PAs and IFs, this facilitated the expression of personal points of view, even by those whose voices are rarely heard or who are called upon to express themselves through concepts and languages that are far removed from their relational contexts.



*“Participatory approaches enriched both the analytical and normative dimensions of the CLEAR project. They challenged technocratic framings of youth transitions and helped amplify the voices of young people often silenced in mainstream policy discourse, particularly those navigating non-linear paths” (Austria National Report).*

Participants acknowledged the researchers' efforts to create spaces that were truly open to different points of view, perspectives, and interpretations, which fostered a climate of trust and empathy. During the final plenary session of the IFs, most of the participants, especially young people, provided very positive feedback on the experience. Many pointed out that this was the first time they had been involved in a space that allowed them to truly express their views, in a context where they felt listened to and motivated to share their life experiences, concerns, and emotions.

*“Among our main challenges was not only to “give voice” but also to reshape the conditions under which voice becomes legible and valued, thus bringing forward silent or underrepresented perspectives, especially those of young adults affected by institutional sorting, mental health challenges, and migration-related barriers” (Austria National Report).*

*“The young participants in the IF [...] felt that they were allowed to speak safely and freely about their views and experiences while appreciating the nature of the event and the fact that it addressed issues that were relevant and resonated with their own lives” (Finland National Report).*

*“Statements such as ‘I wasn’t judged - I was listened to’ and ‘This is the first time I said something that wasn’t a complaint, but a proposal’ capture the affective intensity of the event” (Greece National Report).*

*“The young people were most active and seemed very excited by the fact that they were listened to and their views were taken seriously. One of the young men, a last year student at a Plovdiv school stated in the last session: ‘Such events shouldn’t remain in isolation. Such events give me the confidence that there are many like-minded people around, with whom we can, step by step, change everything that we do not like in our education’” (Bulgaria National Report).*

The reactions of the young participants mentioned above are particularly interesting because they highlight that a contextualized and situated analysis of the phenomena



investigated not only allows for the acquisition of a plurality of viewpoints and perspectives that are not usually accessible. It can also help motivating young people to take action and increase trust and willingness to collaborate with teachers and experts. It can also counteract the tendency toward isolation and individualization that often leads to individually managing problems experienced in biographical paths without identifying their connection to institutional dimensions and collective processes. The link between individual pathways and collective processes and structures is often overlooked in both training policies and research. These reproduce, more or less consciously, an individualistic approach to the study of transition pathways and Learning Outcomes, through the use of approaches and methodologies that are in turn individualized.

The emergence of more subjective aspects has facilitated discussion about the structural aspects shaping LOs, making it clear to participants that behind the statistical data there are diverse life experiences and perspectives which, if considered, allow a deeper understanding of the phenomena under analysis. The most intimate aspects, linked to the expression of emotions, are marginal to traditional research methods, especially the quantitative ones. Opening to the expression of emotions enable the analysis to be grounded in the dimension of individual experience, and this helps bridging subjective perspectives and interpretations to broader structural dynamics. This was supported by the fact that the adults participating in the IFs - experts and policymakers - were encouraged by the facilitators to share aspects of the biographies too, consistently with the use of tools to promote the expression of all the standpoints. In this way, the interaction with young people was productive in all the Ifs, as hierarchies and power unbalances were mitigated by empathy, to gain a recognition-based, relational understanding of youth views and choices, and embed co-interpretation into the research design, with the effect to help reshape the project's analytical lens (cf. Austrian National Report).

By the perspective of Habermas (1996)<sup>3</sup>, the discussion in the IFs enabled the development of an interaction geared towards understanding, in which each participant

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<sup>3</sup> According to Habermas (1996), a free space of communication, where participants engage in mutual understanding and argumentation rather than simply aggregating preferences or using strategic manipulation, is fundamental to reach democratic agreement. Public deliberation is based on the exercise of communicative rationality — oriented toward understanding — and not on instrumental rationality — oriented toward maximizing personal interest. Communicative action serves as the mechanism for deliberation in a democracy, providing the process for citizens to engage in mutual understanding and reasoning. In ordinary discussion contexts, communication dynamics differ greatly from the normative model as they are influenced by power relations and inequalities between participants about their economic, social, cultural, and political capital. To recreate conditions as close as possible to an ideal discursive situation and create spaces for debate and discussion in which participants can intervene freely and equally, for example to promote citizen involvement in city governance, mini publics (Ryan, Smiths 2014) are created. These are assemblies of citizens who are



contributed to develop a shared vision, starting from the plurality of approaches, languages, and perspectives present, confirming that

*"[...] the production of knowledge cannot be separated from dialogue with those who live, endure, or enact that knowledge in their everyday lives" (Italian National Report);*

*"[...] when participation is authentic and grounded in mutual recognition, it can transform research from observation into transformation" (Portugal National Report).*

The participatory approach made thus possible to introduce a form of inter-subjective and experience-grounded meaning production (cf. Austrian National Report), placing emphasis on thinking together, rather than debating positions (cf. Greek National Report). At the end of the activities, researchers from the national teams assessed the added value of the participatory activities, the unexpected results and the critical issues encountered, incorporating the feedback received from participants to their own reflections. This is a task of fundamental importance when assessing whether and how the TPA can become a recurrent component in future research.

Concerning the IFs, they have functioned not only as dissemination mechanisms but also as methodological tool aimed at reinterpreting empirical findings through a shared lens between the CLEAR research team and the various stakeholders in the educational field (youths, stakeholders, policymakers, professionals, teachers, etc.). It is important to stress that the IFs were not intended to validate the data and information collected during the CLEAR project using traditional methodological tools (such as qualitative interviews, questionnaires, document analysis, etc.). Instead, they were designed as public spaces for dialogue and exchange among various individuals who experience the educational landscape from different positions. In other words, the research results served as stimuli to promote collective reflection on the challenges and opportunities currently faced by local educational contexts where the IFs took place. This format gave a voice especially to young people, who, throughout the project and across the different countries involved, expressed their struggles in being heard by politicians, stakeholders, and education professionals. The methodological dimension of the IFs was structured along two main axes. First, it concerned the organizational processes that supported their implementation. From this perspective, the national research teams engaged in experimenting with communication formats and languages that differed from traditional academic conventions. Translating the empirical data and findings collected throughout

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demographically representative of the wider population. They are brought together to learn and deliberate on a topic to inform public opinion and decision-making. To do this, the discussion takes place in deliberative settings, which are structured and facilitated in such a way as to allow all participants to express and argue their own points of view.



the research into accessible language required researchers to change their perspective and confront the need to make their results usable for public communication — especially towards audiences not accustomed to academic dissemination. This led to a circular process of reflexivity, where the knowledge produced was tested through interaction with actors bringing different kinds of expertise. This made the organization of the IFs both complex and fascinating, at all stages and levels. Second, from a purely methodological standpoint, national teams were called to abandon conventional tools and experiment with new participatory methods. A key role in this process was played by the support provided by Codici, the partner organization that guided and assisted the implementation of IFs across all countries involved in the CLEAR project.

Looking across the various IFs, different techniques and tools were tested, although within a coherent methodological framework. In general, the World Café model and the creation of discussion subgroups were recurring features in most of the Innovation Forums. While the aim of creating safe spaces where all participants could feel comfortable sharing their thoughts was consistent across contexts, the methods used to achieve this goal varied. For example, in the two Italian IFs (Genoa and Urbino) and in Thessaloniki, the teams chose to organize subgroups that brought together diverse participants. More in general, the distribution of participants in sub-working groups is a recurrent feature among the IFs, with the only exception of the Finnish one. The aim was to foster horizontal dialogue, allowing roles and positions to blur. In these cases, stakeholders and professionals were invited to reflect more on their personal experiences within education systems, rather than focusing on their usual public or institutional roles. In contrast, in Turku, the subgroups were composed of individuals sharing the same profile — such as young people — supported by facilitators whose role was to stimulate discussion. The goal was to create a trusting environment where participants felt free to share criticisms or dissenting views related to their educational experiences. As we will see, despite these different approaches, the objective of creating a safe space was successfully achieved in both models. Furthermore, in all IFs, visual materials were used to present data and information gathered from the research activities developed within the various WPs. As previously mentioned, these materials were translated into accessible language and graphic formats, making them understandable even to those unfamiliar with traditional academic presentation styles. This forced the researchers organizing the IFs to confront the challenge of effective public communication and to adapt their outputs for a non-academic audience. The visual materials included data, graphs, interview excerpts, and quotes — all derived from the research WPs. Finally, in every context, a specific moment was dedicated to reflecting on the future of educational systems, encouraging imagination and critique, and supporting the development of alternative educational trajectories. In summary, the tools adopted were adapted to local contexts thanks to the flexibility of the "Octopus" model (see *D8.2 Innovation Forums*) which ensured both methodological coherence and operational autonomy for the national teams.



Concerning the participants' expectations, in some cases they were initially disoriented, because they expected a more traditional meeting aimed at presenting and validating the research outcomes. In other cases, participants complained that they had been involved in previous participatory workshops that turned out to be tokenism, namely a symbolic - or fake - inclusion, which turns participation perfunctory or merely symbolic, having little or no impact on decisions or in changing the status quo. In some situations, the researchers themselves had some initial difficulty in implementing an approach they were not used to and in taking on the role of facilitators. However, both researchers and participants expressed positive evaluations at the end of the activities. According to this experimentation, the TPA provided insights into an innovative approach that could be implemented in future research in a more structured format.

*"We have come to the conclusion that the notion of participation is very limited in our case, as it is reduced only to a single event and has limited potential to install long-term changes. Nevertheless, it was an enriching experience and helped us not only to see the intricacies of local environments, but also to think of our research on learning outcomes as a chance to break with the established understandings and offer a more sustainable and inclusive approach to education"*  
(Germany National Report).

On the other hand, the whole experience of application of the TPA helped to overcome some doubts both about the possibility to involve young people and about the actual added value of these practices. As the Spanish team observed, an appropriate setting, facilitation, the use of diversified languages, can promote open and inclusive discussion even when there is an imbalance in status and interpersonal and communication skills.

*"Initially, the UAB team was doubtful about the potential of participatory activities involving disadvantaged young adults. Although Latin American sociologists like Orlando Fals Borda and educationalists like Paulo Freire have convincingly shown that participation empowers even the most destitute, we struggled to see how young students could really discuss their own problems publicly with educators and policymakers who inherently hold an uneven power relationship with them (...). It has been extremely interesting to observe how the young participants elaborated sophisticated analyses of the perverse effects of material deprivation, certain ungrounded expectations on the language skills of migrants and the irrelevance of school curricula for the education of young generations that are more diverse than the older generations of*



*teachers, policymakers and social researchers in European countries”  
(Spain National Report).*

We can argue that the TPA enhanced the capacity of the project to contextualise analysis and interpretations, by allowing to build more relational, dynamic, and context-sensitive process. The involvement of different perspectives and interpretations allowed to incorporate a contextualized and situated understanding, open to the incorporation of specific standpoints, which is opposed both to a realist gaze (from nowhere), and to a relativistic gaze (from everywhere) (Montenegro et al. 2022). The TPA was indeed able to introduce reflexivity in the research, replacing the traditional focus on objectivity, promoting the expression of subjectivities and the intersubjective dialogue and cooperation between researcher and participants (Ranci, 1995; Williams & Vogt, 2011).

The feedback received from participants involved in PAs and IFs was mostly encouraging, to the point that it was often highlighted that this type of participatory, relational, and situated approach to knowledge production:

- should be used in a structured, rather than episodic, form;
- should be applied not only in research, but also in educational contexts, where the various actors involved communicate little and each remains anchored to their own languages.

The researchers agreed that the TPA should be applied to future research, further expanding it. The aims to be pursued in this sense were clearly identified in the Portuguese National Report:

- *“move beyond consultation in order to foster co-creation processes*
- *strengthen territorial anchoring;*
- *prioritise relational methodologies;*
- *diversify epistemologies by combining narrative, visual, and artistic tools;*
- *ensure continuity: Avoid extractive logics by creating feedback loops, follow-up spaces, and opportunities for long-term collaboration”.*

As pointed out in the Finnish National Report, a further recommendation regards the importance to reserve enough time and resources for designing and implementing participatory activities.

### ***3.1.1 Achievements and criticalities from the implementation of the TPA in a methodological perspective***

In closing this section of the report, we can highlight some of the most positive achievements gained through the implementation of the TPA.



Concerning the PAs, the co-construction of research instruments proved effective, as the PAs functioned as reflective devices, capable of challenging standardized approaches and producing more context-sensitive tools. In Finland, focus groups with education and youth policy professionals contributed to refining the interview guidelines for vulnerable youth (WP5); similarly, the PAs integrated into WP6 helped better defining the expert profiles for the international survey. Strengths included sustained engagement, careful participant recruitment, and a clear link between PAs and the empirical tools. In Bulgaria, the discussions with local experts helped identify context-specific vulnerabilities and suggest relevant interview questions. In Italy, PA5 was used to test visual communication tools (e.g., narrative posters and scenarios) and to critically revise the survey instruments, making them more consistent with local contexts and stakeholder needs.

Secondly, the PAs contributed to the production of situated knowledge, enabling the emergence of narratives and perspectives that are frequently overlooked by traditional research methodologies, while decentring the epistemic authority of researchers. Examples include: the emotional and relational dimension of education processes (PA1); the role of social marginalization, discrimination, and cultural identity (PA2); the divergence between institutional indicators of academic success and local understandings of meaningful learning (PA3 and PA5).

Finally, the use of visual and creative tool was useful in fostering participatory engagement. The experimentation also included visual and creative tools (e.g., narrative posters, Padlet, imaginative scenarios) to encourage expression and lower barriers to communication. In Italy and Greece (PA5 and PA2), in particular, these tools enabled the active involvement of non-expert participants, transforming the interpretation of findings into a shared, accessible exercise.

The main criticalities faced by the Core Teams implementing PAs regard organisational complexity and time constraints. Compared to traditional approaches, the PAs required more time for designing and implementation. In certain instances (see for instance PA4), time constraints hindered a more thorough examination of all the intended themes. Online environments (see PA5) add challenges in managing time and ensuring balanced participation. The representativeness of the involved of participants remains an open methodological question. As well-known, in qualitative social research, representativeness does not refer to statistical generalizability but to the depth and diversity of the perspectives included in the sample. While smaller samples are typical, attention must be paid to including marginalized or less-visible voices. Representativeness is thus achieved through conceptual saturation rather than numerical proportion. The specific nature of the PAs prevented a larger inclusion of social profiles, and in some cases, it led to involve already-networked participants, thus reducing viewpoints' diversity (PA1). The richness of discussions sometimes exceeded the format or time available, making it difficult to integrate insights systematically into the main



analysis. This shows the challenge of mediating between the depth and scale of participatory discussions with the structural requirements of formal reporting.

The methodological experimentation conducted through the Innovation Forums revealed many positive aspects, but also some critical issues. From a positive perspective, an analysis of the National Reports focusing on the IFs shows that these spaces effectively promoted inclusiveness and supported the expression of a plurality of voices. The participation of diverse profiles in a space perceived as safe and protected allowed for meaningful exchanges between individuals holding different roles within educational systems. Many of these actors — who do not usually engage in dialogical or deliberative spaces — were generally able to actively participate in a co-construction of meaning around the main themes addressed in the IFs. For example, during the IF held in Austria, policymakers reported being particularly impressed by the depth and reflective competence expressed by the young participants. Second, the interaction between these situated reflections, developed by individuals with different roles within the school system, enriched the interpretation of the data and information collected during the CLEAR project. This diversity of viewpoints allowed for alternative readings and interpretations, producing outcomes more closely aligned with the needs expressed by the local communities in which the IFs were implemented. In Genoa, for instance, participants focused on the need to strengthen the role of schools as mediators between the demands expressed by young people and the local policies targeting them. Third, the production of graphic outputs to foster participation became an opportunity to develop accessible formats and languages, which improved the dissemination of the project's results. In Lisbon, for example, the researchers radically simplified the visual tools used, making the materials more accessible to young people with migrant backgrounds who had limited proficiency in Portuguese. Finally, the participatory approach underpinning the IFs helped generate an emotionally engaging and inclusive environment, encouraging the emergence and sharing of significant personal experiences and increasing both participants' involvement and freedom of expression.

However, the methodological approach of the IFs also revealed some critical issues. These were primarily related to the organizational and implementation capacity of the research teams, rather than the practical execution of the forums themselves. First, several teams pointed out that managing heterogeneous groups, preparing materials, and facilitating discussions required specific skills and resources that were not always available. For example, in Castelló, the lack of adequate space and technical support limited the Spanish team's ability to document the event. From this, a second limitation emerged: the difficulty in balancing power dynamics between young people, professionals, and policymakers. Although this issue was reported in multiple countries, most teams made efforts to mitigate these asymmetries — and succeeded in doing so in the majority of cases. Finally, two additional limitations highlighted by the research teams deserve further analysis: the difficulty of integrating participants' feedback into the qualitative and quantitative



analyses carried out within each WP and a form of epistemological tension between the horizontal and participatory nature of the IF discussions and the need for systematic reporting required by scientific deliverables. Some teams expressed difficulty incorporating the IF results into the comparative deliverables. However, it is important to clarify that in the design phase, IFs were planned as a final activity, after the completion of all empirical research. This timing meant that the IFs were not designed to generate new data or to validate results, but rather to stimulate reflection and dialogue. In this sense, the limitations perceived by some teams are more related to the timing and framing of the IFs within the project, rather than inherent flaws in the Innovation Forum model itself. At the same time, the ability to report the IFs in a language suitable to the funder's expectations is an area where researchers will likely need to develop new skills and training in the future.

The experience of the Innovation Forums confirms both the effectiveness and the complexity of methodological experimentation in the field of educational research. The approach adopted enabled the expansion of analytical categories, the active engagement of relevant actors, the generation of new research hypotheses, and the development of policy recommendations that are more grounded and legitimate. However, to ensure the sustainability and transferability of such experiences, it is necessary to strengthen the methodological training of researchers — particularly in the areas of visual, participatory, and deliberative methods. Moreover, appropriate resources and sufficient time must be planned from the outset to match the complexity of participatory work. In other words, despite some critical issues and the need to develop cross-cutting skills among researchers who wish to adopt participatory methods in their work, the IFs have shown that participation is not just a tool to enhance the legitimacy of research results. It is, in fact, a potential driver of methodological and cultural innovation. For this reason, the replication and institutionalization of Innovation Forums could represent an important path forward for both educational research and European policy development.

### **3.2. Impact of the TPA on the analysis of data**

Although most of the participatory activities coordinated by the TPA were not meant to directly feed the analysis of the empirical materials gathered in CLEAR, we can anyway consider some impacts on this dimension.

Firstly, some of the PAs contributed to orient the interpretation of raw data. Specifically, PA1 created a chance for discussing preliminary results of secondary data analysis (see WP3), and widen the analytical view, by identifying two “previously underexplored themes: [...] informational gaps faced by newly arrived migrant youth, and [...] the rising incidence and institutional neglect of mental health problems among young people” (Austria National Report). The analysis of policies produced in WP4 benefited from the contribution of PA2, as its preliminary results were discussed by stakeholders who are directly affected by the policies at the core of the Work Package's focus. Again, the



involvement of different profiles of stakeholders proved very effective in complementing the preliminary interpretation of data, as PA2

*“enriched the interpretative layer of WP4 findings. Participants’ feedback confirmed key themes—such as institutional labelling, affective exclusion, and the invisibility of informal competences — but also introduced new dimensions, such as the politics of local engagement and the role of municipal actors in bridging formal and non-formal systems” (Greece National Report).*

The PA5 promoted an online discussion with 12 experts of the first draft of analysis of the data gathered through the WP6 survey. The assessment of its impact on the analysis by the Urbino team is very positive, indeed

*“valuable insights were provided during the PA, enabling a critical examination of some of the key findings emerging from the WP6 survey. Notably, it confirmed the strong tie between social class, self-efficacy, and, more broadly, the social environment in which individuals in education find themselves. While this issue was only alluded to in the survey results and hypothesised through their relation to existing literature, the activity provided new evidence to substantiate this claim. Furthermore, it demonstrated that policymakers, as well as researchers, are very much aware of this connection even across different countries. Similarly, regarding the second selected topic, participants provided essential insights into issues that remained ambiguous in the survey. These included the actual impact of neoliberalisation and the individualisation of education at the individual level, particularly in relation to increasing inequalities. In addition to the research aims, the participatory activity also served as a bridge between research findings and the practical implications for policymakers, emerging as a pivotal tool for translating the report’s findings into the policy brief” (Italy National Report).*

The Innovation Forums (IFs) proved effective as opportunities to further elaborate research outcomes derived from the empirical work packages. The partners’ approach in this sense is exemplified in the Austrian and Spanish National Reports, both of which emphasise the enrichment of result interpretation through participatory engagement. As highlighted, “the Forum did not seek to ‘validate’ findings in a linear, positivist manner but to uncover transformative potential, identify blind spots, and surface interpretations that could not be accessed through standard empirical methods” (Austria National Report).



Similarly, “The [IFs] created a space of encounter in which empirical evidence, personal experience, and institutional knowledge were brought into critical and creative conversation” (Spain National Report). These participatory processes foregrounded significant reflections regarding the construction of LOs, deepening the research team’s understanding of LOs: “not as static competencies or formal achievements, but as processes of social recognition, often mediated by trust, support, and inclusion” (Austria National Report). The Greek partners noted that the debates within the IF *transformed* WP4 and WP5 results into dialogical tools:

*“the IF was not a dissemination activity in the conventional sense. Rather, it functioned as a co-reflective assembly in which research findings... were transformed into dialogic tools—visual prompts, quotes, scenario cards—that seeded collective exploration, critique, and reimagination” (Greece National Report).*

In the Italian context, the IFs prompted a reconsideration of how educational performance is quantified: “both forums underscored the necessity of transcending standardised evaluation systems, advocating for more inclusive, adaptable, and empathetic approaches to learning and assessment” (Italy National Report). According to Italian participants, this objective may be achieved only by rethinking

*“the education system in Italy around the aim of valorising personal capabilities and passions – something that the idea of ‘merit’ and a strict and quantitative conception of learning outcomes are seen as incapable of”.*

In closing this paragraph, it’s important to stress that the comparative analysis yielded in WP7 has also drawn from the TPA, applying its outcomes as material for reflection in comparative analyses.

### **3.3 Ethical challenges in the implementation of the TPA**

Consistently with the framing of ethical issues presented in *D8.1 Strategy Paper*, the TPA raised a series of questions that go beyond formal compliance (e.g., informed consent, data protection), requiring reflexivity, contextual sensitivity, and a sustained commitment to inclusion, care, and epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007; Kidd et al., 2017). Indeed, applying participation in the project has requested recurring negotiations of trust, confidentiality, and non-routinary approach to the ownership of the research results.

Across countries, the participatory activities have also involved structurally marginalized or vulnerable groups across nations, especially young adults who were socioeconomically or educationally disadvantaged. In this context, informed consent could not be treated as a one-off act, but as an ongoing dialogical process. For example, in Finland and Bulgaria, researchers took care to build trust-based relationships with frontline professionals who



acted as mediators with youth participants. In Greece and in Italy, visual and narrative tools were used to ensure that participants could express themselves in their own terms, reducing linguistic and cognitive barriers. Furthermore, the voluntary nature of engagement was emphasized at every stage. In this way, the teams implementing participatory activities have pursued forms of participants' engagement able to overcome the traditional definition of research at the outset, acknowledging that these kinds of activities can evolve in unpredictable ways; hence, the commitment to making it a process that spans all stages of participation was effectively implemented.

In addition, epistemic asymmetries (e.g., between academic researchers, policy professionals, and young participants) remained a challenge. For instance, in PA4, participants with institutional roles or academic training sometimes dominated discussions, which could marginalize the voices of younger or less confident participants. Some teams (notably in Greece and Finland) responded to this by using facilitative strategies - such as breakout groups, anonymous tools (e.g., Padlet), and creative formats - that helped mitigate dominance and create more egalitarian spaces for contribution. Nonetheless, the risk of reproducing power imbalances was always present, requiring constant reflexive attention from facilitators. The *D8.1 Strategy Paper* had explicitly warned about such risks, underlining the structural power imbalance between policymakers, professionals, and youths. The solution implemented by the research teams - e.g.: creative tools, anonymous channels, facilitation - can be interpreted strategies to mitigate those risks and pursue more inclusive relationships with the involved stakeholders.

With reference to the dimension of care, that was at the core of the *D8.1 Strategy Paper*, establishing conditions for people to share their personal stories, particularly young people, suggests a responsibility to provide emotional support and safety. Several teams stated that they took great care in creating inclusive, safe, and judgment-free environments. In Finland, Bulgaria, and Greece, efforts were made to ensure that workshops and interviews took place in calm, supportive environments, often with the assistance of professionals known to the participants. In several cases, professionals provided safe spaces for youth to be interviewed.

This attention to care extended to the research teams themselves, who were often confronted with emotionally charged stories and ethically sensitive decisions. Ethical participation thus entailed not only the protection of participants, but also support for facilitators - including appropriate training, supervision, and debriefing.

#### **4. The impact of the TPA on dissemination**

The implementation of the TPA in the CLEAR project had a strong impact on the dissemination of research results which was not limited to the traditional form of inviting some stakeholders to listen to academics presenting research outcomes and the eventual



follow-up session in a questions and answers format. In CLEAR young people, teachers, policy makers and street level professionals were meant to act as co-creators of the dissemination outputs. Their experiences, views and values affected the strategies and tools for spreading the findings in diverse settings and in forms understandable by multiple publics. Our strategy was in line with a growing field of participatory studies which include the contribution of participants outside of academia in the creation of audio and visual materials and other forms for more effective sharing of findings and advocacy on behalf of the groups and communities involved in the research (Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Franzen & Orr, 2016).

While the dissemination results will be fully presented in the reports from Work Package 9, in this section we describe and analyse the added value from the TPA in project. The participatory activities linked to the empirical Work Packages supported the development of a more inclusive design of the IFs and the construction of textual and visual tools in participants' languages that stimulated a more creative and collaborative discussion of the findings and a better reflection on the research process. What is more, the participatory elements in the field of dissemination helped the research teams, as underlined in the Austrian report, to reconsider how to interpret our results when publishing not only in mass media but also in academic journals.

The first PA did not have a set task related to dissemination. Still, the Core Team reported that the engagement of educational experts in discussing the spatial inequalities in LOs informed the team's dissemination efforts by pointing at the need to integrate visual methods (e.g. video creation, graphic recording) into the presentation of research results. Such creative forms held the potential of reducing communicative barriers to the understanding of the findings of the complex statistical analysis of qualitative data. Similarly, PA3 which involved street level professionals in the preparation of the fieldwork did not have a specific dissemination objective. Nevertheless, the organised discussion groups highlighted the interest of teachers and social workers to hear the voices of young people in their own words. After the fieldwork the three partners belonging to the Core Team selected excerpts from the interview transcripts which were then prepared and used during the IFs in all countries proving to be one of the most effective stimuli for open and inclusive debates. PA2, PA4 and PA5 were organised with the objective of involving participants in the co-design of a dissemination output to be presented and used during the Innovation Forums. The tool design had to be appealing to a non-academic wide audience (particularly, local practitioners). The participatory workshops carried out with the framework of PA2 decided on the presentation of selected findings from WP4 in accessible, visualised formats such as comics or illustrated booklets capturing real-life stories. As pointed in the Greek report, the participants in the Thessaloniki session came to the conclusion that dissemination should be implemented not as a unidirectional transfer of information, but as a relational, locally anchored process. In PA4 and PA5 discussing results from the WP6 survey, the participatory sessions contributed to the



production of materials in the form of posters and summaries to be used at the Innovation Forums, helping to identify relevant key messages for different audiences. The Finnish report also highlighted the fruitfulness of using the online tool Padlet in PA5 for collecting and sharing anonymous comments during an online meeting. The set of more or less concrete suggestions for visual and graphic tools made by the diverse participants during the PAs was developed with the support of a graphic designer and the Codici personnel and progressed into a participatory toolkit which is to be presented in more details in *D9.2 Guidelines for Using Participatory Methodologies*. It was applied and tested during the IFs in the countries involved in the project.

The 11 IFs were the main participatory dissemination channels in CLEAR contributing to the systematization and refinement of the project's dissemination products. They served this function already at the stage of preparation through the announcement of the event and invitation of participants, then during the plenaries and working group discussions and finally through the follow-up actions. At the preparatory stage the teams faced the challenge of balancing the dissemination objectives and the ethical concerns of providing a safe environment for young people with vulnerable life trajectories and other educational stakeholders. Some teams, such as those in Genova and Lisbon, widely advertised the event in multiple local media and took photos during the sessions which were then used for further dissemination of the event and the project as a whole. This strategy was in alignment with the project's principles of transparency and openness while also complying with the project ethics guidelines, asking participants to sign informed consent forms authorising the use of photographic images for scientific and institutional dissemination purposes and storing personal data in full compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation. Other teams such as Urbino and Turku teams adopted an invitation-only approach to the preparation of the IFs and limited the use of photos only to the materials, without taking personal images, thus placing the focus on the protection of participants. The strategy of the remaining teams was somewhere in-between those two extremes. The outreach efforts of the teams to ensure the participation of a wide and diverse group of stakeholders also served the dissemination purpose. The news about the project and IF reached two to three times more people than the actual number of 300 participants. Many of the invited experts and young adults spread the information to other potential participants and in practice acted as proponents of the project.

The dissemination potential of the IFs was fully demonstrated in the feedback received from participants (youth, policy makers and practitioners) about the format of the events. The use of visual handouts, alternative scenarios, and innovative posters fulfilled their task for lively and constructive discussions on the topics and issues raised, stimulating interest in collaboration between different stakeholders. In addition, the emotional impact of engaging participants in youth stories related to stigma, failure and neglect, formed a critical awareness and a sense of empathy among participants, as underlined in



the reports from Thessaloniki and Lisbon. The visual and graphic tools presenting the research outcomes were particularly appealing to the young participants in the IFs.

The IFs results were announced by all national teams in their national languages via social media such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and official announcements were posted on official institutional and university websites. The Austrian team shared visual summaries and written outputs with participants three weeks after the forum and were presented at the CLEAR Austrian Final Event. Due to the expressed high interest in the topics discussed and the desire for future cooperation, the participants in IFs in Vienna, Plovdiv, Hamburg, Thessaloniki, and Lisbon received signed certificates of participation. Many teams (Plovdiv, Turku, Genoa, Urbino) prepared short reports in their national languages containing the main results of the event and sent it to the participants' e-mails. In addition, each national team provided an English-language report with key results for the official CLEAR project site, and some teams prepared short articles for the university media. Reference should also be made here to the initiative of the Greek team, that selected and printed quotations and visual content from the IF, which were exhibited in the pedagogical exhibition at KEDEA Thessaloniki for one week after the event. Turku IF participants were given access to the presentation made during the event and Thessaloniki IF participants received a digital version of "the Youth Stories" - visual canvas co-created during the forum, with a brief explanation of how their ideas were integrated. Some participants (Genova, Hamburg, Plovdiv) requested additional results and contacts with other project partners as they were interested in the results of the IFs in other countries. Others were interested in using the tools and methods in other future events (Urbino Plovdiv). The promotional materials of the project (information brochures, pencils, disposable bottles, notebooks) were available during the discussions. Participants also received information about the CLEAR Final Conference "From Learning to Living. Co-creating education quality across European regions" in Lisbon, by distributing conference flyers and QR-Code with a link to registration. Some participants expressed interest and willingness to participate (Lisbon, Hamburg), while for others the lack of financial support (Vienna) and language barriers (Urbino) hindered the participation despite the demonstrated interest.

The visual tools developed by the IF participants will be further used to contribute to the preparation of future national and European policy briefs and conference presentations. The participatory activities in CLEAR demonstrated that such innovative tools could effectively contribute to disseminate the findings of complex research analysis to diverse publics and ensure the active engagement of disadvantaged youth in particular.

## **5. The impact of the TPA on the project's findings**

Particularly by means of the Innovation Forums, the TPA has yielded several findings that could orient educational policies and future research agendas. These outcomes can be interpreted as operational recommendations, identification of critical areas, and



proposals for reform, and they resulted from the engagement with local stakeholders and a grounded understanding of the context. Notwithstanding a common transversal approach adopted by the national teams in elaborating the discussions held in the IFs in terms of recommendations targeting policy makers and future research, the reflections yielded in the National Reports allow to organize these outputs into two main categories.

The first include the partners who have focused the interpretation of the IFs outcomes mainly in terms of systemic/structural change. This kind of suggested directions aims at reforming the structure of the education system or its connections with other areas (governance, evaluation criteria, policy integration), with long-term impacts. For instance, the Finnish IF constituted a chance for reflecting on how translating insights into policy would require collaborative governance arrangements. The report suggests further exploration of multi-actor collaboration and emphasises a governance approach able to involve coordination between various levels and actors to effectively integrate results and practices. Regarding the potential future research agenda (see also the second part of this paragraph), this highlights the need for further exploration of forms of collaboration and constellations of institutional actors fitting a more participatory model of governance. In Bulgaria, the debate coordinated in the IF highlighted significant systemic issues that hinder educational equity. It stressed the need for a shift from the evaluation of individual performance to a more conscious addressing of the structural factors that influence it. One relevant issue identified in the discussion was the lack of sufficient public attention to young people in vulnerable situations. As a result, multi-level recommendations were proposed, targeting schools, services, and local and central governance. These recommendations call for tailored support and better synchronisation between educational and social policies. The Italian report emphasises the transformative potential of participatory activities, not only as practices but also in terms of their impact on the organisational cultures of educational institutions. This perspective serves as a pathway for change, shifting from mere dissemination toward a dialogic exchange of evidence that can inform decisions related to educational curricula design, evaluation, and organisation. In Austria, the debate in the IF has called into question established practices in the national education system (e.g., early tracking and the linearity of educational pathways), proposing a redefinition of learning outcomes that includes relational and material dimensions of youth experience: “learning outcomes are viewed [by participants] beyond fixed indicators of individual achievement; they are considered relational markers of recognition, support, and inclusion”. The message here is conceptual and normative: it calls for an alternative framework for assessing students and educational performance overcoming linear and standardized understandings of the educational trajectories. Namely, a "relational understanding of success, the provision of psychosocial support within educational systems, and the institutionalization of youth voice in transition governance". In Greece the application of the whole TPA process has been also



interpreted as a chance for epistemological revision, aiming for more dialogic and less extractive approach to research:

*"[it] was both a methodological commitment and a political intervention [...] participatory work was not simply instrumental — designed to refine research tools or validate findings — but rather epistemological. It challenged the very assumptions about who produces knowledge, what counts as evidence, and how meaning is constructed within educational research and reform discourse".*

The recommendation is thus mainly research-wise, as it claims a shift in the research practices in educational environments towards an approach characterised by what the Greek report defines as a "culture of listening". It entails

*"rethinking how we frame our research questions, design our engagements, and disseminate our findings. It means privileging dialogue over data extraction, vulnerability over certainty, and co-authorship over representation".*

The second category includes the partners who have oriented their reflection more on operation/targeted interventions, hence concrete and directly applicable actions designed to respond to local needs, improve existing services and processes, or remove immediate barriers to inclusion and participation. In Portugal, the IF has highlighted previously unrecognised local needs and fostered the development of targeted inclusion measures in areas marked by socioeconomic vulnerability. The added value comes from expanding the informational and deliberative base through the collaborative construction of knowledge. This underscores the value for decision-makers of establishing channels for listening and feedback between evidence and local policies. It was recommended to involve young people in policy design and evaluation actively, promoting continuous training in intercultural mediation and transition management. It was also proposed that evaluation models be revised to include qualitative indicators related to well-being, sense of belonging, and personal fulfilment. The German National Report discusses a common limitation in episodic processes of participation: the challenge of transforming insights into actual directions of change when participation is not constant. The German team acknowledged it, stating that "the notion of participation is very limited in our case [...] Nevertheless, it was an enriching experience". The key insight achievable from this is thus procedural, with the recommendation to establish permanent avenues for participation to ensure lasting impact and continuity. However, the discussions held in the German IF resulted in several recommendations, mainly regarding the fact that young people do not perceive "administrative boundaries" (see statistical ratio and bureaucratic framework) as relevant to their life choices: what matters to them are more material aspects such as housing costs, transport accessibility, adequate educational opportunities, and good



working conditions. Consequently, greater flexibility is suggested in rules and requirements (age, certifications), to allow greater flexibility to the educational system, and avoid educational dropouts and skills mismatch. To this purpose, it was also proposed that informal and non-formal skills could be valued in educational profiles, allowing young people to showcase their personal qualities and life experiences.

The Spanish report can be placed midway between the two categories, as three Spanish IFs brought out factors that hinder the implementation of innovative policy practices and concretely affect youth opportunities. Two trajectories are particularly relevant to the policy and research agenda. The first are the structural barriers arising from information gaps, a lack of support frameworks, and misalignments between educational offerings, services, and the actual needs of students and NEET youth. The potential implications for policy are evident: without coordination mechanisms between schools, employment services, and local stakeholders, innovation can only be sporadic and ineffective. The second regards material conditions and multiple vulnerabilities. The debates in the IFs highlighted the importance of material living conditions, linking mobility and housing to educational opportunities. As reported in the National Report, there are significant “issues about mobility and accommodation in the main cities”. These challenges are not just background or mundane details, as they play a crucial role in determining access to educational pathways and work experience. The key recommendation for policymakers is that educational inclusion must be integrated with urban and social policies. This includes considerations for transportation, housing for students and workers in training, and outreach services. Without this integration, the system creates *invisible* barriers that undermine educational initiatives.

Chapter 13 of the *D7.1 Comparative Report* presented a set of research recommendations that emerged directly from the debates held within the IFs. These recommendations develop around several core themes. Firstly, there was a pronounced call for more comprehensive examination of the role that socioeconomic inequalities play in shaping learning pathways, with particular emphasis on the cumulative effects of such disparities on educational attainment and social inclusion. It confirms the relevance of the intersectional approach adopted in CLEAR. More specifically, further research was stressed as pivotal in exploring intertwinement among mental health, well-being, and learning outcomes, especially concerning young people in vulnerable conditions. Another topic addressed was the institutional and territorial dimensions: diverse working groups in the IFs emphasized the significance of comparative analyses of local contexts, multilevel governance frameworks, and administrative barriers, in order to better frame factors that contribute hindering equitable access to educational opportunities. Attention was also devoted to the transition from school to work, accompanied by recommendations for further investigation of guidance practices and support models for young individuals navigating these transitions. Finally, the Innovation Forums highlighted methodological concerns, advocating for sustained experimentation with participatory research



approaches and the inclusion of student, teacher, and community voices. From this perspective, future research is encouraged to move beyond mere external observation by directly involving stakeholders, fostering a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics experienced by diverse educational actors. In the *D8.3 National Report on Participation*, partners reflected on the overall experience of implementing the TPA, producing further guidelines for future research. A first cross-cutting element concerns the role of active participant involvement in shaping tools, objectives, and analysis. As highlighted by the Finnish team, it proved useful to “create the conditions for the voices of the participating people to actively contribute to research, tailoring solutions and allowing their views to impact analysis, research tools and outputs” (Finland National Report). The Bulgarian report highlights specific areas that require further investigation:

*“In the discussions several issues that needed more research attention were identified: the interactions between students, parents, teachers and school authorities; the impact of unnoticed mental health problems on students’ behaviour at school; avenues for effective career guidance models; peer relationships and inner dynamics of student communities” (Bulgaria National Report).*

These recommendations highlight the need for empirical research that focuses on relational dynamics and the often-invisible factors that influence educational pathways. The Greek report offers a more methodological reflection, claiming for a revision of well-established research practices themselves by an approach able to: “reflect[s] on what it means to do participatory research seriously — to stay with complexity, to cede control, to honour the voices that institutions often overlook” (Greece National Report). Future research, therefore, is encouraged to question not only the objects of its study, but also its own methods of knowledge production, accepting to work with the complexity and unpredictability of participatory involvement. Finally, the Portuguese experience reinforces this transformative vision of research: “the Portuguese experience affirms the value of embedding participation at all stages of research, not as a formality, but as a transformative method for knowledge production and social change” (Portugal National Report). The recommendation is clear: to enhance the transformative potential of research in social sciences, participation should be integrated as a methodological foundation of research, not as an ancillary phase.

## **6. Relevance to the EU Call: How the TPA contributed to address the issue of (under-)achievement**

In striving for alignment with the objectives and principles of the Open Science paradigm advanced by UNESCO (2021) — particularly its emphasis on the open engagement of diverse societal groups — the TPA in CLEAR provided an opportunity for critical reflection on the *applicability* of scientific knowledge from the perspectives of various stakeholders.



The underlying premise was that research should transcend self-referentiality, instead fostering the reflexivity of those involved to enable them to envision and potentially enact desired change. Achieving these objectives necessitated processes of knowledge (co)production that yielded accessible outcomes and transcended the boundaries of academic discourse. Such orientation of the TPA helped the research team address many of the expected contributions of call HORIZON-CL2-2021-TRANSFORMATIONS-01-04: Addressing poor learning outcomes in basic skills and early school leaving at national, regional and local level in Europe.

The application of the participatory approach allowed a better explanation of the causes of underachievement of students in vulnerable situations – one of the main expected outcomes of the Call. For instance, PA3 which consisted of holding discussion groups with local street-level professionals, allowed targeting relevant disadvantaged groups such as the socio-economically deprived, Roma, migrants, refugees in two localities in Bulgaria, Finland and Portugal, and ensured professionals' cooperation in accessing potential interviewees. The IFs discussions with the participation of at least some of those multi-disadvantaged youth threw more light on their lived experiences and the interplay of factors and actors of vulnerability. Bringing together diverse educational stakeholders in the IFs encouraged them to question the dominant technocratic understandings of educational (under)achievement and incorporate and compare different meanings and interpretations. The deliberation of contrasting young learners' career tracks in the IFs not only showed the role of social inequalities in learning trajectories but highlighted possible educational actions to overcome them, as for example the role of non-formal education and peer group support for finding a way out from the downward spiral of early school leaving and social exclusion.

The TPA also answered to the Call's expectation for research outcomes that would identify and recommend policy approaches to address underachievement by involving regional and local experts in PAs and IFs. In particular, policies for early tracking of family problems, psychological deficiencies, low language skills, teachers' stereotypes and peer violence were identified as highly necessitated policy interventions. What is more, the involvement of diverse stakeholders in IFs underscored the significance of later interventions in the learning trajectories of underprivileged young people, such as measures for providing better career advice and financial support for more educational opportunities meeting young people's aspirations that could turn low achiever's trail towards school dropout into upward social mobility towards acquiring better skills and quality jobs.

The findings from the analysis of IFs also managed to signify the importance of mobilising educational stakeholders to design innovative policy solutions by considering diverse viewpoints in open debates where all participants are treated as having equal rights to express opinions. Young people were encouraged to participate as experts of their own life experiences with different institutions along their life course; street level professionals



shared their knowledge of young people's troubles and capabilities, as well as their professional difficulties with local implementation of wide-scale policies while policy makers brought their perspectives on educational policies and aspired effective practices.

Finally, a significant contribution to the Call of the TPA in CLEAR lies in the experimental aspect of its methodology. The TPA tested the introduction of participatory actions and tools in a large-scale highly complex research project. This experimental aspect of the TPA is in line with the EU practices of policy experimentation with the aim to explore the best ways to achieve goals through citizen engagement<sup>4</sup>. We intentionally designed the TPA to generate insights into incorporating participatory methodologies into the overall multi-level mix-method research strategy of the project. The project partners were mostly unexperienced in designing and managing participation, and the project encouraged researchers to develop their skills in the field. When inviting experts as participants to the IFs most of them noted that they have not experienced such an event, so the IF organisation was a novel situation for them and an invitation for co-creation of new policy solutions. In this way, the researchers could try separating with the more traditional treatment of young people in vulnerable situations as bearers of research information and persons in need of protection and cooperate with them in research on a more equal basis. Similarly, policy makers had the opportunity to involve youths in shaping policy solutions as critical and meaningful actors, and not merely as a target audience. The direct involvement of young people in the IFs and their active participation in discussions with policy makers and experts demonstrated their acceptance of such a new role for themselves and they strongly recommended the establishment of the innovative practice of ongoing dialogue between representative of schools, communities, and other institutions. The experimental use of visual materials in the IFs encouraged the free expression of different and at times confronting views in an atmosphere of trust and mutual recognition. The participants showed a high appreciation of the format, tools, and inclusive atmosphere of the events. The feedback also included calls for increased opportunities for experimentation in education and training. Following the positive response of participants, many national reports concluded their analyses with a broader vision of a establishing a new culture in education which supports curiosity and experimentation over penalties and fosters personal growth and well-being.

## 7. Conclusion

The methodological framework implemented in the CLEAR project fostered the transversal incorporation of participatory methods throughout the project's life cycle. This approach not only fostered opportunities for collective reflection but also integrated empirical findings across the empirical Work Packages, thus deepening the understanding of dynamics under study. Through participatory activities, a heterogeneous constellation

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<sup>4</sup> See [Policy experimentation in research and innovation - European Commission](#).



of stakeholders — including young people, educators, teachers, social workers, policymakers, and educational experts — actively co-constructed conceptual frameworks, research instruments, and interpretative perspectives. By embedding stakeholders' participation at every stage, the project aimed to develop a dynamic model of knowledge production that challenged hierarchical structures and valued the multiplicity of voices inherent in educational contexts. As previously outlined in the *D8.1 Strategy Paper*, CLEAR aimed to foster reflection and awareness at both institutional, academic and societal levels, explicitly seeking to avoid construing young people as passive recipients of policy interventions or, more problematically, as *problems* requiring remediation. Within this framework, participation was conceptualised as a mechanism for interrogating prevailing interpretations of multifaceted phenomena, such as educational (under)achievement, thus facilitating the emergence of divergent perspectives and expressions of situated knowledge. The TPA's guiding principle was to challenge manifestations of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007; Kidd et al., 2017) by affirming the value and legitimacy of forms of knowledge that are frequently marginalised within public and academic discourse.

The assessment of the participatory activities implemented shows a variable set of outcomes. The evidence presented in this report suggests that, in many instances, young people were able to articulate their perspectives within environments perceived as both safe and inclusive. Moreover, these settings were particularly valued for enabling young participants to engage in open and horizontal dialogue with schoolteachers. Participants emphasized that the everyday routines and organizational structures within educational settings often neglect the significance of meaningful interaction and exchange among these two groups of *protagonists* in education. Consequently, the aim of valorising *marginal* knowledge appears to have been achieved, particularly in Innovation Forums, where the dialogue among actors occupying very different roles and positions was fostered, facilitating their mutual recognition. However, notable limitations persist, beginning with the frequently debated assumption among project partners that the inequalities generated by entrenched social hierarchies within educational systems cannot be addressed solely through the implementation of more democratic research engagement methods. Furthermore, as noted by several national teams, participation frequently manifested as episodic rather than systemic in the project, and the challenge of consistently integrating participants' contributions into data analyses diminished the anticipated transformative potential. This latter point prompts a broader reflection on the inherent complexity of integrating traditional social research approaches with participatory methods. As evidenced by the CLEAR experience, the effectiveness of such a mixed approach relies on carefully balancing methodological standardization and openness. Achieving this equilibrium demands considerable effort and must be embedded as a foundational principle from the project's inception. In considering this limit, it is however important to further stress that CLEAR was not meant to be a fully participatory project. Moreover – and regardless the relevance assigned to participation



in a project design – the risk of perpetuating power asymmetries between young people, professionals, and policymakers remains, as cautioned in *D8.1 Strategy Paper*. Thus, the CLEAR project has initiated a critical re-evaluation of the processes underpinning knowledge production; nonetheless, to be fully achieved, the comprehensive attainment of objectives related to epistemic justice necessitates sustained commitment, sufficient resources, and ongoing methodological refinement.

Regarding the two principal components of the Transversal Participatory Approach (TPA) — Participatory Actions (PAs) and Innovation Forums (IFs) — the former proved instrumental in calibrating research instruments, validating initial hypotheses, and enhancing analyses through the integration of contextual and localized insights. This enabled national teams to finetune both the methodological rigor and contextual relevance of their research. Conversely, the IFs constituted the culmination of the participatory process, functioning as deliberative arenas where actors occupying varied roles and positions engaged in meaningful dialogue, critically examined findings, and co-constructed shared perspectives. This multifaceted approach exerted a profound influence across three primary dimensions. Methodologically, the TPA facilitated the challenging of traditional research paradigms by incorporating dialogic, visual, and creative practices that encouraged expression, even among individuals typically reticent in formal contexts. Accordingly, CLEAR functioned as a methodological *laboratory*. Analytically, the participatory activities contributed to a more nuanced and complex interpretation of empirical data. For instance, some PAs highlighted dimensions not fully addressed in the preliminary analyses — such as the complex interplay between mental health, emotional exclusion, and educational trajectories — by incorporating perspectives unlikely to arise from exclusively technical approaches. Finally, on a political and societal level, the TPA has shown how research can potentially be not only a tool for observation but also for transformation. In participating in the actions promoted by CLEAR, the young people testified to the novelty of this experience, as they found themselves engaged in spaces where they felt listened to and taken seriously, while professionals and decision-makers had the opportunity to engage in a more horizontal environment, capable of mitigating power asymmetries and fostering a dialogue of recognition.

As argued in the *D7.1 Comparative Analysis Report*, the outcomes of the Transversal Participatory Approach (TPA) substantiate the value of participatory methodologies: such engagement has enriched comparative analyses by providing a more nuanced comprehension of the conceptual ambiguities inherent in the application of Learning Outcomes and by challenging technocratic paradigms centred on statistical conformity and quantitative metrics (see Table 4). Furthermore, the experience of the eleven Innovation Forums (IFs) demonstrated the capacity of young people — including those contending with multiple forms of disadvantage — to assume active and critical roles, not as passive observers, but as co-protagonists within educational and policy-making processes. This suggests, on the one hand, the need to move beyond standardised and



vertical approaches, favouring instead research and policy-making processes rooted in local contexts, attentive to relationships, and open to a plurality of languages and knowledge.

**Table 4 – Impacts of the TPA on the research process**

Impact	PAs	IFs
Impact on methodological dimensions	PAs contributed to calibrating research tools, validating procedures, and enriching data collection. They allowed the emergence of often overlooked dimensions (emotions, marginalization, exclusion) and decentralized the epistemic authority of researchers.	IFs functioned as inclusive platforms, experimenting with innovative methodologies. They enabled contextual reinterpretations, alternative readings of data, and co-production of meanings, creating safe and stimulating environments
Impact on the analysis of data	Some PAs oriented the (re)interpretation of data	IFs enriched the interpretation of results without a linear validation function. They transformed data into dialogic tools and created spaces for new interpretations
Impact on ethics	The relevance of ethical issues <i>embodied</i> in participatory activities required continuous negotiation on trust, confidentiality, and reflection on the ownership of results. Particularly in the IFs, great attention for attention to creating safe, trusting, and non-judgmental environment was employed	
Impact on dissemination	Some PAs co-produced dissemination tools (posters, scenarios, comics, booklets, visual summaries, Padlet). They contributed to the construction of the 'participatory toolkit' <sup>5</sup> and to the definition of accessible and multilingual materials	The IFs themselves constituted occasions for disseminating the project results, and <i>test</i> the languages for their diffusion according to different targets' needs and competencies
Impact on the project's findings	The PAs enriched analyses by highlighting new dimensions (structural barriers, discrimination, differences between institutional indicators and local experiences). They produced practical recommendations for research tools and policy briefs	Overall, The IFs redefined LOs as relational and situated processes. Furthermore, the IFs provided recommendations and reform proposals targeting policy makers and researchers in social sciences

Source: WP8 Team

On the other hand, it stimulates the awareness that participation cannot be episodic or marginal: to unleash its transformative potential, it should become an integral and continuous part of the research cycle and educational practices. It would be then pivotal to move beyond mere consultation of social groups and individuals by fostering co-

<sup>5</sup> The toolkit constitutes the core of *D9.2 Guidelines for Using Participatory Methodologies*.



creation processes, reinforcing territorial embeddedness, and advancing relational and diverse methodological approaches — including narrative, visual, and artistic modalities to target different stakeholders with different languages, as was positively experimented with in the IFs. In a broader perspective, when participation is rendered structural, it can serve as a catalyst for reconfiguring educational policies, fortifying connections among stakeholders, and broadening opportunities for inclusion.

Considering the experiences of the national teams in experimenting with participation, we can find specificities and continuities among them.

The Austrian experience has shown the important role of participatory methodologies in enriching educational and labour market research. The main findings include: the need to strengthen the voices of underrepresented groups in society and to perceive non-linear youth transitions as an increasingly popular life model; considering learning outcomes as deeply embedded in institutional recognition processes, emotional experiences and structural opportunities; the need for a relational understanding of success; the need to provide timely psychosocial support within education systems. The policy recommendations that emerged included: reducing standardisation in assessment at the expense of non-formal learning; institutionalisation of youth advisory structures in networks of educational and employment institutions; strengthening psychosocial counselling and promoting it as a key educational resource; longitudinal participatory formats to enable sustained feedback and co-creation of policy decisions.

The Bulgarian experience in the implementation of TPA showed the advantages of direct dialogue between all stakeholders in the field of education and created an open space for confronting and enriching their views on the problems and challenges to increasing learning outcomes. Participatory activities have proven that providing room for a greater confrontation between participants' diverging views can provide more innovative ideas for adequate policy changes. Among the main conclusions stand out: the perception of the process of constructing learning outcomes as a set of multiple factors interacting at multiple levels and not solely dependent on the provision of funding, the allocation of facilities and the number of pedagogical staff; the institutional policy framework is important for the effectiveness of the education system at local, regional and national level, but its sustainability over time also depends to a large extent on multi-actor cooperation; modern research in education must apply the participatory methodology in order to give greater value to the voices and contributions of various important actors in the processes being studied, turning the hard work process into a collaborative process.

The Finnish experience in developing and implementing participatory methods is assessed as very positive, not only in terms of the work tasks within the CLEAR project, but also in establishing a lasting future cooperation with some of the participants in the different activities. A very significant conclusion is the opportunity to share and discuss the results of the project with different groups of stakeholders within the different



participatory activities, which strengthens the link between research and practice and enables the generation of new ideas for future research. Some of the recommendations for future research in the social sciences applying the TPA include: planning sufficient time and resources to develop and implement participation activities; planning sufficient time to discuss results and ideas, taking into account multiple perspectives.

The German experience has shown that TPA allows for a more critical reflection on the results of previous CLEAR work programmes. Since the approach places very high financial, time and personnel demands, its implementation in large-scale research projects requires a long and careful preparation with relevant planning of the necessary resources. Nevertheless, the application of the participatory methods is perceived as very appropriate for management at university level, as it would greatly facilitate access to participants and groups whose voices and experiences are mostly excluded, and their feedback is too difficult. The national report highlights the crucial role of youth councillors in planning and organising participatory events. Some of the significant educational policy recommendations resulting from the integration of TPAs can be systematized as follows: the need for a more individualised approach to young people, who are often organised according to their functional preferences and constraints; more comprehensive consideration of diverse educational pathways and experiences; the need for greater institutional flexibility, especially for new administrative workers; the need for a centralised and more accessible source of information; more space for self-expression and self-evaluation of young people in order to get a better idea of their potential and increase their activity; greater neutrality of local professionals towards young people's life stories to avoid stigma and labelling.

The Greek experience in the implementation of TPA leads to several main conclusions. Participation is a relational practice based on trust and continuous work to build mutual understanding by investing time and energy in alliances with all stakeholders. Methodological adaptation and flexibility are key to respond adequately to the ever-changing composition of participants, available logistical constraints and discursive dynamics. Creating a space where participants feel emotionally and socially secure is a must (especially for the most marginalised groups). One of the most valuable results is related to the redefinition of participation itself, which should not be understood as a one-off event, but rather as a co-creation process in which participants help shape the research focus. Future research can build on this model by deepening long-term engagement with participating groups, experimenting with participatory analysis workshops and integrating creative methodologies. However, these approaches need to be underpinned by institutional flexibility, adequate funding timeframes and evaluation indicators considering the process and results. Finally, participation should be seen as a meeting to give priority to data mining dialogue.



The Italian experience in implementing the TPA highlights several important conclusions. The innovative use of visual tools, which fosters reflection, empathy and dialogue, thus helping to link the content and results of research with the experience of the participants, is perceived as very significant. Another important contribution of the methodology is the possibility of building heterogeneous working groups in different activities, creating spaces for exchange in which institutional roles are gradually blurred, leading to more egalitarian forms of participation. As a result of the application of the participatory methodology, specific recommendations to education policy are also made. One of the key findings is that there is a need to promote more inclusive evaluation practices that are not result-oriented, and schools should be seen as spaces for self-expression and recognition of subjective diversity rather than as selective tools serving labour market needs. TPA is seen as a valuable model for rethinking the relationship between research, public policy and citizenship. Strengthening its role means recognising dialogue between different stakeholders as a necessary condition for knowledge creation.

The Spanish experience with the implementation of the TPA testifies to the ability of young people to discuss and analyse publicly the consequences of material deprivation experienced, as well as the inadequacy of school programmes, and with teachers and politicians who by their very nature have unequal power relations with them. Two key themes emerged, the study of which would overcome the critical discrepancies between the prevailing understanding of education among young people and educators. Firstly, increasing the level of completeness of official information on education and training – there are important shortcomings in the available data, such as past educational experience and likely mental health problems. Secondly, making recommendations by young people to local and regional authorities in the field of education and training – focusing on the possibilities of reconciling life, work and education throughout life, which affect the plans and prospects of young people.

The Portuguese experience with TPA confirms that participatory methodology creates a space where empirical evidence, personal experience and institutional knowledge are brought into critical and creative exchange. When participation is authentic and based on mutual recognition, it can transform research from observation into transformation. It can take place on an individual level, with participants (teachers and local professionals) changing their perspectives and ready to rethink pedagogical and institutional practices. It can also be implemented at inter-institutional level, by promoting links between actors who work in the same territory but rarely cooperate. The key strengths of TPA stand out: building on already existing links with stakeholders, which fosters trust and increases the importance of engagement; an opportunity for a pluralistic and balanced discussion; methodological pluralism as a basis for deep and critical reflection on important topics and problems.



**Table 5 – Assessment of the experimentation with the TPA by the national teams**

Country	Assessment of the experimentation with the TPA
Austria	The TPA amplified voices of underrepresented groups; it emphasized non-linear youth transitions; it showed the need psychosocial support in educational environments and a reduced standardization in evaluation practices
Bulgaria	The TPA fostered dialogue among stakeholders; it highlighted multiple factors shaping learning outcomes; it demonstrated that sustainability depends on regular multi-actor cooperation
Finland	The TPA strengthened research-practice link; it highlighted need for time and resources for participatory work
Germany	Although resource-demanding, the TPA enabled inclusion of excluded groups; it highlighted role of youth counsellors and need for flexibility
Greece	The TPA was meant as co-creation based on trust, which requires institutional flexibility and long-term engagement; it demonstrated that participation should be an ongoing collaborative process
Italy	The TPA fostered innovative use of visual tools; it created egalitarian participation; it promoted inclusive evaluation and recognition of diversity
Spain	The TPA highlighted material deprivation and inadequate programs; it stressed the need for lifelong reconciliation of work, life, and education; it highlighted the gap between youth perspectives and institutional approaches to education
Portugal	The TPA fostered critical exchange between evidence, experience, and institutions; it built trust and inter-institutional cooperation; it valued pluralism

Source: WP8 Team

In conclusion, the TPA experience highlighted that participatory research is not a mere adjunct to more established and traditional social research methodologies, but it can function as an epistemological *infrastructure* able to reframe research aims, question discursive frameworks, and redesign the distribution of agency within the knowledge production process. By applying a cross-cutting and critical approach, the TPA enabled in CLEAR a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of educational phenomena and facilitated the formulation of policy recommendations embedded in the standpoints of diverse educational stakeholders. It challenged prevailing clichés frequently perpetuated in mainstream educational discourse by demonstrating that education is not merely an abstract system, but rather a lived and contested experience. Moreover, it provided evidence that educational research attains greatest relevance when those most impacted by policy regulation are not simply subjects of study but are actively empowered to participate as co-creators of contextually sensitive knowledge.

Hence, the project's *legacy* extends beyond the generation of analytical and comparative insights; it lies in the establishment of a methodological orientation and epistemic stance that foregrounds the relevance of participatory engagement. Addressing both present and emergent educational challenges, this orientation relies on the valorisation of the contributions of all actors within the educational ecosystem — especially young people — in order to embrace epistemic pluralism and rethink the relation between society and research.



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## **Annex – National Participatory Reports**

In the following Annex, the National Participatory Reports are ordered by countries, and are structured as follows: a) Introduction - The national context of implementing a Transversal Participatory Approach by the national teams, b) Participatory Actions along the Empirical Work Packages, c) Innovation Forum, d) Conclusions/reflections on the use of the participatory approach in CLEAR.





## **Work Package 8**

Framing and Implementing the Transversal  
Participatory Approach

### **Deliverable D8.3**

National Participatory Report

**Austria**

**University of Vienna**

Yuri Kazepov, Nikoletta Jablonczay, Niklas Pernhaupt

## Executive summary

This National Report reflects on Austria's experience with the transversal participatory approach implemented within the CLEAR project. It draws on two participatory actions (PAs) designed to critically engage with empirical findings from Work Packages 3, 4, and 5, and to embed lived experiences into the analysis of educational transitions, labour market integration, and youth governance.

The first action (PA1) was a co-learning workshop involving institutional experts from education, labour policy, and statistics. It served as a dialogical platform to test and refine key analytical categories from WP3. This process uncovered overlooked dimensions—such as the growing prevalence of mental health challenges and knowledge barriers faced by newly arrived migrant youth—that were not fully captured through conventional fieldwork alone.

The second participatory activity, the Austrian Innovation Forum, brought together young adults, educators, researchers, and practitioners in a highly interactive setting. Using creative and horizontal methods—including scenario-based prompts and visual artefacts—the forum challenged normative assumptions around learning outcomes and success. Participants problematised early tracking, credentialism, and the rigid structure of Austrian educational pathways, arguing that they obscure the emotional, relational, and socio-material realities faced by young people.

During both participation activities, the Austrian team successfully advanced to a collaborative process of knowledge co-production. The methods used fostered an environment of trust and reflexivity. Importantly, learning outcomes are viewed beyond fixed indicators of individual achievement; they are considered relational markers of recognition, support, and inclusion.

The report concludes that participatory approaches enriched both the analytical and normative dimensions of the CLEAR project. They challenged technocratic framings of youth transitions and helped amplify the voices of young people often silenced in mainstream policy discourse, particularly those navigating non-linear paths.

Key policy recommendations include expanding narrative and portfolio-based assessment for a more holistic and process-oriented (not only outcome) view, institutionalising youth voice in transition governance, embedding psychosocial support into educational settings, and investing in longitudinal, low-threshold participatory formats that allow for sustained engagement and system co-design.



## **a. Introduction: The national context of implementing a Transversal Participatory Approach by the national teams**

Austria's contribution to the CLEAR project has been characterised by active engagement across empirical Work Packages, including both quantitative and qualitative data collection in WPs 3, 4, and 5. The Austrian team focused primarily on educational transitions, labour market entry, and the governance structures surrounding young people.

In line with the project's broader objectives, two participatory actions (PAs) were undertaken: a co-learning workshop with experts and a multi-stakeholder Innovation Forum (IF), designed to expand and test the interpretive validity of empirical findings by creating a space for dialogue between institutional actors and vulnerable youth. A key goal was to challenge technocratic framings of learning outcomes (LOs) and to promote horizontal, co-productive knowledge practices.

Rather than treating participation as an add-on to empirical research, the Austrian team approached it as a deliberative method of inquiry, particularly relevant in the national context, where institutional actors and standardisation regimes heavily shape discourses on learning outcomes. Therefore, among our main challenges was not only to "give voice" but also to reshape the conditions under which voice becomes legible and valued, thus bringing forward silent or underrepresented perspectives, especially those of young adults affected by institutional sorting, mental health challenges, and migration-related barriers.

In contrast to earlier descriptive reports, this national reflection goes beyond documenting events to interpret the processes and outcomes of these initiatives critically. It asks: What kinds of knowledge were produced through participation? Whose voices were amplified or muted? And how did these interventions reshape our understanding of transitions, learning, and recognition in the Austrian context?

The following two sections provide a detailed account of these participatory activities.

## **b. Participatory Actions along the Empirical Work Packages**

We have based our participatory activities on the findings from WPs 3, 4, and 5, aiming to bridge macro-structural insights with lived experiences. The Vienna team implemented two participatory actions: a co-learning workshop with institutional experts (PA1, linked primarily to WP3) and a youth-centred Innovation Forum (linked to WP3, WP4, and WP5). These actions were conceived to validate thematic findings, test their interpretive resonance, and identify gaps in the knowledge base, particularly from the standpoint of affected social actors.

Despite our aims for representational diversity, structural constraints limited participation by disengaged or NEET youth, especially those without institutional affiliation.



Nevertheless, the forums created valuable opportunities for multidimensional dialogue and produced insights that went beyond the findings of empirical work conducted in WPs 3, 4, and 5.

We applied several core design principles:

The use of non-hierarchical discussion formats, including scenario-based questions, “role reversals,” and fictionalised prompts;

Careful attention to participant composition, balancing institutional voices with those of young adults and frontline practitioners;

Integration of visual and creative methods (e.g. video creation, graphic recording) to support expression beyond verbal articulation and reduce communicative barriers.

### **PA1: Vienna – Co-learning Workshop (WP3)**

This participatory action was conceptualised to reflect on the preliminary findings from WP3 critically. We assessed their relevance for professionals operating in the fields of education, labour representation, policy, and statistics. Drawing additionally on insights from WPs 4 and 5, the workshop was structured as a co-learning space, where expertise from research and practice could be brought into productive dialogue.

We invited participants with direct influence over youth policy and education, including a director of a technical high school (HTL), a representative of the Public Employment Service (AMS), a policy officer from the Chamber of Labour, a university professor, and a social scientist from Statistics Austria. This allowed for a practice-informed and interdisciplinary discussion. One of the main challenges was to foster balanced exchange across these professional roles, given differing epistemic positions and potential institutional hierarchies. However, the workshop format helped us facilitate horizontal dialogue, grounded in shared reflection and mutual recognition.

PA1 helped us refine WP3’s analytical categories, based on expert feedback. The identification of two previously underexplored themes: (1) informational gaps faced by newly arrived migrant youth, and (2) the rising incidence and institutional neglect of mental health problems among young people. Interestingly, the Innovation Forum have reflected the same results.

### **Vienna – Innovation Forum (WP3/WP4/WP5)**

Building on the co-reflective ethos of PA1, the Innovation Forum was intentionally designed as a horizontal, imaginative, and inclusive space. A range of participatory techniques—including scenario-based prompts, fictional personas, and rotating group discussions—was employed to minimise power differentials and foster honest, situated reflection. The Forum did not seek to “validate” findings in a linear, positivist manner but to uncover transformative potential, identify blind spots, and surface interpretations that could not be accessed through standard empirical methods.



Despite targeted outreach, we were unable to reach and engage NEET youth with no connections to institutional networks. Recruiting disengaged youth—particularly NEETs, care leavers, and migrants without institutional affiliation—proved difficult, even with gatekeeper support. This limitation reflected deeper patterns of structural silencing and social detachment, which participatory formats alone cannot fully overcome.

Yet, the Innovation Forum produced several significant outcomes. First, participants redefined learning outcomes not as static competencies or formal achievements, but as processes of social recognition, often mediated by trust, support, and inclusion. Second, they exposed patterns of symbolic misrecognition and institutional violence, particularly in how guidance systems and school hierarchies handle young people who do not conform to normative success trajectories. Third, we found that integrating psychosocial support into educational settings, developing inclusive counselling formats, and acknowledging the emotional and relational dimensions in transition pathways would be desired by young people.

As part of the IF, we created visual handouts and participatory scenarios, which were later integrated into the CLEAR national event. Most importantly, it helped strengthen the project's interpretive lens, shifting it further toward a recognition-based, relational understanding of youth transitions.

Both participatory actions in Austria generated substantive and interpretive value for the CLEAR project. PA1 facilitated expert reflection on the governance typologies developed in WP3, surfacing blind spots such as the invisibility of youth mental health and the information barriers faced by newly arrived migrants. The IF deepened the dialogue by bringing together young people and institutional actors in a co-reflective space that challenged normative understandings of learning outcomes and transition success.

Embedding co-interpretation into the research design helped reshape the project's analytical lens, highlighting underexplored dimensions such as emotional cost, bureaucratic filtering, and symbolic exclusion. Young people described education as an emotionally and materially costly terrain that is shaped by experiences of institutional neglect and rigid accountability logics. Professionals added how they are frustrated with systemic inflexibility, fragmented mandates, and the limitations of performance-based assessment regimes.

These discussions revealed that “learning outcomes” cannot be treated as neutral indicators of success, but must be re-politicised as contested markers of institutional recognition. Participatory formats brought to the fore the significance of biographical disruption, emotional labour, and informal learning—dimensions largely absent from formal policy discourse. The WP3 co-learning workshop, for instance, prompted researchers to move beyond linear metrics of transition (e.g., qualifications, placements) and toward a more relational, recognition-based understanding of youth pathways.



The participatory formats were logistically demanding. Short sessions demanded careful time management and emotional awareness, particularly among diverse participants. However, we successfully minimised authority dynamics and fostered an environment where participants felt listened to rather than judged.

We would like to highlight the following key lessons:

The perceived informality of the formats—especially scenario-based prompts and role reversals—effectively reduced status anxiety and enabled open dialogue.

The underrepresentation of NEETs, care leavers, and migrant youth reflects broader patterns of social invisibility. Future participatory research must invest in outreach infrastructures and alternative, low-threshold engagement formats.

Participation also proved valuable for professionals, offering a rare, transversal arena in which to reflect critically, share tacit knowledge, and reassess routine assumptions.

The PAs expanded empirical and interpretive categories, redefining concepts like “failure” and revealing phenomena such as quiet burnout among support professionals.

The success of participatory processes depends on having adequate time, building trust, and effective facilitation. Under-resourced or symbolic formats risk reinforcing extractive research logics rather than redistributing epistemic power.

In Austria, where debates around learning outcomes are often dominated by institutional actors—from ministries to chambers of commerce and school leadership networks—such participatory efforts are not just methodological innovations, but political acts of inclusion. They help to reshape who gets to define success, and on what terms.

**Table 1. Summary of Participatory Activities Conducted in Austria**

Activity	Location	Participants	Gender (F/M)	Stakeholder Groups Involved	Connected WP(s)	Key Features/Comments
PA1	Vienna	4	1F / 3M	Educational leader (HTL), AMS youth project coordinator, Labour Chamber policy officer, Statistics Austria researcher	WP3	Co-learning workshop; supported critical reflection on WP findings; helped refine dissemination priorities and highlighted overlooked issues (mental health, migration)
IF	Vienna	15	6F / 9M	Young adults (including migrants), educators, youth workers, researchers	WP4/WP5	Innovation Forum; used fictional prompts, collective reflection, and participatory visual outputs; addressed the meaning and legitimacy of LOs from youth perspective



### **c. Innovation Forum: Interpretation, Methodology, and Policy Implications**

The Austrian Innovation Forum (AIF), held on April 29, 2025, at the University of Vienna, was the culmination of CLEAR's transversal trajectory. We invited young adults, institutional stakeholders, and researchers to reflect on the findings from WPs 3, 4, and 5, which were structured around three thematic tables, each anchored in one Work Package.

We addressed the following questions during the forum:

- How do young people define and experience learning outcomes?
- What systemic factors enable or hinder meaningful learning?
- How do institutions (e.g., schools, AMS, counselling services) shape transition pathways through their structures of recognition or neglect?
- What is missing from current debates about success, failure, and education as a social contract?

The Vienna core team facilitated discussions through participatory methods, including world café rotations, poster feedback, and scenario-based prompts. Materials included stylised quotes, statistical visualisations, and anonymised fieldwork excerpts, making complex findings accessible without oversimplification.

Participants were involved in youth education, training, or support systems. These included students in second-chance programmes, trainers, educators, researchers, and institutional representatives. Particular emphasis was placed on including young people with non-linear trajectories and lived experiences of systemic barriers: recruitment combined personalised outreach, snowball sampling, and public calls via youth networks. In total, approximately 34 individuals were contacted; participation was facilitated through prior WP relationships and institutional partnerships.

Interactive and creative methods enabled participants to express themselves without being confined to institutional roles, reframing their position from “informants” to co-analysts. Breakout spaces and visual, non-verbal tools helped build safety, especially for participants hesitant to speak in mixed settings.

Participant feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Young people valued the forum as a space free from judgment— “For once it didn't feel like we were being measured, but listened to,” one noted. Professionals, meanwhile, recognised the rarity of such transversal and dialogic spaces in their own practice. The affective quality of the forum — the space it made for vulnerability, recognition, and critique — was cited by many as both necessary and uncommon.



From a methodological perspective, the IF proved successful in creating a reflexive, co-productive environment. It was not possible to time the event without clashing with school calendars and institutional obligations. Thus, we realised the binding power of institutional commitment, extending beyond symbolic inclusion.

Nevertheless, the IF contributed to the CLEAR project in four key ways:

- It generated new empirical insights, particularly around mental health burdens, institutional misrecognition, and the emotional toll of navigating fragmented systems.
- It provided conceptual refinements, reframing learning outcomes not as fixed indicators of competence but as relational processes of recognition and support.
- It produced policy-relevant recommendations—including calls for better psychosocial support, inclusive and youth-led counselling formats, and systemic recognition of informal learning and care work.
- It informed dissemination efforts. Visual summaries and written outputs were shared with participants three weeks after the forum and presented at the CLEAR Austrian Final Event. These materials were also made publicly available on the project website and will contribute to future national and European policy briefs.

**Table 2. Summary of the Austrian Innovation Forum**

Participants	Gender (F/M)	Stakeholder Types	Research Sites	Notes
15	6F / 9M	Young adults, VET school representatives, youth coaches, researchers	Vienna	Discussion grounded in CLEAR WP findings; strong emphasis on recognition

#### **d. Conclusions/reflections of the UTU team on the use of participatory approach in CLEAR**

The Austrian experience in the CLEAR project illustrates how participatory methodologies can meaningfully enrich educational and labour market research by challenging linear assumptions about youth transitions and amplifying the voices of underrepresented groups. Across both the co-learning workshop (PA1) and the Innovation Forum, participation served not merely as a tool for engagement but as a critical practice of co-production and reflexivity.

We found that learning outcomes are not simply technical markers of competence, but are deeply embedded in processes of institutional recognition, emotional experience, and structural opportunity. Young people often feel that dominant frameworks of assessment in Austria—marked by early tracking, credentialism, and siloed support structures—



frequently obscure their lived realities, especially those navigating migration, precarious conditions, or institutional neglect.

We believe that the particular format of the participatory actions succeeded in unsettling these dominant assumptions and co-producing policy-relevant alternatives grounded in everyday experience. Among the most salient outcomes were calls for a relational understanding of success, the provision of psychosocial support within educational systems, and the institutionalisation of youth voice in transition governance.

Crucially, the process also enriched the research itself, prompting researchers to revisit analytical categories and engage more fully with dimensions of emotional labour, misrecognition, and informal learning that only emerged through co-reflection.

Drawing from these insights, we propose the following national-level policy recommendations:

Move beyond standardised grading as the primary evaluative filter. Invest in portfolio-based and narrative evaluation formats that recognise informal learning, emotional resilience, and non-linear trajectories.

Institutionalise youth advisory structures within AMS offices, school networks, and municipal education platforms to ensure that participation becomes a core element of system design, not a symbolic afterthought.

Embed psychosocial counselling as a fundamental educational resource, acknowledging that “readiness” is shaped relationally rather than individually.

Expand low-threshold learning formats—such as *Berufspraktische Tage*, supra-company training, or “learning labs”—with clear, supportive pathways into mainstream certification systems.

Longitudinal participatory formats should be preferred over episodic participation (e.g., youth panels, design labs) to enable sustained feedback loops and the co-creation of policy solutions.





## **Work Package 8**

# **Framing and Implementing the Transversal Participatory Approach**

## **Deliverable D8.3**

National Participatory Report

**Bulgaria**

**University of Plovdiv**

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## Executive summary

This National Report presents the strategy, methods and outcomes of the implementation of the participatory approach (PA) in the CLEAR project in the context of Bulgaria. The design of the PA in the country envisioned two main participatory activities. First, we introduced participatory activities in WP5 and organised discussion groups with local practitioners in the two CLEAR regions Plovdiv and Gabrovo with the aim to prepare the fieldwork – conducting narrative biographical interviews with young people in vulnerable situations. Second, we carried out an innovation forum in Plovdiv, in which stakeholders in the field of education from the region discussed key findings from WP4, WP5 and WP6, identified main problems in the Bulgarian education system, highlighted relevant topics for future research and came to concrete recommendations to education policy.

Using institutional and personal contacts, the Bulgarian team managed to hold two focus groups with nine experts each (18 in total) as the first participatory activity. The selected professionals were working with young people in the fields of education, the labour market and social support. Some of the criticisms of the Bulgarian education system made by experts included: the quantification of learning outcomes and the lack of individualized treatment of learners; the disregard of the specific barriers faced by young people outside school (in the family, in interactions with peers, in the labour market and in the life path as a whole); the lack of sufficient public attention to young people in vulnerable situations and the difficulties they faced in their educational trajectories. The discussions in the focus groups were useful in several directions: substantiating the research design of the WP5; a better understanding of the concept of learning outcomes as well as the factors for success and failure in education; compiling a list of vulnerable situations, which supported field work in both regions; making it quicker and easier to access potential young people to be interviewed.

The Innovation Forum in Plovdiv was entitled 'If it were up to me... What learning outcomes should we strive for?' and brought together young people, educational experts and representatives of local authorities and NGOs to exchange their experiences and views on the issue of learning outcomes in the country. The event was attended by 21 people, with young adults predominant and policymakers underrepresented. The participants formed three working groups which focused on different key findings of the three CLEAR Work Packages (WP4, WP5, WP6). In the discussions several issues that needed more research attention were identified: the interactions between students, parents, teachers and school authorities; the impact of unnoticed mental health problems on students' behaviour at school; avenues for effective career guidance models; peer relationships and inner dynamics of student communities. The participants formulated a wealth of policy recommendations agreeing on the need to improve the collaboration between multiple actors in education including young learners through regular meetings and deliberations. For us as researchers the main take-away from the experience was the



recognition of the value of using participatory methodologies in social inquiries and the need of greater trust in young people.

**a. Introduction: The national context of implementing a Transversal Participatory Approach by the national teams**

The CLEAR project in Bulgaria has been implemented in a rapidly changing global context shaped by the efforts to overcome the consequences of the Covid19 pandemic, through the economic and political implications of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, to the effects of the military actions in the Middle East. While the latter region is named as the 'Near East' in Bulgarian, the war in Ukraine had and still has a more prominent place in the public debate in the country further widening the split between the parties and their supporters with a 'Western' and 'Eastern' orientation. The national context in the three years of the project duration has been marked by a definite rise of the membership and electorate of the nationalistic parties most of which are strong Russian supporters, opposing the country's joining the Schengen area (which happened on January 1, 2025) and the Eurozone (which is expected on January 1, 2026). The internal political developments have been characterised with a high instability with seven parliamentary elections in three years, continuous accusations of a widespread corruption and lately, mass protests of diverse occupational groups, mainly in the public sector, claiming wage increases.

Amid these changes, education manages to hold a major position in public debates in Bulgaria acclaimed as a 'traditional' national value since the liberation movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the fast-changing governments in the country have tried to introduce wide ranging reforms in response to the mass expectations for improvements of the educational system. Designed with the aim to raise the quality and relevance of education in the county's development, the policy changes include orientation towards competence-based curricula, revision of vocational training programs, expansion of work-based learning, investment in digital technologies in schools and an increase of the attractiveness of the teaching profession with several payment increases. Enrolment rates in early education have been rising in response to making such education free for all children aged 0 to 7, together with a reduction of early school leaving, and a marked increase in the numbers of university students. However, the progress in achieving higher learning outcomes since the introduction of the 2021-2030 Strategic Framework for Education and Training, backed by EU funding, has been slow amid the high political turnover and the declining levels of trust in government. Major challenges in achieving higher learning outcomes are the lack of systematic governance coordination and short-term and project-based financial management system; data fragmentation and low capacity of evidence-based policy design of ministerial institutions; declining academic results of Bulgarian students in international comparative studies and national examinations; continuous inequity between access and academic achievements



urban and rural areas, students with low and high family resources, and students in general and vocational education (OECD, 2025). While in the beginning of the CLEAR project the performance of Bulgarian students in the PISA studies dominated the public debates, towards the end of the project the focus is on the issues such as the governmental proposal for the introduction of a new obligatory subject ‘virtues and religion’; continuous teachers’ training and evaluation of teachers’ performance and punitive measures for improving school discipline which are included in the Proposal of Amendment and Supplement to the Preschool and School Education Act, published on May 23, 2025 (MES, 2025). The most prominent voices in the recent debates are those of the opposition parties and NGOs with expertise in the field while parents’ and community organisations are much less vocal and young learners’ views remaining almost invisible.

In view of the high public interest in educational issues on the national level in Bulgaria, the participatory approach in the CLEAR study is highly relevant. Our team at the Sociology Department of the Plovdiv University have some experience with participatory research activities under the framework of the Transitions<sup>6</sup> project where we organized an innovation group and the Partispace<sup>7</sup> project where we supported youth associations to carry out small-scale participatory studies. In CLEAR the ambition was the introduce a transversal participatory approach throughout the research process which was a real challenge for our team. In Bulgaria sociological research is rarely involved in participatory investigations which are more common for anthropological and ethnographic studies. In cooperation with the CLEAR Coordination team and supported by the expertise of the University of Genova and Codici, we managed to participate in the design of the Transversal Participatory Approach of the project and the comparative analysis of the implementation in the countries-members of the project. We proposed and effectively carried out two main activities: a discussion group before the fieldwork within WP5 (interviews with young people in vulnerable situations) and an Innovation Forum within WP8 aiming at the deliberation of the main CLEAR findings with diverse group of educational stakeholders. In the next paragraph we present our reflection on these experiences.

### **b. Participatory Action(s) along the empirical WPs**

As the Bulgarian team was one of the three participants of the core group of WP5, it was relevant to select this WP for the design of a PA in the country. In collaboration with the University of Turku and the University of Lisbon, it was decided that each team organised a focus group with street level professionals before the start of the empirical work. The

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<sup>6</sup> Transitions: Gender, Parenthood and the Changing European Workplace: young adults negotiating the work-family boundary, 5<sup>th</sup> FP, EC.

<sup>7</sup> Partispace: Spaces and styles of participation. Formal, non-formal and informal possibilities of young people’s participation in European cities, Horizon 2020, EC.

aim was to deliberate the design and implementation strategy of the fieldwork with young people in vulnerable situations. The concrete objectives of the TPA were:

- to discuss the profiles of young people in vulnerable situations in our regions whom we should invite for interviews as in WP5 no types of vulnerabilities were pre-selected for unified implementation in all countries, with the rationale to capture the regional specificity;
- to advise the researchers about gate keepers who can provide us with contacts with representatives of the relevant multi-disadvantaged youth groups;
- to suggest adequate themes and questions to include in the interview guide.

The Bulgarian team organised and carried out two focus groups - one in each of the regions studied in CLEAR. In preparation we did intensive outreach work in Plovdiv and Gabrovo by desk mapping of relevant stakeholders and relying on institutional and personal contacts of the research team members. We contacted about 26 people checking their readiness and availability for taking part in the activity. The composition of the two groups (See Table 1) was diverse covering a wide range of professionals working with young people in education, labour market and social support.

**Table 1. Stakeholders involved in the focus groups for the WP5 TPA**

Venue	Participant profile/Gender
Plovdiv	Headmaster of a high school (male); Roma mediator (male); Roma mediator (male); Member of the Education Committee of a municipal council working in the vocational education sector (woman); Executive Director of a charity (woman), Volunteer coordinator in a non-governmental organisation (woman), Manager of a humanitarian centre (woman); Director of a private institute of technology (male); Researcher of youth activities and policies among marginalized communities (woman);
Gabrovo	School principal (woman); Teacher (woman); Teacher (male); Expert social services in NGOs (woman); University teacher (male); Expert in a labour office (male); Psychologist in a labor office (woman); Director of a career guidance centre (male); Expert in NGOs working on Roma issues (male)
Total	18 participants: 9 women and 9 men

We should note that two selected persons who had accepted the invitation failed to come to the discussion. A challenge for the subsequent analysis was the fact that we did not make an audio recording of the discussion, according to a previously agreed decision of WP5 core group. The notes taken in the course of the debate did not do full justice for the



rich information shared by our participants, and made us determined to record any following TPA events, such as the planned IF.

In both focus groups the first set of questions concerned the participants' personal interpretation of the term 'educational achievement', which young people they identified as academically successful, what the desired learning outcomes were and what learning success or failure meant to them. The discussion showed that the concepts of 'educational achievement' and 'success' were understood as highly differentiated. For example, the educational success of a child from a poor Roma family was considered in the community to be the completion of primary education, while for those with a better-off family background success meant was graduation from a university in Sofia or abroad. Participants in the Plovdiv focus group focused on the academic results from the National Graduation Exams while those in the Gabrovo group considered the success in finding work in the specialty immediately after the completion of training as the most important for measuring educational success. The experts in Gabrovo highlighted the following success stories/factors for high achievement:

- Young people with high internal motivation to learn and develop
- Those involved in various forms of non-formal education, developing diverse competences and skills (thanks to the NGO sector), programs such as "Erasmus +".
- The expansion of career guidance;
- The introduction of dual education in secondary schools;
- The involvement of employers in programs for employment of young people and state programs such as "Career Start";
- Adequate family support, the good example from parents.

The second group of questions in the discussion centered on vulnerabilities and the factors putting young people at a disadvantage. The experts pointed out the shortcomings of the Bulgarian education system focusing on quantitative measurements and lacking individualized treatment of learners, the lack of real adequate support for young people with physical and mental difficulties, the underestimation of non-formal and informal education and the general failures in the country's politics. The profiles which we should contact for interviews according to the experts were the following:

- Roma, Pomak (religious minority), Armenian, Vlach and other ethnic minorities;
- young people from rural and mountainous areas;
- children whose parents work abroad and their care is left to grandparents or other relatives;
- young people with major health problems and special educational needs;
- young people living in poverty;



- children of single parents or parents without education.

Prompted to discuss the role of gender in particular, the professionals in Gabrovo considered that it was usually the young men that lacked self-dependence and autonomy (an expert from the labour office Gabrovo stated that young men often came with their moms to register as unemployed) while young women were denied autonomy in the family (girls were not allowed by their parents to study in another town mainly due to security risks). Girls from the Roma and Vlach ethnic groups were more often stopped by their families from studying at all; often the interruption of education of women occurred due to early marriages, pregnancy and childbirth or the need to care for younger children in the family.

In the last part of the discussion, respondents were invited to write suggestions on stick-it notes for questions they considered relevant for the interviews with young people, some of which the research team subsequently included in the development of the questionnaire for biographical interviews. Among them were:

- What are the things they learned in middle school that were most helpful in their search for jobs and in life?
- What are their life plans in a five-year time span?
- How do they imagine the development of their family, the settlement, the region? How do they think they can contribute to the flourishing of their regions?
- Are they supported at some point in their lives by loved ones or the local community?
- Why do they live here and why do they work what they do now?
- Are they aware of programs they can use for their own development?

The professionals disagreed with the public debate on education in Bulgaria which concentrated on the quantitative measurement of the learning outcomes and blamed teachers for failing to 'educate' the young. Also, the experts came to an agreement that the official discourse on education ignored the specific barriers that young people faced not only in school but also in the family, peer interactions, job search and wider life. The participants in the Plovdiv focus group expressed the opinion that young people as a whole were the social group in Bulgaria that remained out of the focus of public attention. According to them, the voice of young people in Bulgaria was not heard due to the lack of media freedom and the type of political figures that dominate the country political scene. The media were mostly interested in scandals while the so-called political elite followed the mass culture and could not be taken as a good role model.

As a whole, we found out that the discussion with professionals contributed to the grounding of our research design. We improved our knowledge of experts' understanding of learning outcomes and factors for success and failure in education. The list of



vulnerable situations was very helpful for our preparation of the fieldwork in both regions and our team designed the planned sample accordingly. All participants expressed a commitment to support us with contacting young people in such situations when preparing the fieldwork and later delivered very useful contacts (this promise was not kept by the Roma mediators in Plovdiv, and we found access to this group through social workers in the homes for children without parents). In retrospect, it would have been beneficial for the WP5 work and the project as a whole if we had organised another focus group with the same professionals in each region to share with them the findings of the analysis of the interviews in a more systematic way. In particular, to present the typologies of learning pathways of young people in multi-disadvantaged situations and of their future orientations and to discuss the factors for educational achievements and raptures that we derived from the analysis of the interviews. From a methodological point of view, it would have been very interesting to see in a second discussion what the participants in the first focus groups accepted readily from our reports, what they were uncertain about or disagreed with and what changes and improvements they would suggest. In a way this task was included and fulfilled by the Innovation Forum that was organised a year and a half later.

### **c. Innovation Forum**

The Innovation Forum (IF) was the second and major participatory activity that our team organised within WP8 in which we were part of the core group. Our team organised one IF in Plovdiv which took place on April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2025. We considered organising another IF in Gabrovo but gave up the idea due to our limited time, personnel and financial resources.

The Plovdiv IF was designed as a collaborative event among diverse stakeholders in education which would give them space for exchange of experiences and views on the issue of learning outcomes in the country. It was not meant to present and achieve an approval of our research findings but to stimulate an open dialogue over theoretical discussions and analytical outcomes of the empirical data collected in the project. The IF was titled: "If it were up to me... What learning outcomes should we strive for?", brought together young people, education experts and representatives of local authorities and NGOs and had three main aims:

- to discuss some of the main results of the CLEAR project from the perspective of the personal experience of participants with different social profiles such as experts, practitioners and young people;
- to identify topics and problems in the education and life transitions of young people for which there is a lack of reliable information supported by research data;
- to formulate recommendations for educational, youth and social policies to achieve higher learning outcomes.



The IF in Plovdiv responded to the situation of a persistent lack of effective cross-sectoral cooperation between ministries, departments and agencies on the national level in Bulgaria (Angelova & Boyadjieva, 2020; OECD, 2025)). On the local level, education stakeholders rarely meet and rarely communicate with each other. Often their relationship is tense, multi-layered and marked by a search for a balance between demands, opportunities and responsibilities. The issues on which tensions most often arise are related to: the increase of teachers' salaries, which proves to be a challenge for the state budget; the poor learning outcomes of pupils, which gives the impression of inefficiencies in the education system and reinforces the need for substantial reforms; the administrative burden on teachers and the learning process that education policy is trying to tackle through the introduction of digitalisation, but the process remains slow; the threat of large-scale protests by the teacher's guild, which strains the relationship between teachers and parents (while parents support the idea of decent remuneration for teachers, they insist that this should not cost the normal course of the learning process). Young people are a central figure in the educational process, but rather in the role of "objects" instead of "co-authors" of change. They are often an undervalued and marginalized educational stakeholder in Bulgaria. Young people remain underrepresented in key educational structures, lacking a real dialogue between pupils/students and institutions. For example, students' views on the issue of compulsory religious education, in-class telephones or disciplinary assessments are rarely sought, although they are directly concerned; pupils do not participate in public consultations related to necessary reforms of the examination system (e.g. national external assessment); student organisations have repeatedly insisted on a better quality of higher education, but their voice is difficult to reach to the public policy.

The strategy for selecting the IF venue was to look for non-academic social spaces and we considered a youth centre and an NGO premises which however were not logistically suitable, so the IF was organised in Plovdiv University which is a well-known public institution, popular among young people and the general public in the city. Some of the invited people had already participated in the preliminary focus group (WP5), which was held again at the same building. Several of the interviews with young people were conducted there (WP5). And others recognize the institution as a safe and secure place (they work or study there, or have experience of studying there).

The invitation of participants from the three target groups was multi-stage. In the first stage of engagement process, we invited those people who had already participated in some of the CLEAR project stages – the preliminary focus groups under WP5, the interviews with young people under WP5, the interviews with experts under WP4. The contact with potential participants was made through several main channels: by email, by phone call and through a personal informal meeting. In our preliminary conversations with them, we provided detailed information about the purpose and nature of the event and were ready to provide additional clarifications if necessary. In the second stage of the



participant selection process, we targeted local stakeholders who would be interested in participating – students in high schools and universities, teachers, psychologists, leaders and employees of local NGOs, municipal councillors, etc. Among the participants in the IF predominated young adults (10), followed by experts working with young people (7) and the least represented were policymakers (4). In terms of gender, women significantly outnumbered men.

The main difficulty was finding young people with experience of vulnerability. Not all of the already interviewed under WP5 were able to participate in the IF. Some initially agreed, but just before the event it was difficult to contact with them. Others were hindered due to personal and work commitments. Yet we managed to secure high youth participation by using formal and informal connections with school and university students. Despite the efforts, we failed to secure sufficient participation of policymakers, with a few of those invited and confirmed participation failed to attend at the last moment. We consider that this had a significant impact on the way in which the IF discussions took place and on the conclusions and recommendations that have been reached.

**Table 2. Stakeholders involved in the IF**

	<b>Stakeholder group</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Status</b>
1	Policy maker	Woman	Former municipal councillor. Currently a member of the Management Board of two NGOs. Participant in a CLEAR focus group.
2	Policy maker	Woman	Head of a national NGO and advisory group. Participant in the CLEAR focus group.
3	Policy maker	Man	Former municipal councillor. Currently a head of an NGO. Participant in a CLEAR focus group.
4	Policy maker	Man	Municipal councillor
5	Young adult	Woman	School student – a chair of a school parliament
6	Young adult	Woman	School student
7	Young adult	Woman	University student
8	Young adult	Woman	Interviewed under WP5 (CLEAR)
9	Young adult	Woman	University student
10	Young adult	Woman	University student
11	Young adult	Woman	University student in the Netherlands
12	Young adult	Woman	University student
13	Young adult	Man	School student – a member of a school parliament
14	Young adult	Man	University student – interviewed under WP5 (CLEAR)
15	Professional	Woman	Career consultant at an NGO.
16	Practitioner	Woman	Youth center expert
17	Practitioner	Woman	NGO Manager. Participant in a CLEAR focus group.



	Stakeholder group	Gender	Status
18	Practitioner	Woman	Secondary school psychologist
19	Practitioner	Woman	Expert at a university career development center
20	Practitioner	Woman	Teacher at a mathematics high school
21	Practitioner	Woman	Teacher at Vocational High School

The participants were divided in three different working groups, distributed in three rooms. They were divided randomly, achieving maximum diversity in terms of their affiliation (policymakers, young adults, experts, working with young people). The group discussions were opened with an ice-breaking questions (e.g.: the best memory of their school years, memories of the best or the worst day at school) and continued with a discussion on key findings of CLEAR project, based on results from WP4, WP5 and WP6 (quotes from WP4 and WP5 and a figure presenting three scenarios from WP6). At the end of the discussion, the participants had the opportunity to formulate topics on which future research should focus, as well as specific recommendations for education policy.

The plenary discussions and working groups highlighted some of the main problems in the Bulgarian education system, which create challenges for young people in their educational trajectories:

**A need for a systemic reform:** The current education system is not flexible enough and does not meet the individual needs of students. It is necessary to involve all stakeholders in discussions about changes in the education system. More freedom for teachers in choosing teaching methods and pace must be provided. Individualizing educational paths according to students' interests is one of the important steps to achieve the desired change. Last but not least, decentralizing education, taking into account the specificities of different communities and students at the local and regional level;

**Strengthening the role of non-formal and experiential learning:** Non-formal education and volunteering are key components for acquiring 'soft skills' such as teamwork, communication skills and social engagement. Expanding opportunities for student volunteering, in cooperation with non-governmental organizations, cultural, religious and sports institutions, as well as including more practical and interdisciplinary subjects in secondary education, which would prepare students for real life must be provided;

**Assessment and standardization issues:** The current form of assessment limits students' potential, ignores individual context and social vulnerability, and does not adequately address the emotional and psychological needs of young people. Alongside a more personalised approach to students, there is a need to strengthen communication between parents and teachers, as well as to expand the number of experts in schools who can provide adequate support to adolescents in dealing with emotional problems;



The motivation of teachers and students: The low motivation among students is often due to outdated teaching methods, a lack of teachers who can arouse interest in the learning content, and distrust in the quality of the professional competence of teachers. Teacher training in tertiary education needs to be strengthened and a transparent system of teacher selection put in place.

The IF in Plovdiv underlined some sensitive topics related to the education system in the country which were not sufficiently researched and also did not find their rightful place in the public debate:

- Student-parent-school relationship: It is important to study it from the perspective of the student's position simultaneously in two vital areas – family and school. The radically different expectations on the part of parents and teachers for the educational achievements of the individual are inevitably a prerequisite for problems in educational choices and future career aspirations. Enhancing student-parent-teacher communication would help shape a more real vision of the student's future in both parents and teachers. In addition, this would also affect the adequacy of family support as an important motivator in the educational and work paths of the young person;
- Mental and physical health of students: The two problems are interrelated and can significantly affect the motivation of the individual in learning. Research on the topic would confirm/reveal both the factors for the occurrence of mental and physical problems in students, as well as the consequences they have on their behaviour and relationships within the school environment. The topic could also refer to research on the role of the school in this process and the potential it has in supporting the identification of such health problems;
- Effective career guidance models: Identifying career guidance methods that are more attractive to young people and lead to real results makes it possible to promote good practices and successful cases of young people who have encountered difficulties in the transition from education to employment. This creates conditions for proactive action towards the problems of young people on the labour market, as well as the necessary motivation in them in education and in searching work;
- Good practices for working with talented students: Research on this topic would support school staff in their daily work with children with an in-depth interest in a particular field, as well as parents who want to develop their children's potential in a specific direction. This may contribute in part to the early career guidance of the student;
- Study of student communities, their inner dynamics and satisfaction with the learning process: Diversity in student communities leads to the need to apply



different approaches in the learning process to meet the individual needs of learners. This inevitably requires a set of skills and additional resources. Studying these diverse communities (their specific traits and dynamics) and receiving feedback on learning satisfaction are key prerequisites for establishing an effective education system that meets both the expectations of students and parents.

We consider that the IF reached to some specific recommendations that would contribute to the improvement of the country's educational policy:

- Greater focus on the importance of non-formal education and its validation: a basis for the formation of important personal qualities that could support future working careers;
- Inclusion of all stakeholders in the discussion of changes in the education system: analysing problems in the education system according to different perspectives and finding effective solutions that satisfy all stakeholders;
- Emphasis on the acquisition of 'soft skills' among young people: an important element in the process of sustainable and secure labour market integration;
- Improvement of the professional training of teachers and implementation of selection criteria in starting work as a teacher: a key factor in increasing learners' confidence in teachers' competences, which also affects learners' motivation to participate actively in learning process and develop their skills and knowledge;
- Training opportunities for young people according to their specific skills and interests: a prerequisite for early career guidance and rapid transition from education to employment;
- Strengthening communication between parents and teachers – providing parents with more information about their children's skills: a prerequisite for providing adequate support from parents regarding the educational choices of learners, which would support their proper career guidance;
- More support and encouragement for the acquisition of additional (more than curriculum) knowledge of students: an opportunity to identify hidden potential in a particular field, the development of which would prove important in terms of future educational and career choices;
- More freedom to teachers to choose the methods and tempo of teaching: adapting to the potential of learners to lead to effective learning outcomes;
- More professionals in schools who could help young people deal with emotional problems as well as more focused training of teachers to recognize psychological problems early: school as the main vital area must be an active party in the prevention of mental problems in learners, which in certain cases can be decisive for their future in education and the labour market;



- Reduction of the number of students in class (formation of smaller classes): an opportunity for more fruitful interaction between the learners and the teacher and for applying an individual approach to the learners by the teacher.

The atmosphere during the two plenaries and three working groups was very positive as the theme proved to be of great interest for all participants. The feedback at the end of the second plenary was lively and constructive. In particular, the young people were most active and seemed very excited by the fact that they were listened to and their views were taken seriously. One of the young men, a last year student at a Plovdiv school stated in the last session: "Such events shouldn't remain in isolation. Such events give me the confidence that there are many like-minded people around, with whom we can, step by step, change everything that we do not like in our education". Another participant from a local NGO insisted that such discussions should be organized more often, however with greater present of political decision-makers. As he put it: "Otherwise, everything we say here goes to waste". He himself committed his organisation to organize such a discussion in September.

The Plovdiv IF affirmed the CLEAR conclusion that learning outcomes depend primarily on the coordination of the priorities of all stakeholders – policy makers, experts and young people. That is why it is essential to regularly discuss the problems in the education system and coherently formulate recommendations for the preparation and implementation of specific policies in the field. The workshops and the final discussion within the IF supported the in-depth interpretation of the CLEAR results. They served both to formulate specific recommendations to education policy in Bulgaria and to discuss many new ideas for future studies on the topic, which explore problems related to learning outcomes from a different point of view. This reaffirms the complex nature of educational outcomes and the need for more and more focused research on the various aspects of the problem in order to optimize educational policy.

In retrospect we consider the duration of the Plovdiv IF having a too short duration to serve the purpose of the transversal participatory approach. We set a time span of three hours as an incentive for a wider participation. We believe that, if working groups were longer, there would have been more opportunities for discussions to address many more issues raised by the CLEAR project and for better development of the ideas for policy innovations. And the conclusions that the participants reached would have the potential to be much better systematized and more clearly justified. Also, the low number of participants representing the local and national policymakers was not fully efficient to allow different points of view to be presented, provided with arguments and contested with different opinions and formulate recommendations for education policy on the EU, national and local level.



#### **d. Conclusions/reflections of the national team on the use of participatory approach in CLEAR**

Participatory research has the potential to produce new valid knowledge by widening the scope of research questions and sharpening the focus of data collection and analysis methods (Benasso et al, in print). In the field of educational research in particular it promises to ‘encompass the wide variety of processes of education, formation and learning that can occur at many different times and in many different settings throughout people’s lives’ (Biesta et al., 2014, p. xiv). However, participatory approach has been usually applied to small-case action research projects. In CLEAR as a large-scale research project the ambition was to develop a transversal participatory approach throughout the theoretical discussion, project design, implementation and dissemination (CLEAR WP2). As a result, we struggled with the need to meet the high expertise standards of the traditional academic investigation and the participatory research convolutions of messy sampling, grounded analytical work and the difficulties in ascertaining the representativeness of the findings and the policy implications. We were aware that the mainstream policy field favours quantitative arguments for the evidence-based policy making (OECD, 2025).

The application of participatory approach in the study was taken seriously as an integral part of our study which we expected to yield better results than the previous projects we have taken part in. We consider that the TPA enriched our research design by reframing the research design through integrating a variety of professional insights into study of the educational achievements and considering the impact of vulnerability of young people on the complex process of constructing learning outcomes. The two main participatory forms sharpened the focus of our inquiry, deepened the understanding of the complexity of the process of constructing learning outcomes in the regional and national context and informed to policy recommendations arising from the analysis. The discussion groups in WP5 facilitated a more informed selection of interviewees and led to valuable suggestions for the content of in-depth interviews, while revealing gaps between political discourses and real-life conditions. Despite some limitations, such as the lack of audio recordings and unfulfilled promises by some participants to join the focus group in both regions, the participatory process significantly improved both access to hard-to-reach groups and the contextual relevance of our findings. The Innovation Forum brought together diverge experiences of learning throughout life and showed the advantages of the face-to-face dialogue between scientists, young people, policy makers and practitioners and created an open space for contrasting and enriching their perspectives on how to manage the challenges to achieving better learning outcomes for all participants. Allowing for greater diversity and more confrontation between participants might give more innovative ideas for adequate policy changes. Although the forum was designed as a local event sensitive to the local specificity of educational opportunities it quickly spread out to comparisons with national and European solutions to the challenges facing young people in school and



beyond. It also served as a tool for wider dissemination of our research findings through the people we invited to the forum, those to whom the invitees spread the information about the event and the broad range of follow up activities.

The three most important findings of the TPA in Bulgaria might be summed up in the following way:

- Learning outcomes are constructed in a complex continuous process encompassing the interaction at multiple levels of manifold factors, not only the allocation of funding, distributions of facilities and the numbers of pedagogical personnel. The efficiency of the education system in the country is low due to its rigidity and unresponsiveness to the individual needs of the learners who often find themselves in vulnerable situations and lack adequate support to overcome diverse barriers in their educational paths.
- The efficiency of the governance of the educational system on the local, regional and national levels depends on the collaboration between multiple actors and not only on the normative regulation of institutional policies. Policy makers, experts, practitioners and learners need the space to consistently deliberate the rising challenges and innovative ways forward and the encouragement to create a new culture of listening to and hearing different voices, particularly of youth who are the most invisible stakeholder in the policy making.
- The flexibility of the transversal participatory approach in CLEAR was well attuned to the recognised heterogeneity of participation inquiry (Brown, 2022) and gave the opportunity to our research team to find the proper forms and moments for the application of the participatory design. Contemporary education research should open towards the capacity of the participatory methodology to overcome the power imbalance between researchers and their “objects”, give more value to the voices and contributions of diverse participants and reframe the rigid workflow in traditional research into a collaborative process.

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## **Work Package 8**

Framing and Implementing the Transversal  
Participatory Approach

### **Deliverable D8.3**

National Participatory Report

**Finland**

**University of Turku**

Päivi Naumanen, Tero Järvinen, Jenni Tikkanen

## Executive summary

To study the interplay of manifold factors effecting on the quality of learning outcomes, the CLEAR project applies not only multi-level and mixed-method approach and analyses, but also innovative participatory strategies at local level. Participation is an integral part of the research, with which the project seeks to give voice and actively listen to young people, policy experts and policy practitioners. Transversal Participatory Approach (TPA) is meant to create the conditions for the voices of the participating people to actively contribute to research, tailoring solutions and allowing their views to impact analysis, research tools and outputs

This document reports the experiences of UTU team in developing and applying TPA as part of the CLEAR research project. It describes the participatory activities implemented by the Finnish team both aligned to the empirical Work Packages and the creation of Innovation Forum and discusses the experiences related to their design, implementation and results.

The experiences of UTU team in designing and implementing participatory activities were generally favourable. PA3, organised as part of WP5, provided vital assistance in the planning, designing and implementing of WP5 fieldwork and the local innovation forum. The PA3 focus group discussions enabled the team to approach young adults and to refine both the research objectives of the Work Package and the themes and questions for the interviews. PA3 participants also made a significant contribution to the research by providing a calm and safe place within their organisations for interviews with young adults. Furthermore, some of the PA3 participants have become more permanent partners of the research team; they have participated in Innovation Forum organised in Turku, and the cooperation is likely to continue after the project ends.

The PA4, organised as part of the WP6, helped the research team to clarify the themes of the expert survey and confirmed the researchers' decisions on which target groups would be most suited to respond to the survey. The PA4 was also beneficial in that it enabled the team to commit the participating experts to continue their involvement in the next phases of the project. The PA5, in turn, facilitated the research team to critically reflect on some of the key preliminary results of the international expert survey and provided new insights into the interpretation of the results.

For the UTU team, the Innovation Forum was particularly successful because it gave the researchers the opportunity to share the study results with the various stakeholders, strengthened the link between research and practice, and generated ideas for further research, thereby increasing the social impact of the CLEAR research project. For the participants, it appeared rewarding to hear and discuss the results of the study in an event that involved also young adults who are currently searching for their own learning path. The young participants in the IF, on the other hand, felt that they were allowed to speak



safely and freely about their views and experiences while appreciating the nature of the event and the fact that it addressed issues that were relevant and resonated with their own lives.

**a. Introduction: The national context of implementing a Transversal Participatory Approach by the UTU team**

The Finnish team (UTU) was involved in total of *four participatory activities* integrated into two CLEAR project's Work Packages (WP5, WP6) and organised one Innovation Forum (IF) during the period of 2022–2025. Altogether *51 Finnish participants* including young adults and representatives of various national, regional and local stakeholder groups from different fields and sectors (political, academic, public and NGOs) were engaged with the participatory activities of the project.

In the WP5, which involved interviews with young adults in vulnerable or multi-disadvantaged life situations, the key participatory activity (PA3)<sup>8</sup> was two regional *focus group discussions with professionals working closely with young people*. The PA3 contributed to the construction of research instruments, fine-tuning research questions as well as better focusing the objectives of investigation by identifying themes to be addressed and explored in the interviews with young adults. Furthermore, the PA3 generated additional output for the Innovation Forums, serving as a tool for triggering participation activities. The Finnish focus group discussions in the WP5 were implemented successfully in both field work locations, in Kainuu and in Southwest Finland and involved *20 professionals* representing educational institutions, youth work, public employment services (PES) and NGOs. Altogether, the PA3 not only provided crucial assistance for the planning and implementation of the WP5 fieldwork but also paved the way for the UTU team's main approach and methods in the creation of the local Innovation Forum.

In task 6.1 in the WP6, the participatory activity (PA4) included a *consultation of experts and stakeholders* in the design research phase. It contributed to the construction of the survey tool and helped to better define the composition and profile of the expert panel responding to the survey. The Finnish PA4 was carried out using focus group discussions taking place at the University of Turku and bringing together *eight experts* from the fields of education policy, youth policy, labour market policy, and academic research. The experts shared their views on the most important themes and issues related to learning outcomes, educational underachievement, and inequality, as well as future scenarios affecting these issues.

In the task 6.3, the objective of participatory activity (PA5) was, in turn, to enrich the discussion and validate the preliminary analysis and results of the international expert

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<sup>8</sup> UTU team was not taking part in PA1 or PA2.

survey. As part of a larger international panel, a group consisting of *four Finnish experts* representing education policy, research, and NGOs engaged with an online discussion in which, for instance, some of the preliminary conclusions of the survey were critically discussed.

Finally, the *local Innovation Forum with 19 participants* was held in Turku as a workshop, which central idea was to highlight the perspectives of young people whose voices often remain unheard and ignored. The Innovation Forum was given a Finnish title "Tukea ja taitoja tulevaisuuteen" (Support and skills for the future), and its mission was to create a deliberative and safe space for a dialogue between young people, policy makers and experts, focusing in particular on the experiences and views of young adults based on the interviews conducted as part of the CLEAR study.

In the following subsections, we present all the participatory actions arranged by the Finnish team both aligned to the empirical Work Packages and the creation of the Innovation Forum and discuss the experiences related to their design, implementation and results.

#### **b. Participatory Action(s) along the empirical WPs**

##### *Participatory Actions integrated to WP5 (PA3)*

In the WP5, participatory activities were implemented in Task 5.1 *"Developing research framework and procedures for national data collection and along the data analysis phase"* with the aims of:

- contributing to the construction of research instruments (interview guidelines), and fine-tuning the main research questions to better include voices of young people and street-level professionals and to better focus the objectives of investigation, by identifying the themes to be addressed and explored;
- providing additional outputs for the Innovation Forums, serving as a tool for triggering participation, and
- helping to better define strategies and solutions for engaging young people in the Innovation Forum as participants.

To achieve these objectives, the WP5 core team and the WP8 leaders agreed on common guidelines for implementing the participatory activities. According to the guidelines, informal participatory workshops with 6–9 local front-line professionals from the fields of youth work, education and labour market policy were to be organised in each of the two fieldwork sites in the three WP5 core team countries: Bulgaria, Finland and Portugal. It was agreed that the people involved in the discussions should preferably be professionals working closely with young adults in vulnerable or multi-disadvantaged life situations, e.g., youth workers, special education teachers, study counsellors, guidance counsellors, youth coaches, rehabilitation specialists etc. The workshops were to be held as focus group



sessions in a way that stimulates dynamic discussions among participants and ensures that all group members engage and feel free to discuss.

To facilitate the Finnish WP5 participatory activities, the UTU team organised a focus group workshop in each of the fieldwork locations in October 2023 – one in Kainuu (Kajaani) and the other in Southwest Finland (Turku).

*The Kainuu focus group* event was organised and facilitated by one member of the UTU team and held in a meeting room at a hotel in the city center of Kajaani, where *seven professionals* (three males, four females) who work directly with young people were engaged. They represented educational guidance and youth work from Kainuu Vocational College, One-Stop Guidance Centre [Ohjaamo], Outreach Youth Work and Culture House Marilyn of Kajaani.

*The Southwest Finland workshop* was organised at the University Turku with the help of three members of the UTU team. In Turku, *13 professionals* (two males, 11 females) working closely with young people in vulnerable or disadvantaged situations engaged with the discussions. They represented Turku Vocational Institute, Adult Education Centre, Turku City Outreach Youth Work, Turku City Youth Services, regional/local Public Employment Services as well as three NGOs working to facilitate young people's access to education, learning, employment, and well-being. All these organisations collaborate with educational institutions and PES authorities. One of the organisations focuses on guiding multicultural young people.

The content of these events and the recruitment of participants were carefully considered and planned, and the focus group events held in both locations were extremely successful in terms of the objectives set for participatory activities. The focus group discussions enabled us to better outline and define the following issues:

- what are the key groups of young people to try to interview and how to approach them,
- what questions to include in the interviews with young adults and how to ask them,
- what local and regional factors and circumstances have a key impact on the well-being and disadvantages of young people, and
- what local and regional factors and circumstances have a significant impact on the learning and employment opportunities of young adults.

Furthermore, the focus group discussions provided us with a good starting point for recruiting interviewees at a later stage, as most of the professionals involved were willing to act as contact people for the research project and were prepared to assist in finding eligible interviewees. The PA3 participants also contributed significantly to the research by providing a calm and safe place within their organisations for interviewing young adults. Some of them have become more permanent partners for the research team, and



the collaboration is likely to continue after the project ends. This is evidenced, for example, by requests for the research team to participate in their events and discussions. Some PA3 participants have been actively involved throughout the research process and have been engaged with the Innovation Forum held in Turku.

We did not encounter any major problems or obstacles in implementing the PA3. The recruitment of some professionals was slightly complicated by the autumn school holidays (in October), which meant that we were unable to reach all targeted participants. We invited participants to the event directly and personally using the information available on the organisation's website. Contact was initiated both by phone and email. In Kainuu, professionals working with young people were first contacted by phone, followed by more detailed email invitations to participate in the event. In Southwest Finland, email invitations were first sent to the potentially eligible professionals, followed by phone calls to those who did not respond. In Southwest Finland, we contacted a total of 26 professionals from 14 different organisations at various stages.

The programme for the PA3 discussions was rather similar in both locations: first, there was an icebreaker session during which participants enjoyed coffee/tea/refreshments and sandwiches while introducing themselves to each other. This was followed by an introductory Power Point (PP) presentation of the project and the objectives and tasks of the WP5. After this, the participants were given five questions related to the implementation of the WP5 to discuss. In the conclusion part, the key points of the discussion were wrapped up. At both events, the facilitator took notes on the event and the discussion.

At the PA3 event in Southwest Finland with more participants (13), we used group assignments and note-taking tools to facilitate the event. The participants were divided into four groups, each of which discussed only one question independently. The small groups facilitated time management and helped to lessen the academic tone of the discussion, as participants in the small groups were able to discuss informally with each other, often with their fellow workers from the same organisation. The groups made notes on the key points after which the discussions were debriefed collectively with all participants. At the end of the event, the last question was discussed collectively, namely what would be the best way to approach young adults living in vulnerable or disadvantaged situations and how to potentially recruit them for interviews, and how to engage them to participate in the Innovation Forum organised in their locality.

The focus group discussions conducted by the WP5 core group also served as an important tool in planning and organising the entire fieldwork phase of the interviews with young adults. After the discussion sessions, each WP5 core group team provided the Work Package leader with concise notes on the content and progression of these discussions. The notes informed other research partners about the planning and



implementation of their fieldwork. They also led to several recommendations that were specifically considered in the guidelines for the interviews with young adults.

In addition to the participatory workshops organised in the core team countries, each partner implemented an aspect of the participatory strategy in the WP5 when conducting and analysing the interviews as the Interview Guide included three questions specifically aimed at producing material for the Innovation Forums. The use of the interview materials – i.e., inputs on the selected topics provided by the interviewed youth – aimed to facilitate the participation of especially young people in the discussions carried out in the Innovation Forums by bringing forth aspects emphasised by their peers presented in their “own language”.

Altogether, the PA3 did not only provide crucial assistance for the planning and implementation of the WP5 fieldwork – drafting interview questions, finding and recruiting interviewees who met the right criteria, and arranging suitable interview conditions – but it also paved the way for the UTU team in planning and selecting the content and methods for the Innovation Forum. Based on the PA3 discussions suggesting that a sense of security and trusting relationships are key prerequisites for the participation of young people living in vulnerable situations, these elements became central to the creation of the *loca*/Innovation Forum, which aimed to bring to the fore the perspectives of the young adults who are less often heard and listened to.

#### *Participatory Actions integrated to task 6.1 in WP6 (PA4)*

In the WP6, the participatory activities were implemented in tasks 6.1 and 6.3. In the task 6.1, “*Construction of the survey and definition of experts’ profiles*”, the objectives of the participatory activities were to contribute to the construction of the survey tool by fine-tuning the main questions to be presented so that they better focus on the objectives of the study by identifying the most relevant issues and policy areas to be addressed; and help to better define the composition and profile of the expert panel responding to the survey.

According to the guidelines set by the leaders of the WP6 and WP8, the first round of participatory activities included a consultation with a national group of experts and stakeholders in the three core team countries of the WP6 (Italy, Finland and Portugal). The group of experts (5–6) were heterogenous and represented different fields of policies (including education, labour market and youth policies) and different sectors (academic, public sector, NGOs). The meetings with experts were organised as focus group discussions, which covered the overall thematic content of the survey questionnaire.

To implement the first round of the WP6 participatory activity (PA4), the UTU team organised a focus group discussion with national, regional and local experts at University of Turku on 16 March 2023. In total, *eight experts* representing educational policy, labour market policy, academic research, vocational education and training, and youth work



participated in the discussion. Five of the experts were women, one had a migrant background, and one was an advocate of a NGO. The participants were invited to the event by email and telephone, and there were no major difficulties in persuading them to attend. Three members of the UTU team were facilitating the meeting, one leading the discussion and two taking notes of the content of the discussion and the proceedings of the meeting. The participants were asked to speak in a free form manner, though the discussion was guided to be focused on the issues at hand. The first half hour of the two-hour event was devoted to introductions of participants and a presentation of the research project and tasks and goals of the WP6 (with a PP presentation). The remainder of the time was used discussing the following themes and questions:

- From your perspective, what are the key issues when talking about young people's learning outcomes?
- Do all actors understand the concept of learning outcomes in the same way or are there alternative ways of defining it?
- How important is it to consider learning outcomes when trying to understand and tackle educational disadvantage in policymaking and in the activities of your organisation?
- What factors influence learning outcomes and educational disadvantage in the current social and political context?
- What factors hinder and contribute to the functioning of different policy measures addressing educational disadvantage and the success of cooperation between them?
- From your perspective, what are the key factors that have influenced and will influence young people's learning outcomes?
- How various crises (e.g., the financial crisis in 2007–2012, the coronavirus pandemic) have affected young people's learning outcomes and educational disadvantage?
- How will educational disadvantages evolve over the next 10 years? What are the likely, desirable, and threatening developments in both educational disadvantage among young people and the policy responses to it?

The focus group discussion was successful beyond our expectations in that the participants were very enthusiastic about sharing their views on the themes and questions presented. Although views varied considerably, the discussion helped us to clarify themes related to learning outcomes, educational underachievement and inequality, as well as questions related to their potential future scenarios in the Finnish context. At the same time, the discussion confirmed our understanding of which target groups would be the most suited to respond to the WP6 survey. The discussion brought



up ideas about what new themes and questions should be included in the survey, such as 1) views on the impact of digitalisation and social media on learning, 2) views on the usefulness of formal/standardised learning outcomes, and 3) views on the need to change/expand the assessment system. The discussion also led to a reassessment of the time horizon to be used in the survey scenarios. Based on this, it was evaluated that a time horizon of no more than 10 years would be sufficient and exceeding this would make it difficult for respondents to assess. It also became evident that including critical drivers of change in the current situation in the survey would make it easier for respondents to assess future scenarios. The discussion was also beneficial in that we were able to engage the participating experts in the UTU team's CLEAR network, and some of them continued to the next phases of the project's participatory activities.

On the other hand, it must be highlighted that the focus group discussion was complicated by the number of themes and questions to be addressed in the short event and the complexity of some of them in relation to the time available. There was clearly not enough time to address all the issues in a single session, and some issues – such as effective policies and their coordination – would have deserved to be discussed in their own separate session. The group discussion would have benefited from a more structured approach rather than free discussion, or from focusing on fewer themes.

#### *Participatory Actions integrated to task 6.3 in WP6 (PA5)*

In the task 6.3, *"Data analysis and reporting"*, the goal of participatory activities was to enrich the discussion and validation of preliminary analyses and findings, encompassing different experts' points of view before the reporting phase.

The three core team countries of the WP6 and the leader of the WP8 agreed on the proceedings of the second round of participatory activities, which was to consist of a shared online meeting with selected national experts from Finland, Italy and Portugal discussing a set of findings from the WP6 report. The discussion with the experts did not serve as a form of validation, but rather an opportunity for the participants to scrutinise the interpretations and conclusions made from the survey results'. This critical discussion fed the final versions of the WP6 deliverables. The plan was to involve 3–5 participants from each core country representing various fields of expertise and different sectors and levels (policy making, academic research, NGOs, as well as local experts working closely with young adults). The participants of the online discussion were provided with a short summary of results in advance.

The online event was held on 4 June 2024, and the discussion was moderated by the members of the WP6 leading partner. The event was held in English, but members of the national teams provided translation support when necessary. The event lasted an hour and a half and consisted of the following stages: 1) presentation of the project and its main topics; 2) individual comments by participants on the themes and questions presented to them via an online tool (Padlet); collective discussion on the comments



written on Padlet, and 4) conclusions. The WP6 core group selected two interrelated dynamics that emerged as particularly important topics for discussion based on the survey results: the importance of individual factors for learning outcomes, and the processes of individualisation and differentiation in education.

On behalf of the UTU team, two members facilitated the online event, and they invited some of those experts who responded to the survey and indicated that they were available for further engagement with the research activities. This way and through own networks, the team was able to involve five national-level experts in the international online discussion. At the last minute, however, one of the representatives of NGOs had to cancel her participation, and the final Finnish panel consisted of *four experts* (two men and two women), two of whom were from academia, one from the field of education policy and one from NGOs. It is likely that the academic approach and the use of English had a negative effect on the willingness of some of those invited, especially local actors, to participate in the international online discussion.

Although the profile of the participants in the discussion did not fully correspond to the original plan, the event was nevertheless a success in terms of the objectives set for it. The discussion was particularly useful in that it helped to problematise, among other things, one of the key findings of the survey concerning the strong influence of individual-level factors on learning outcomes. According to the participants' comments, many of the variables classified as individual-level factors in the survey, such as self-efficacy, are strongly linked to the social environment in which individuals grow up and go to school (e.g. social class), and thus the overall question might be more about structural and combined effects of multiple factors than our preliminary findings had suggested. This interpretation was thus better confirmed by the participants and the studies they referred to and were taken into account in the final results reports.

In terms of participation, the use of Padlet as an online tool for collecting and sharing anonymous comments and thoughts proved particularly fruitful; the tool enabled each participant to reflect on the questions and at the same time allowed to follow the comments made by others. On the other hand, the plenary debriefing section at the end was more limited than expected due to time constraints. As was the case in the previous round of PA, it was difficult to achieve a balance in the use of time between presenting complex issues, allowing for individual comments and free discussion, while also giving due consideration to the different participant groups. Some of the participants left their comments and feedback after the discussion had ended.

**Table 1 - PAs integrated to the Work Packages implemented by UTU team**

PA	WP integration	Objective	Applied method method	Participants	Contribution to IF in Turku
PA3	WP5, task 5.1	Design of qualitative interviews;	Focus group discussions in Kainuu (Kajaani)	Front-line professionals working with	Bringing participants;



PA	WP integration	Objective	Applied method method	Participants	Contribution to IF in Turku
		Define strategical approaches for qualitative interviews; Provide additional outputs for IF	and in Southwest Finland (Turku)	young adults (educational institutions, municipal youth work, NGOs)	Shaping PA methods and materials to be discussed in groups and in plenary session
				All: 20	
				Females: 15	
				Males: 5	
PA4	WP6, task 6.1	Design of survey tool; Define profile of the expert panel	Focus group workshop in Turku	Experts (education policy, labour market policy, academic research, VET and youth work)	Bringing participants; Shaping materials to be presented in plenary session
				All: 8	
				Females: 5	
				Males: 3	
PA5	WP6, task 6.3	Discuss and validate findings from the survey	International on-line workshop with the help of Padlet	Experts (education policy, research, NGOs)	Shaping materials to be presented in plenary session
				All: 4	
				Females: 2	
				Males: 2	

### c. Innovation Forum in Turku – “Tukea ja taitoja tulevaisuuteen”

The Innovation Forums are key events of the CLEAR project’s participatory strategy designed to create a deliberative space and support for different groups of stakeholders – young people, policy experts, policy practitioners and professionals – in expressing their opinions to the other groups and reaching a common understanding. In the project, the Innovation Forums aim to co-create awareness about the topics of learning outcomes and educational underachievement and to encourage open exchange of insights and experiences between participants from different fields and sectors. One of the innovative endeavours of the CLEAR project’s participatory approach is to bring international research topics and questions into dialogue with the practical knowledge of education policy makers, implementers and those who live with and experience education. (Deliverable D2.1, pp. 40–41; Deliverable D8.1, pp. 17–18.)

The UTU team started planning the Finnish Innovation Forum in autumn 2024. Basing on previous participatory activities and inspired by the results of the WP5 results, it was decided by the team that the goal for constructing local Innovation Forum is to bring fore the “unheard and ignored voices” of young adults. Following the idea on listening to young people’s voice and messages, the key guideline for the participation strategy was to create a participation space that is as safe and confidence-building as possible. In this, we drew on the experiences and insights gained through the PA3 on how to approach and engage young people – through trusted individuals familiar to them, such as instructors, teachers and coaches, and with their encouragement. Accordingly, we did not approach young people directly as researchers but asked the professionals who work closely with young people to act as intermediaries and invite young adults to participate in the event. The contact people inviting young adults to the IF were for the most part the same professionals who helped us to find interviewees for the WP5 study.

Informing about the IF was also based on solutions developed in the WP5 to ensure confidentiality and secure data processing for young adults. The interviewees in the WP5 were promised in the information and consent form that the views they expressed in their interviews would be presented at the IF event, which is not open to the public but a closed invitation-only event that is not videotaped or recorded. Therefore, we did not promote the IF event publicly or on social media but kept it exclusively for invited participants.

The IF event was held in Turku on April 23, 2025 at the city-run youth art and activity center “Vimma” and it was originally planned to have around 15–20 participants, including 1) at least 6–8 young adults, 2) 4–6 professionals working with young people, 3) 3–4 local/regional policymakers, and 4) 2 academic experts. The decision on the venue was based on the recommendations of the PA3 participants for a space that would be preferable for young people and easily accessible.

Professionals, policymakers, and experts were invited to the event personally by email and/or telephone. Invitations were sent out in several rounds and to a larger group than the number of intended participants (a total of 41 people, including invitations forwarded to young people via professionals). Altogether 23 participants registered for the IF. Unfortunately, four young adults dropped out at the last minute, meaning that *19 people* attended the final event. However, the final number of the IF participants met our targets in terms of the different groups (see Table 2): *eight young adults, six professionals working with young people, three local/regional decision-makers and two experts from academia*. In the final group of participants, the gender balance was not quite as good as we wished: the number of men was significantly lower (5) than that of women (14).

The main methods applied to facilitate participants in expressing their opinions and reaching a common understanding in the IF included *group discussions* and *a plenary debriefing*. The participants were divided into working groups according to a specific logic to allow young people to share their thoughts with safe and familiar instructors. In other



words, we initially divided the pre-enrolled participants into four groups, three of which consisted of young adults and their instructors (the PA3 professionals, e.g., their VET guidance counsellors), and one of which consisted solely of regional policymakers and experts. However, as some young adults did not come to the event, one of the former groups ended up consisting only of instructors/coaches, while two groups consisted of young adults and their instructors as initially planned. Thus, a total of four groups with unequal numbers of participants were involved.

Participating in the same group as one's own *instructor* may entail a risk that the young person acts according to the instructor's expectations and does not dare to express own views, especially if believes them to be contrary to the instructor's opinions. We weighed this risk within the UTU team and concluded that it was very small when compared to the benefits in the case of the people we invited, as their guidance relationship did not involve the same kind of assessment element as in a traditional teacher-student relationship in the school system. Participation in the event was also entirely voluntary, and all participants signed an informed consent form. All participants were over the age of 18.

Following the idea of getting young people more engaged and listening to their voices, the IF focused on the WP5 research findings from interviews with young adults. From these interviews, we had selected three quotes we felt best summarised the key concerns of the interviewed young adults based on their experiences in learning and educational pathways. The three interview quotes selected focused on the following themes: 1) "*Young people talk to walls*" – young people are not listened to, their concerns about factors such as loss of livelihood and lack of access to mental health services are ignored; 2) "*Poor wellbeing and anxiety are real problems*" – problems expressed by young people, for example those related to gender identity construction and mental health, are not taken seriously and are disregarded as teenage phenomena or as a world created by social media; 3) "*Help with career choices*" – young people are left without adequate assistance in their educational and occupational choices, often leading to drop-outs from post-comprehensive education.

In the course of the *group discussions*, participants were asked to share their thoughts on the concerns expressed by young adults in the research interviews. Participants were given mini posters with the selected interview quotes, and their own thoughts and comments were prompted by a couple of questions: 1) Does the interview transcript resonate with your own experiences or the experiences of those close to you? If so, what are your own or your close circle's experiences of or thoughts on this theme? 2) What message would you send to researchers and/or policy makers on this topic? How should the issue be addressed? Participants were first asked to reflect and discuss with each other in peace after which they were invited to comment on at least one of the issues – or ideally on each of the three issues presented in the interview extracts. To give their comments, participants used coloured post-it notes, which they attached to the respective



poster, or a large cardboard provided for the group. After the independent workshop discussions, the four UTU team facilitators joined one group each and collected the comments on posters and discussed with the group members the ideas and experiences that had motivated their comments. During *the plenary debriefing*, the group facilitators presented the key points of the comments from each group discussion followed by a joint discussion. Finally, participants were presented a selection of international research results of the project, allowing them to comment and ask questions.

Overall, the IF ran smoothly without any incidents or problems. The feedback provided by participants during the event was positive and appreciative. The topics discussed were considered relevant, and the event was deemed a success. However, the timeframe for plenary discussion may have remained insufficient, as one participant from the expert group commented that it would have been interesting to hear more about the issues discussed in the different groups. Participants had an opportunity to provide feedback on Webropol platform after the event using a special QR code. However, no one made use of this opportunity.

The discussions with participants brought up some positive feedback about the inclusive nature of the event. Participants found it rewarding to hear about and discuss the research results in an event that also included young adults who are currently searching for their own learning path. Although many experts and policymakers are generally involved in various collaborations and participation activities, the voices of young people are rarely heard in these, especially those of young people living in vulnerable or multi-disadvantaged situations. The young participants in the IF, on the other hand, felt that they could speak safely and freely about their views and experiences while appreciating the nature of the event and the fact that it addressed issues that were relevant and resonated with their own lives.

The discussions in the groups were lively. Both the young people and the experts recognised the phenomena described in the interview quotes from the study. Many of the young people had personal experience of dropping out of education and changing study fields. The groups discussed issues related to study and career choices most actively, but young people's feelings of unease and anxiety, as well as the fact that their concerns are not heard or understood, also sparked a lot of reflection.

The Innovation Forum was particularly successful because it gave the UTU team the opportunity to share the study results with the various stakeholders, strengthened the link between research and practice, and generated ideas for further research, thereby increasing the social impact of the CLEAR research project. Based on the group discussions and the final debriefing, several *issues* and *research questions* emerged, including the following:

- The system of study and career guidance does not ask or listen to what young people concretely expect and hope for the system.



- The system of study and career guidance does not recognise the diversity of students and their different backgrounds and is not able to respond to the needs and wishes of young people living in different situations and coming from different backgrounds.
- Teachers and study counsellors in the school system have not enough competence and sensitivity to recognise when young people are feeling bad or anxious.
- Teachers and study counsellors in the school system are not adequately trained to be sensitive and aware of young people's different situations and differing opportunities to seek help for their problems.
- The school system is unable to promote a sense of togetherness and belonging among different groups of young people.
- The school system has not sufficient and adequate methods to deal with young people's bullying and stigmatising and it cannot create trusting atmosphere, and safe arenas, where young people could rely on the support by school and their peers and get help with various problems.
- Proactive and preventive youth work, etc., is not valued and allocated resources, even though in the long term its costs would be significantly lower than, for example, substance abuse and institutional care

Moreover, the group discussions and final discussion prompted several *recommendations* for policymaking, including, e.g. the following:

- Rather than scaling down, youth-oriented and peer support-based methods that promote young people's safety should be integrated into the school system. These methods would help young people's voices to be better heard, increase their trust in the system, and encourage them to participate.
- Ensuring young people's access to mental health and other services. It is not enough that services are available, they must also be accessible, which is why young people must be provided with sufficient information and guidance on the right services. As suggested by the participants, low-threshold services, a variety of contact methods, a human contact at an early stage, and bringing together actors from various sectors in one place (multiprofessional approach) are needed to ensure accessibility.
- Improving the sensitivity and the preparedness of teachers and counsellors, for example through training, to recognise students' different cultural backgrounds, circumstances, when they are seeking help and support and referring them to the right services.



- Developing methods and practices within the school system to foster a sense of belonging among students and strengthen their participation. Examples of activities that might promote cohesion, as suggested by participants, include class and school trips, excursions, and other shared events that are perceived as providing opportunities to get to know fellow students better.
- Providing more realistic information about different study fields and professions and what is the studying like.
- Devoting more time and lessons to familiarise students with different educational options and professions, offering opportunities for experimentation, trial and error, and flexible transitions between different educational programs and professions.
- Lessening excessive skill requirements upon young people entering labour market and providing them with better introduction to the work tasks.
- Providing young people with low-threshold jobs that enable them to gain the work experience they need for entering the labour market. Methods to facilitate entry into the labour market include, e.g. the adoption of new forms of learning and skill acquisition/certification models.

**Table 2 – The local Innovation Forum in Finland – main features and methods**

City	Place	Participants by group	Gender	Recruitment methos	Group composition	Methods stimulating discussion	WP findings discussed
Turku	Youth art and activity centre	All: 19	F:14; M: 5	Personal invitations, participants in WP5 and WP6, young people only through their facilitator	4 uniform groups	ice-breakers; quotes from young people's interviews	WP5
		Young adults: 8					
		Professionals: 6					
		Policymakers: 3					
		Academics: 2					

#### **d. Conclusions/reflections of the UTU team on the use of participatory approach in CLEAR**

Our experiences in designing and implementing participatory methods were generally positive. The PA3 organised as part of the WP5 provided crucial assistance for the planning, designing and implementation of the WP5 fieldwork and the local Innovation Forum. The focus group discussions in the PA3 helped us to approach young adults, fine-tune both research objectives of the Work Package and interview themes and questions. The PA3 participants also contributed significantly to the research by providing a calm and safe place within their organisation for interviewing young adults. Furthermore, some of the PA3 participants have become more like permanent partners for the research team;



they have not only participated in the Innovation Forum held in Turku, but the collaboration is likely to continue after the project ends.

The PA4 organised as part of the WP6 helped us to clarify themes of the expert survey and it confirmed our decision about which target groups would be the most suited to respond to the survey. The PA4 was also beneficial in that it enabled us to engage the participating experts to continue in the next phases of the project's participatory activities. The PA5, in turn, helped us to critically reflect some of the key preliminary findings of the international expert survey and provided us new viewpoints for the interpretation of the results.

For future social science research integrating participation, based on our experience, it is important to reserve enough time and resources for designing and implementing the participatory activities. Recruitment of participants is time-consuming, and one has to also be prepared for last minute cancellations, particularly when planning to have participatory activities involving individuals in multi-disadvantaged life situations. There should also be enough time for discussion in participatory activities, since many crucial issues in the field of social sciences are complex by nature and need to be discussed from multiple viewpoints. We learned that it is important to achieve a balance in the use of time between presenting complex issues, allowing for individual comments and open discussion, while also giving due consideration to the different participant groups. If time reserved for discussion remains insufficient, the participants should be provided an opportunity to express their views afterwards.

In our case, the Innovation Forum was particularly successful as it allowed us to share our results with various stakeholder groups, strengthened the connection between research and practise and generated ideas for further research and hence enhanced the societal impact of the CLEAR research project. For the participants, it was rewarding to hear and discuss the results of the study in an event that also involved young adults who are currently searching for their own learning path. The young participants in the IF, on the other hand, felt that they were allowed to speak safely and freely about their views and experiences while appreciating the nature of the event and the fact that it addressed issues that were relevant and resonated with their own lives.





## **Work Package 8**

Framing and Implementing the Transversal  
Participatory Approach

### **Deliverable D8.3**

National Participatory Report

**Germany**

**University of Münster**

Johannes Ludwig Löffler, Andrea Sittig, Jozef Zelinka

## Executive summary

The German National Participatory Report (Report) focuses on the experiences and organization of the Innovation Forum in Hamburg, since no other participatory actions were implemented. The goal of the Report is to provide a reflexive input on the use and role of participatory actions, such as the Innovation Forum, in research projects.

The Report evidences the important role of engaging local educational stakeholders not as objects of research or sources of information, but as subjects of the research process and active agents in shaping the local educational environment. This was the main lesson learned from the IF in Hamburg. The participants have frequently reported their interest in the research results, but also stressed the necessity to unite different stakeholder groups in such fora.

Among the main outcomes, we have produced a list of recommendations that could be applied at various governance levels:

- First, the role of administrative units and boundaries needs to be contrasted against young people's experiences and perceptions, who often organise themselves according to their functional preferences and limitations.
- Second, the multifarious educational pathways and experiences must be viewed more holistically, not only through the lenses of formal requirements, which often lead to disappointments and frustration on all sides.
- Third, more institutional flexibility is needed, especially for those administrative workers who have the first contact to young people in vulnerable positions, in order to avoid structural disadvantages and enable a smoother process of (re)integration in the labour market.
- Fourth, a centralised and more accessible source of information is necessary, especially for those who seek new information and are often lost in the search for relevant information and contact point.
- Fifth, to get a better insight into the skills and capabilities' profile of young people and enhance their active participation in the formation processes, more space for self-expression and self-assessment is needed.
- Sixth, for local professionals, value neutrality and recognition of young people's life histories is recommendable to avoid stigmatization, labelling, and ill-advised decisions.

In terms of reflection on the participatory actions, we have structured our experiences into three stages: preparation, implementation, and processing.



During the preparation phase, the high motivation and engagement have guided our work, while at the same time we have reflected on our role as researchers in the diverse setting with other stakeholders.

During the implementation, our main experience was the need to safeguard an environment, where everyone can freely express their thoughts and ideas and where power relations do not limit the participation.

Finally, when processing all experiences, we have come to the conclusion that the notion of participation is very limited in our case, as it is reduced only to a single event and has limited potential to install long-term changes. Nevertheless, it was an enriching experience and helped us not only to see the intricacies of local environments, but also to think of our research on learning outcomes as a chance to break with the established understandings and offer a more sustainable and inclusive approach to education.

**a. Introduction: The national context of implementing a Transversal Participatory Approach**

Germany was involved in the preparation and implementation of one Innovation Forum (IF). The WWU Team responsible for the IF has selected Hamburg as the relevant site for the organization of the event. This was due to close proximity to Münster, well-established contacts with local professionals, and financial limitations. The IF in Hamburg took place on April 1, 2025, and involved several professionals from education, training, career guidance, and policymaking. The main objective was to reflect on the project’s findings from the local perspective and invite various stakeholders to share their view on Hamburg as a place of living and learning (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Participants (IF Hamburg)**

Stakeholders	Male	Female	Total
Youth Advisors/Teachers	0	5	5
Employment Advisors	3	0	3
Young Adults	2	0	2
Local Policy-Makers	1	0	1
Youth Counsellors	0	1	1
Researchers (non-team)	1	0	1
Total	7	6	13

Source: WWU Team

The IF in Hamburg was organized as half-a-day event with a possibility for networking and dissemination and contributed greatly to the relevance of participation in the project.



## **b. Innovation Forum**

### *b.1 Strategies of engagement*

The main targets of the IF were the engagement of persons involved in the construction and implementation of Learning Outcomes (LOs) in the region of Hamburg, and creating a room for discussion between people who are not always present in public debates about LOs. Another goal was the dissemination of research results and comparing them to the experiences of people working in the field. This is especially relevant to those who were involved in earlier stages of the project, as they had already expressed interest in the final results of their contributions.

In total, 60 persons were contacted, the majority of them via mail. Some of the requested participants were already involved in earlier research stages of the CLEAR project, e.g., as interview partners or as contact persons. Additionally, some stakeholders were also contacted by phone, which proved to be an effective strategy. Organisations that agreed to participate, namely the Christliches Jugenddorfwerk Deutschland (CJD), were asked to forward the mail to other potential participants. With that, we tried to activate and make use of existing networks in the field.

The mail contained a short description of the IF and its goals. Moreover, the CLEAR project and the concept of LOs were explained and related to the context of Hamburg-Mitte. Important data about the IF was included (date, time, and address) as well as ways to contact us in case of questions. Furthermore, the mail contained an invitation flyer and a link to access a registration form, gathering information that helped us to better organize the event in advance.

With regard to the research context, the Hamburg IF mostly referenced the local context of Hamburg by discussing the living and learning possibilities in the region, especially for multi-disadvantaged youth.

By bringing together participants from various backgrounds, the Hamburg IF tried to produce a fruitful discussion between those voices already represented in debates about LOs (e.g., policy makers, teacher associations, political parties, research institutions) and those who are often silent (namely multi-disadvantaged youth, but also those people working with young people, i.e., counsellors). In comparison to other IFs, the Hamburg IF has managed to invite a lot of street-level bureaucrats, many of whom were thankful to be given the opportunity to make their voice heard in an event like this.

Problems faced in the engagement process of the Hamburg IF included the timing of the event, as the period in which the IF was planned to take place collided not only with school holidays and semester breaks, but also with the Hamburg city council elections in March 2025, which caused some local political offices to be vacant during this period of transition. This made recruiting teachers, young people, and local policy actors especially difficult and can be seen as one of the reasons why the group of implementors and



counsellors was overrepresented at the Hamburg IF. It is also important to consider that the IF itself poses certain requirements to participate, which led to the exclusion of some groups (e.g., young adults with limited time capacities or with limited language skills).

### *b.2 Process of implementation*

For the Hamburg IF we utilized three working groups, with the initial goal for each group to attend each workshop. The workshop discussions were opened with icebreaker questions, which eased the tension and allowed a smooth transition into the debates. The icebreakers worked as intended, decomposing hierarchies between the participants. To our surprise, the icebreaker questions led to fruitful debates on topics introduced at a later stage of the workshops. Throughout the workshop, we flexibly enriched the discussions with project findings and follow up questions. Due to time constraints, each of three groups attend two workshops in total. This facilitated a livelier concluding debate at the end of the event, as there was still something new to learn for each group attending two of three workshop groups each. The three workshops were designed as follows:

- Workshop 1: Living and Learning in Hamburg – or elsewhere? The WP3 workshop started with a reflexion on how the participants have estimated their labour market perspective given their then current educational outcomes. This exercise was designed based on WP3 results on the regional disparities based on different opportunity structures.
- Workshop 2: Changing Perspectives – interrupted educational pathways. The WP4 workshop started with an exercise on reflecting a particular case. The case was a young person, who has dropped out of the school and now wants to get back on the track. The participants were asked to deliberate who might this person be and what steps are needed to get back into the school.
- Workshop 3: Listen to us! – voices of young adults. The WP5 workshop started with an exercise based on a quotation from the project's interviews conducted in Hamburg. The quotation says: "Listen carefully" and the participants had to reflect on the quote and give their opinion on what policymakers could do differently in their approach to young people.

Further documentation of the results included: First, photographic documentation by the event's organisers before, during and after the event to better illustrate the different elements of the participatory approach (e.g., workshop groups; seating arrangements; working materials), the presentation of CLEAR (e.g., power point presentation; flyers), and the general process of organising, conducting, and evaluating the event (e.g., location, room setup, catering). Second, field notes during the event to document observations such as participants' experiences and expertise. Third, a recap session in the aftermath of the event, to gather our observations, to exchange our immediate impressions and reflect on our experiences with regard to the participatory approach.



### *b.3 Research materials*

For the Hamburg IF we utilized CLEAR research findings from WP3 (*Quantitative Analyses of Learning Outcomes*), WP4 (*Institutional Analysis, Policy Review, and Assessment*), and WP5 (*Qualitative Research with Young People*). For the Hamburg IF, we applied the instructional toolkit first implemented at the pilot IF in Genoa. It provided us with graphics that enabled us to create a link between the research findings and the participants' living and learning realities. In case of questions from the participants during the workshops, we included selective research findings from other WPs to provide additional context.

### *b.4 Guiding research questions*

As the central guiding research question for the Hamburg IF, we asked: Successfully living and learning in Hamburg – who can (not) make it? We used this question as the IF's title (e.g., flyer; presentation). With this we wanted to explore Hamburg as a living and learning place, especially in the context of multi-disadvantaged and vulnerable youth. As for the three workshop groups, we utilized the following guiding questions: "Think back to your school days, when you first started imagining your future or exploring job possibilities. How did you perceive your opportunities back then? Which of these statements best reflects how you felt at the time?" (WP3); "Imagine a young person who didn't finish secondary school and has had intermittent jobs since then. Now, they're eager to return to their studies to advance in their career. Who might this person be? What steps could they take?" (WP4); "What would you say to those in charge of taking decisions?" (WP5).

### *b.5 Issues during the implementation*

Another challenge was a certain confusion many participants expressed with the term "Innovation Forum". As this form of event is not that common in the participants' living and working realities, the majority of them expected a more "traditional" presentation of project's results and were surprised by the amount of active participation required of them. This conceptual mismatch was present during the entire course of the IF and required careful navigation of expectations and thoughtful consideration of participants' questions on the part of the researchers. Throughout this process, researchers and participants alike were required to reflect on what it means to participate in a format that requires critical input of all parties involved. Stickers were used to avoid homogenous group building as well as hierarchies within the working groups. As a general observation, the transversal participatory format requires a high degree of openness and flexibility on part of the organisers, which in turn greatly limits planning security. The success of the IF predominantly depends on the active participation of the audience, which calls for continuous and careful guidance throughout the event. To conclude: Conducting the Hamburg IF was a risky but ultimately successful endeavour.



### *b.6 Feedback from the participants*

In general, participants regarded the IF as an unfamiliar but otherwise intriguing event, enabling them to safely discuss individual living and learning experiences with a diverse group of educational stakeholders, ranging from teachers to policy-makers. At the end of the event, as part of their feedback, several participants highlighted the creation of an atmosphere of trust that enabled everyone to share personal experiences and opinions. As an immediate outcome of the event, several participants used the opportunity of the group's composition of different actors to exchange contacts with the prospect to build work-related networks. Furthermore, young adults regarded the participatory approach as a novel way for them to, for once, let their voices be heard.

### *b.7 Indications for further research and recommendations to policy-makers*

Result: (Non)perception of artificial statistical units

Recommendation: Young people do not think about their job or education opportunities in administrative boundaries, and perceive them as artificial statistical units. To them the decisive factors to move to or stay within a certain district, city or region are affordable housing (costs of living), places for education and training suitable to their needs, capabilities and goals, and overall good working conditions (in the case of Hamburg, in Hamburg-Mitte). Due to mostly limited financial resources, accessibility (e.g., costs and connections of public transportation) must be further taken into account as important decision-making factors. In particular, young people in vulnerable positions think functionally, carefully assessing their local living and learning conditions.

Result: Diverse educational pathways, unrealistic expectations & disappointments

Recommendation: The life experiences of young adults must be considered holistically and included in the design and implementation of training and learning programmes. We suggest not to place the same formal requirements or demands on everyone equally, especially in case of young people in multi-disadvantaged positions. Due to high dropout rates in vocational training, we recommend that young people should be given the opportunity to spend a given period of time (e.g., half a year) in pre-training programmes, allowing them to familiarize with the institutional landscape and to adjust their educational and working expectations. For young migrants, this also can also serve as an element of integration into society and the labour market. With such programmes, young people could be offered additional time for orientation and self-assessment, which can potentially lower their dissatisfaction and reduce the rates of school and training drop-outs. For implementation, we suggest institutional settings familiar with teaching basic skills to young people in vulnerable or multi-disadvantaged positions (e.g., language and integration courses).

Result: Limited knowledge regarding the purpose of some rules & regulations





critical life experiences) that reflect skills deemed valuable by many employers (e.g., flexibility, creativity, critical thinking).

#### *b.8 Dissemination of results*

Dissemination of results was supported by news articles on the project's official website, the website of the Institute of Education at the University of Münster, on LinkedIn, and as part of the *Deliverable D8.2 Innovation Forums*. Some results will be utilized as part of the *upcoming Deliverable D7.1 Comparative Analysis Report*. The IF was further used to promote the CLEAR Final Conference "From Learning to Living. Co-creating education quality across European regions" in Lisbon, distributing flyers entailing basic information as well as a QR-Code that forwards to the registration.

### **C. Conclusions/reflections on the use of participatory approach in CLEAR**

With regard to designing and implementing the transversal participatory approach, the experiences of the Hamburg IF Team (e.g., our expectations of the format and our role as researchers designing and implementing the IF) are summarized along a temporal axis: before (preparation), during (implementation) and after the event (processing).

#### *c.1 Preparation*

Due to the fact that this was the first time for all members of the Hamburg IF Team to design an Innovation Forum and implement participatory methods, we felt particularly motivated to not only present findings from CLEAR, but to translate these results for a diverse audience, aimed to include local policy-makers, youth advisors, youth counsellors, employment advisors, researchers, teachers, and young adults. In particular, we reflected on our role as researchers (e.g., the design of the event, the use of working materials, the facilitation of an informal atmosphere for the debates, but also the power balance and knowledge we possess compared to others, and vice versa), and the potential expectations and questions of the different groups. At this stage, we had little information to what extent the different attendees would actively take part in the workshops. As a consequence, we discussed different strategies on how to stimulate participation and discussion among the participants, leading to our decision to implement an icebreaking activity at the start of the workshops. Here, the experience gathered from the CLEAR pilot IF in Genova supplied us with helpful materials and guidelines on how to design and implement a transversal participatory event. In general, preparing the IF proved to be a challenging but intriguing task, requiring a flexible event structure that avoids creating unnecessary restrictions for all people involved.

#### *c.2 Implementation*

In the course of the event, we faced the following challenges:



*First*, at the end of the initial presentation, many educational stakeholders showed differing expectations of the IF, anticipating a speaker-centred style format that is followed by a discussion primarily directed at the researchers. This was due to the fact that the attendees had no previous experience with the format and thus very vague expectations. Consequently, some educational stakeholders showed high expectations for our research as means to provide them with solid facts and concrete recommendations, as they regarded us and not themselves as the experts. Thus, they (probably unintentionally) (re-)created hierarchies between the researchers (as speakers) and the participants (as listeners) that the format aimed to dismantle. We tackled this issue by continuously emphasizing the participatory aspect of the IF and the active involvement of all attendees.

*Second*, in the course of the debates, we had to keep in mind that especially young adults in vulnerable and/or multi-disadvantaged positions might feel intimidated talking in front of other participants of the IF, in particular those with perceived high social status such as policy makers and researchers. Thus, to let all voices be heard and listened to, we aimed to facilitate a safe space that enabled all participants to get into an open exchange with each other. In particular, this was achieved by the attendance of many youth counsellors that have substantial experience in working with young adults in vulnerable and/or multi-disadvantaged positions. Furthermore, the aforementioned icebreakers helped to ease the tension as intended, resulting in continuous and lively debates. The icebreaker activities revealed that some educational stakeholders came from multi-disadvantaged backgrounds as well, creating relatability and understanding among the participants. This made it easier for young adults to share their educational and working experiences.

*Third*, following our initial expectations (see 3.1), we aimed to facilitate a debate that did not simply centre on or reproduce CLEAR research results, but that was open to discussion and reflection. As the Hamburg IF was our first time implementing a transversal participatory approach, we made sure to be as flexible as possible in order to allow the participants to freely interact and choose their preferred way of expression. However, this flexibility came with the downside that we were dependent on the attendee's readiness to participate in the event. Thus, while flexibility is deemed necessary as part of the IF design, the more flexible we were the fewer scenarios we could prepare for. Thanks to the participant's engagement (i.e., sharing personal biographical experiences), our initial concerns were quickly resolved.

### *c.3 Processing*

Our concern is that one single IF only partly realises what full participatory research (e.g., on an annual basis) could provide. This would allow to continuously identify and discuss potential results (e.g., networking, lessons learned), as well as to receive regular feedback on the design and implementation of participatory events from the different actors and groups. In this regard, we believe that a second IF in Halle (Saale) would have helped to



get more familiar with the format, and to receive further input from young adults and educational stakeholders from a socio-economically declining region. We consider it limited to integrate the IF format into our further research activities, as both its design and implementation feature high requirements, including financial costs for event organisation, the need for multiple researchers to design and implement the event (e.g., parallel working groups), and time to prepare the necessary working materials and process the results.

The utilization of contacts established prior to the IF (as part of WP4 and WP5 interviews) proved to be particularly helpful, enabling us to further build trust and to access existing networks with local stakeholders. The IF Hamburg shed light on the diverse perspectives and experiences on LOs, providing valuable insights on similarities and differences between different educational stakeholders. With regard to the IF's design, we recommend paying attention to the selection of the event date (e.g., weekdays, time of day, holidays) and venue (e.g., accessibility; access to affordable public transportation), keeping in mind the needs and resources of the different stakeholder groups.

In general, the Hamburg IF enabled us to critically reflect on the results of previous WPs. On the one hand, the IFs were designed to be implemented during the later stage of the project, not only allowing to share the project's results, but to facilitate a discussion between the different educational actors and groups. On the other hand, this gave all partners little time to disseminate the results at this stage of the project.

Beyond the project's application of the IF, we believe that the format might be suitable at university level, particularly for institutes to facilitate continuous exchange with specific groups, to engage with actors and groups whose voices and experiences are mostly excluded from mainstream discussion formats.





## **Work Package 8**

Framing and Implementing the Transversal  
Participatory Approach

### **Deliverable D8.3**

National Participatory Report

**Greece**

**University of Thessaloniki**

George K. Zarifis, Kyriakos Bonidis, Achilleas Papadimitriou

## Executive summary

This report presents the participatory work carried out in Greece as part of the CLEAR project, coordinated nationally by the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH). Rather than treating participation as an auxiliary step or as an obligatory layer of dissemination, the Greek team placed it at the core of their research strategy. Participation was not only about inviting voices into the room, but about changing the terms under which knowledge was produced, interpreted, and eventually returned to those most affected. It was an approach grounded in the belief that marginalised young people, educators, and community actors are not data sources—they are co-thinkers. The participatory work unfolded within a national context marked by a persistent disconnect between educational policy and lived experience. While discourses of Europeanisation and lifelong learning continue to circulate at the institutional level, learners on the ground—particularly those navigating vocational routes, second-chance education, or exclusion as NEETs—often encounter a system that fails to see them. In this terrain, the AUTH team sought not to repair the gap from above, but to open space for dialogic exchange from within.

Two core activities anchored this effort. First, a preparatory workshop—Participatory Action 2—brought together twelve participants from Central Macedonia, including trainers, NGO workers, and representatives from migrant and Roma communities. This session avoided the familiar trap of passive consultation. Instead, it used narrative prompts, visual tools, and biographical sketches to stimulate reflection on issues such as recognition, learning motivation, and institutional misrecognition. What emerged was not just commentary, but co-created material—quotes, themes, questions—that later formed the structure of the larger Innovation Forum. That Forum, held in April 2025, brought 38 participants into a purposefully non-hierarchical setting at AUTH's KEDEA building. Using the World Café method, participants rotated across six thematic tables, each engaging with questions drawn from previous research and participatory work. These conversations were open-ended, emotionally textured, and grounded in personal experience. Young people and professionals spoke not in parallel, but in proximity, often revisiting difficult moments: dropping out, being labelled, feeling invisible, returning to education late. The Forum did not aim to extract consensus or produce a list of polished recommendations. Instead, it allowed uncertainty, contradiction, and emotional intensity to remain part of the process. Still, several themes clearly crystallised: a desire for more humane assessment practices, for validation of informal learning, for narratives of success that extend beyond university degrees. Many participants stressed that genuine participation must become structural, not event-based.

This report does not merely recount those activities. It reflects on what it means to do participatory research seriously—to stay with complexity, to cede control, to honour the



voices that institutions often overlook. What happened in Thessaloniki was not a consultation. It was a reframing.

**a. Introduction: The national context of implementing a Transversal Participatory Approach by the national teams**

The implementation of the Transversal Participatory Approach (TPA) within the framework of the CLEAR project in Greece was rooted in a complex, multi-scalar educational and social context marked by longstanding tensions between institutional reform, social inclusion, and the persistent marginalisation of vulnerable youth populations. Informed by both structural and lived inequities within the Greek education and employment systems, the participatory activities led by the national team at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH) sought to operationalise CLEAR's transversal ethos by embedding dialogic engagement at the very heart of empirical and translational work. The challenge was not only methodological but also political and epistemic: how can youth and community actors—so often objectified in education policy—become active interlocutors in a process of co-producing insights and shaping reform narratives?

Greece presents a paradoxical case for participatory research on learning outcomes (LOs) and youth trajectories. On the one hand, the national policy landscape has increasingly incorporated discourses of Europeanisation, lifelong learning, and skills recognition. On the other hand, these discourses have largely remained top-down and technocratic, often disconnected from the affective, biographical, and socio-economic realities of those they are meant to empower. Young people designated as NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training), Roma youth, and students from vocational or second-chance educational tracks continue to encounter systemic exclusion, frequently mediated through mechanisms of labelling, fragmented support infrastructures, and limited opportunities for meaningful participation in decision-making.

In this contested terrain, the AUTH national team approached the TPA not as an add-on to research design, but as a principled methodology for epistemic justice. Our ambition was to cultivate spaces—both real and symbolic—where young people and educators could not only express their perspectives, but influence the knowledge-making process. The participatory strand of CLEAR in Greece thus became an effort to unsettle the passive role often assigned to research "subjects" and instead enact dialogic modes of engagement that reframe those same subjects as co-analysts, storytellers, and policy thinkers.

The Greek national context is particularly significant due to the historical marginalisation of VET and adult education in mainstream pedagogical discourse. Despite successive reforms, the social and cultural perception of non-academic educational tracks remains ambivalent, often linked with deficit assumptions about learner potential. This structural undervaluing disproportionately affects youth from minority backgrounds, migrants, and low-income households. Moreover, formal mechanisms for recognising informal or non-



formal learning remain underdeveloped, despite efforts aligned with European frameworks.

Against this backdrop, AUTH implemented its participatory interventions with a dual intention: to critically interrogate the epistemological boundaries of educational research, and to make space for voices systematically silenced or underrepresented in national learning outcome debates. The participatory actions were designed not simply to elicit opinions, but to catalyse a shift from extractive forms of knowledge gathering to more reciprocal and situated modes of inquiry. Central to this shift was the use of creative methodologies—World Café, narrative prompts, reflective tools, and arts-based engagement—that resisted hierarchies of expertise and invited emotional as well as intellectual investment.

The Thessaloniki Innovation Forum, organised in April 2025, represented the culmination of this participatory arc. It brought together 38 participants across multiple sectors, including young people from marginalised communities, educators, policy officials, NGO actors, and researchers. The venue, the Centre for the Dissemination of Research Results (KEDEA) at AUTH, was chosen for its spatial neutrality and dialogic affordances. Structured as a six-hour event using the World Café methodology, the Forum was not a dissemination activity in the conventional sense. Rather, it functioned as a co-reflective assembly in which research findings from CLEAR WP4 and WP5 were transformed into dialogic tools—visual prompts, quotes, scenario cards—that seeded collective exploration, critique, and reimagination.

Crucially, this was not the first point of contact with stakeholders. The Forum was preceded by a participatory workshop engaging twelve regional actors—including trainers, second-chance educators, municipal staff, and representatives from Roma and migrant communities—in a session aimed at co-interpreting research results and co-designing materials for the IF. This pre-Forum session served as both a pilot and a critical filter for localising the Forum agenda. It also revealed how prompts drawn from WP4 and WP5 could function as heuristic devices: “What does a young man from a migrant background with low Greek language skills need to become a social worker?” or “How do we assess education when the process matters more than the grade?” Such prompts enabled participants to situate research in real-life dilemmas, thus foregrounding the link between structural patterns and individual biographies.

The participatory implementation process foregrounded the necessity of relational infrastructure. In practice, this meant forging partnerships with NGOs such as Praxis, ARSIS, and Generation 2.0, who facilitated the inclusion of young adults and provided interpretative and emotional support where needed. It also entailed a recalibration of academic habitus: facilitators and AUTH researchers had to relinquish control over the pace and content of discussions, allowing for ambiguity, contradiction, and affect to enter



the analytical space. This openness proved essential for engendering trust and surfacing insights that would not have emerged in more formalised consultation formats.

Finally, the ethical framework underpinning the participatory approach deserves mention. All participants signed informed consent forms based on CLEAR's GDPR-compliant protocol, translated and culturally adapted for clarity and accessibility. However, beyond procedural ethics, the team practiced what might be termed “ethical presence”—attentiveness to emotional vulnerability, power asymmetries, and the latent risks of symbolic participation. This commitment shaped everything from the spatial layout of discussion tables to the use of anonymous feedback tools.

In sum, the national implementation of CLEAR's Transversal Participatory Approach in Greece did not merely add a qualitative layer to research. It reconfigured the ontology of research itself. Rather than mining data from social actors, the participatory strand fostered shared authorship, polyphonic interpretation, and situated relevance. Through this process, CLEAR was not only able to surface rich empirical insights, but to model what participatory social science can look like when its normative ambitions are matched by rigorous methodological design.

#### **b. Participatory Action(s) along the empirical WPs**

The participatory strand of the CLEAR project in Greece, as implemented by the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH), was not only an auxiliary component but a core empirical strategy embedded within WP4 and, by extension, linked to WP5 and WP8. In designing and carrying out Participatory Action (PA2), the AUTH team drew explicitly from the project's commitment to contextualised inquiry and life-course perspectives, tailoring the participatory design to address the Greek socio-political terrain and the lived realities of youth navigating exclusionary educational and employment pathways. The participatory action was conceptualised not merely as a validation tool, but as a generative space for dialogue and meaning-making, shaping both the dissemination strategy and the empirical reading of research results.

##### *b1. Rationale for the Participatory Action and Design Anchoring*

The core rationale for PA2 derived from the WP4 imperative to explore differentiated life-course trajectories and forms of underachievement through qualitative depth. In the Greek context, where national educational reforms frequently fail to consult those most affected—particularly Roma youth, migrants, NEETs, and adult learners in second-chance or vocational settings—the participatory action was designed to re-centre those voices. The AUTH team aimed to mobilise the findings of WP4 (as consolidated in D4.1) not as static knowledge, but as dialogic prompts to be explored with individuals whose biographies and professional lives intersect directly with the themes of exclusion, recognition, assessment, and recovery.





such as community service initiatives, comics or illustrated booklets capturing real-life stories, and local “youth observatories” emerged as possible outputs to further embed CLEAR’s work in regional conversations.

### *b3. Challenges and Critical Reflections on the Process*

While the participatory session was evaluated positively by all involved, several critical reflections emerged during and after implementation. First, the heterogeneity of the group posed initial difficulties. Bringing together policy actors, Roma representatives, and frontline educators into a common dialogue space required not only logistical coordination but also sensitive facilitation. Some participants initially hesitated to share openly, citing institutional hierarchies or past experiences of being tokenised in policy dialogues. The ice-breakers helped mitigate this, as did the facilitator’s emphasis on “thinking together” rather than debating positions.

Second, the choice of prompts proved crucial. Participants responded most strongly to biographical and situational prompts that resonated with their lived or observed realities. Abstract questions—such as those framed around “learning outcomes”—were less generative, revealing a disconnect between policy discourse and grassroots experience. This insight has implications for both dissemination and advocacy, underlining the need for grounded, affectively resonant language when engaging non-academic publics.

Third, while the workshop succeeded in eliciting valuable insights, time constraints limited the depth of some conversations. Several participants indicated that a follow-up session would have allowed for deeper engagement and potential co-design of policy tools. Notably, the Roma and NGO participants proposed forming an inter-organisational taskforce to explore local solutions to youth exclusion—an idea that has since been shared with regional authorities.

### *b4. Research Impact and Dissemination Contributions*

The participatory action directly informed the design and content of the Thessaloniki Innovation Forum (D8.2). Based on insights gathered during PA2, the AUTH team developed a set of visual and narrative materials, including posters and quotes, that were used as stimuli in the IF’s World Café discussions. Moreover, participants’ emphasis on accessibility, inclusion, and the affective dimensions of learning shaped the IF’s tone and facilitation strategy. For example, the quote “Grades are not my value” originated as a participant paraphrase during the participatory action and became one of the most circulated quotes in the IF visual canvas.

From a research perspective, the participatory session enriched the interpretative layer of WP4 findings. Participants’ feedback confirmed key themes—such as institutional labelling, affective exclusion, and the invisibility of informal competences—but also introduced new dimensions, such as the politics of local engagement and the role of municipal actors in bridging formal and non-formal systems. These insights have been



fed into the cross-national synthesis discussions of WP8 and are being considered for integration into CLEAR’s upcoming policy briefs.

**Table 1. Summary of the Participatory Action**

Aspect	Details
Participatory Action Number	PA2 (Greece – Thessaloniki)
Linked Work Package	WP4 (with input into WP5, WP8)
Format	Workshop with dialogic tools and visual co-design
Participants	12 total (7M, 5F)
Age Range	26–54
Profiles	Trainers, second-chance educators, Roma and migrant representatives, NGO workers, municipal officials
Research Sites Reached	Central Macedonia (Thessaloniki)
Dissemination Outputs	Poster designs, quote-based visual materials, co-reflection inputs for IF
Contribution to Research	Validation of findings, refinement of IF methodology, thematic deepening
Key Methodologies	World Café, narrative prompts, biographical vignettes, collective reflection

### c. Innovation Forum

The Thessaloniki Innovation Forum, held on April 14, 2025, stands as the cornerstone of the participatory dimension of the CLEAR project in Greece. Designed and implemented by the national team at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH), the Forum materialised CLEAR’s transversal participatory logic in a local context, functioning not merely as a dissemination event but as a dialogic space for shared knowledge production. As a culmination of prior participatory actions and empirical engagements (particularly under WP4 and WP5), the Innovation Forum operationalised CLEAR’s commitment to grounded, inclusive educational reform by bringing together a diverse ecosystem of participants to critically reflect on learning outcomes, structural exclusions, and institutional listening.

#### *c1. Engagement Strategies and Participant Composition*

From the outset, the AUTH team adopted a strategic approach to participant engagement, rooted in principles of cross-sectoral balance, intergenerational exchange, and representation of marginalised groups. Participant selection followed a targeted, invitation-only model based on prior stakeholder mapping and existing collaborative ties. This approach ensured the presence of youth from vulnerable backgrounds (including NEETs, migrants, and Roma learners), alongside educators, NGO professionals, local policy actors, labour market stakeholders, and academic researchers.



The resulting forum included 38 participants:

- 18 young adults (10 female, 8 male), aged 18–30, including individuals from migrant and Roma backgrounds, as well as VET and SDE learners.
- 6 municipal representatives (3F, 3M) working on education, youth policy, and inclusion.
- 4 trainers and educators (2F, 2M) from vocational and second-chance institutions.
- 5 NGO professionals (3F, 2M) from key civil society organisations (ARSIS, PRAKSIS, Solidarity Now, KMOP, Generation 2.0).
- 3 academic researchers (3F) from AUTH involved in educational and sociological research.
- 2 labour market representatives (2M) from tourism and healthcare sectors.

The inclusive composition of the Forum was achieved not through tokenistic representation but through deliberate alliance-building and ongoing preparatory conversations. Young participants were supported in advance by partner NGOs to familiarise them with the Forum’s aims, and facilitators were trained to ensure equitable participation.

Special attention was given to ethical transparency. All participants signed informed consent forms adapted from CLEAR’s GDPR-compliant template, which clearly outlined participation conditions, the scope of data collection, and the optional nature of photographic documentation. The tone of the invitation materials and opening session framed participants not as passive contributors but as co-thinkers, invited to bring their lived experiences into dialogue with research.

### *c2. Methodological Design and Implementation Process*

The Thessaloniki Innovation Forum was designed using the World Café methodology, a flexible and dialogic format suited to transversal engagement. The Forum spanned six hours and took place at the KEDEA building, selected for its accessibility, neutrality, and capacity to accommodate dynamic group movement. The venue’s open atrium and flexible layout helped support the participatory spirit of the event.

The core structure included six thematic discussion tables, each linked to CLEAR’s WP4 and WP5 findings:

1. Diverging Educational Trajectories
2. Returning to Education
3. Migration and Recognition of Informal Learning
4. Youth Participation in Educational Governance
5. Assessment and Motivation
6. Cultural Constructions of Success



Each table functioned as a site of focused, rotating discussion, with participants cycling through all topics in 15-minute rounds. Every table was facilitated by a trained moderator and hosted by a rapporteur who remained in place to summarise the evolving discussion. Prompts were derived from the participatory action outputs and included scenario cards (e.g. two learners with the same background but different life outcomes), quote cards (e.g. “Grades are not my value”), and thematic questions designed to activate memory, critique, and imagination.

The agenda included:

- Welcome coffee and informal introductions
- Opening plenary framing the Forum within CLEAR’s wider objectives
- Icebreaker activity: “My Learning Path in Three Words” posted to a communal narrative wall
- Six World Café rotations
- Plenary synthesis through collective visualisation (table posters and canvas)
- “If I Could Change One Thing...” reflection round
- Tree of Proposals (participants writing messages on coloured leaves)
- Final circle and thank-you session

Facilitators guided discussions using affective and cognitive prompts, ensuring emotional safety while stimulating critical engagement. The absence of hierarchical seating arrangements, use of visual tools, and freedom to write, draw, or speak offered participants a multiplicity of expressive modes.

### *c3. Use of Research Materials and Guiding Questions*

CLEAR research outputs from WP4 and WP5 were not simply presented but transformed into stimuli for co-reflection. Scenarios, quotes, and statistics were visually adapted and printed for table discussions. Some prompts—such as “They ask us after they decide”—were taken directly from interviews with marginalised youth and sparked immediate recognition among participants. Others—such as the scenario of a migrant youth aspiring to be a social worker—enabled participants to interrogate institutional barriers and map possible policy responses.

Each table was guided by open-ended questions:

- “Why do two learners with the same background diverge so drastically?”
- “What stops or supports re-entry into education?”
- “What learning do we carry that the system doesn’t see?”
- “What would real participation look like—not just consultation?”



- “How do grades help or hurt our sense of worth?”
- “What does success mean in your own terms?”
- These questions functioned not as research instruments but as dialogic activators, inviting participants to bridge the personal and structural.

#### *c4. Participant Feedback and Atmosphere*

The tone of the Forum was described by participants as reflective, safe, and emotionally resonant. Young people, in particular, noted the difference between this space and previous “consultation” exercises in which their contributions had been marginalised or instrumentalised. Statements such as “I wasn’t judged — I was listened to” and “This is the first time I said something that wasn’t a complaint, but a proposal” capture the affective intensity of the event.

Some stories—especially those related to stigma, assessment failure, and systemic neglect—were emotionally charged. Facilitators were attentive to signs of distress and made space for participants to withdraw or contribute anonymously. No participants exited early, and all contributed in at least one modality. Feedback gathered through a reflection wall and anonymous box confirmed the sense of ownership and safety participants felt.

#### *c5. Results: Indications for Research and Policy*

The Forum generated both micro-level insights and macro-level policy recommendations, several of which have fed directly into WP8 synthesis discussions:

- Recognition and Relationality: Success and motivation are rooted not only in institutional opportunity, but in relational dynamics—recognition, encouragement, mentorship. Policies must address the emotional labour of learning.
- Assessment Reform: There was strong support for narrative, portfolio, and peer-based assessment tools. Summative grading was consistently described as alienating, especially by NEET and second-chance learners.
- Plural Narratives of Success: The dominant association of success with university pathways was rejected. Participants proposed showcasing non-linear, community-based trajectories through media and curricula.
- Participation as Structure, Not Event: Youth participation must be embedded in educational governance structures—not treated as a symbolic or one-off gesture.
- Recognition of Informal Learning: Migrants and marginalised learners called for decentralised, user-friendly systems to validate their knowledge beyond formal documentation.



These results were translated into a set of visual recommendations (Tree of Proposals), a digital canvas, and a narrative summary report circulated to all participants and CLEAR partners. Quotes and insights were also exhibited publicly at AUTH’s KEDEA building the week following the Forum.

*c6. Challenges and Reflections*

The most significant implementation challenge was managing the rotation system across six simultaneous tables. Two roaming facilitators helped support participants who found the format disorienting. Another challenge was linguistic accessibility: while most participants spoke Greek, informal peer interpretation was required for some migrant youth more comfortable in English. Despite these minor constraints, the Forum maintained its inclusive ethos throughout.

The absence of audio recordings (for ethical reasons) made post-event synthesis reliant on facilitators’ notes, visual documentation, and the reflective wall. While this preserved participants’ privacy, it required careful triangulation of data during reporting.

**Table 2. Summary of the Innovation Forum**

Aspect	Details
Date	14 April 2025
Location	KEDEA, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
Duration	6 hours
Total Participants	38 (20F, 18M)
Participant Groups	Youth (18), Municipal Officials (6), Educators (4), NGOs (5), Academics (3), Labour Market (2)
Age Range	18–30 (youth), 30–65 (professionals)
Methodology	World Café, visual prompts, quote cards, narrative wall, reflection tree
Key Themes	Trajectories, Return to Education, Recognition, Participation, Assessment, Success
Outputs	Tree of Proposals, Digital Canvas, Forum Report, Public Exhibition
Contribution to Research	Validation of WP4/WP5 themes, generation of policy recommendations, participatory evidence
Ethics	Informed consent, GDPR compliance, anonymity preserved, emotional safety prioritised

**d. Conclusions/reflections of the national teams on the use of participatory approach in CLEAR**

The application of the participatory approach within the Greek strand of the CLEAR project was both a methodological commitment and a political intervention. For the national team at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH), participatory work was not simply instrumental—designed to refine research tools or validate findings—but rather epistemological. It challenged the very assumptions about who produces knowledge,



what counts as evidence, and how meaning is constructed within educational research and reform discourse.

Reflecting on the entire trajectory—from initial participatory design through the empirical work of WP4, the pre-forum co-reflection session, and the final Thessaloniki Innovation Forum—several overarching insights emerge that cut across theory, practice, and ethics. These reflections offer not only a synthesis of what was achieved but also a critical lens on what remains to be addressed, particularly when participatory ideals confront institutional constraints.

#### *d1. Participation as Situated Relational Practice*

One of the clearest lessons from our experience is that participation cannot be meaningfully enacted through generic templates or formal invitations alone. It is, above all, a situated and relational practice—anchored in existing trust networks, affective labour, and the slow work of building mutual understanding. In our case, this meant investing time and energy in cultivating alliances with NGOs, adult education institutions, and local authorities. These relationships were essential in recruiting participants from vulnerable groups, particularly NEETs, Roma youth, and migrant learners, and ensuring that their presence was not symbolic but substantive.

Even within a clearly defined Horizon Europe framework, participatory work in Greece required contextual adaptation. For instance, while European policy discourses often frame "learning outcomes" in competency-based and technocratic terms, our participants gravitated toward affective, narrative, and biographical framings. Their reflections emphasised recognition, respect, and human dignity as preconditions for learning—elements often sidelined in national policy debates. This mismatch reinforced the importance of designing participatory tools that are culturally resonant, emotionally accessible, and open to redefinition by participants themselves.

#### *d2. Methodological Adaptation and Flexibility*

The implementation of the participatory strand called for a methodological ethos of flexibility. While CLEAR provided a coherent structure through WP8 and the transversal approach, the Greek team had to continually recalibrate the participatory design to fit the evolving composition of participants, logistical constraints, and discursive dynamics of each setting. This was particularly evident during the Innovation Forum, where the World Café model was adapted with rotating discussion rounds, multimodal expression (writing, drawing, speaking), and varied facilitation strategies to accommodate different comfort levels and expressive capacities.

In practical terms, this meant ensuring that no table discussion became dominated by expert discourse, that young participants felt entitled to share their stories without fear of being pathologised, and that emotional disclosures were held with care. The methodological flexibility extended to how findings were documented and synthesised,



especially in the absence of audio recordings (an intentional ethical choice). Facilitator notes, visual canvases, and participant feedback became our primary data—requiring interpretative rigour but also imaginative synthesis.

One of the most generative adaptations was the use of quote cards and visual prompts drawn from WP4 and WP5. These served as both cognitive and affective activators, enabling participants to connect abstract concepts like “assessment” or “success” to their own life experiences. The use of metaphor (e.g., the “Tree of Proposals”) and collective art-making (e.g., the narrative wall) also helped bridge the gap between lived experience and policy discourse.

### *d3. Ethical Presence Beyond Procedural Ethics*

While the project’s data collection processes were compliant with GDPR and formal ethical standards, what stood out most was the necessity of cultivating what we would call “ethical presence.” This meant going beyond checklists and consent forms to create a space in which participants felt emotionally and socially safe—particularly those who had experienced marginalisation or institutional harm.

At times, this required improvisation. For example, one Roma participant initially hesitated to speak about substandard living conditions in his community. Rather than pressuring or redirecting the conversation, the facilitator allowed the moment to rest, and other participants gently supported the sharing without judgment. The ensuing conversation became one of the most honest and critical discussions of the day, surfacing the tensions between educational policy and housing precarity. Such moments cannot be engineered through procedural design—they depend on tone, trust, and the tacit practices of facilitation that treat lived experience as data, not pathology.

The participatory process also highlighted the emotional labour required of researchers. Holding space for complex emotions—anger, grief, hope, ambivalence—requires attentiveness and resilience. Our team debriefed after each session to process not only the content of discussions but also the emotional energy they carried. This reflexive practice proved essential for sustaining the participatory commitment across multiple engagements.

### *d4. Reframing Participation as Co-Creation*

One of the most valuable outcomes of the participatory work was the redefinition of participation itself—not as a one-off event or consultation, but as a process of co-creation. Participants did not merely respond to pre-defined questions; they helped shape the research focus, language, and dissemination strategies. For example, the design of the Innovation Forum was directly informed by feedback from the PA2 session, where participants requested accessible language, interactive formats, and visual tools. Likewise, the “If I Could Change One Thing” reflection wall and the co-created “Tree of Proposals”



were participant-generated mechanisms for policy recommendation, not researcher-imposed formats.

Several participants expressed a desire to continue beyond the Forum—asking how they could be involved in municipal youth councils, policy advocacy, or future project phases. This highlights the need to think of participation not as a project activity but as an invitation to ongoing civic engagement. Our challenge going forward will be how to institutionalise these openings without ossifying them, and how to support the infrastructures that allow such engagements to continue once the project ends.

#### *d5. Contribution to Social Science Methodology*

From a broader academic standpoint, the participatory approach trialled in CLEAR Greece makes a contribution to the growing field of collaborative and dialogic research methodologies. It demonstrates that when properly resourced and contextually embedded, participatory methods can yield not only richer data, but also more grounded policy insights and ethical research practices. It also underscores the value of designing participation around intersectionality—not simply including “youth” or “migrants” as homogeneous categories, but attending to the layered identities and positionalities within those groups.

Future research could build on this model by deepening longitudinal engagement with participant groups, experimenting with participatory analysis workshops (in which participants help interpret findings), and integrating creative methodologies (e.g., participatory theatre, digital storytelling) into policy-oriented research. Importantly, such approaches must be supported by institutional flexibility, funding timelines that allow for relational work, and evaluation metrics that recognise process as well as outcome.

#### *d6. Towards a Culture of Listening*

Perhaps the most profound lesson lies not in what we did, but in how it was received. Time and again, participants spoke of the significance of being heard—not as “beneficiaries,” but as thinkers. The participatory spaces we facilitated became mirrors in which participants saw themselves not as failures or outliers, but as legitimate narrators of their own trajectories. For those working within education systems often defined by audit cultures and technocratic reforms, this was both affirming and unsettling.

The challenge for us—and for the field more broadly—is to cultivate a culture of listening that does not treat participation as input, but as encounter. This entails rethinking how we frame our research questions, design our engagements, and disseminate our findings. It means privileging dialogue over data extraction, vulnerability over certainty, and co-authorship over representation.

In this sense, the participatory strand of CLEAR was not just a research method. It was a political stance.





## **Work Package 8**

Framing and Implementing the Transversal  
Participatory Approach

### **Deliverable D8.3**

National Participatory Report

**Italy**

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Nevertheless, the activities highlighted the transformative potential of participatory research in redefining the relationship among academia, educational systems, and citizenship, thereby positioning schools as arenas for dialogue, autonomy, and recognition rather than merely instruments of selection and performance.

**a. Introduction: The national context of implementing a Transversal Participatory Approach by the national teams**

Within the Italian context, participatory activities were implemented across at least three Working Packages (WP) of the CLEAR project, including two Participatory Actions (PAs) in WP6, one in WP4 and two Innovation Forum (IF) pertaining to WP8. All participatory actions stemmed from the WP8 guidelines drafted by Codici Ricerche and UNIGE, which also supported the different implementing team in all steps, from planning to reporting. The PAs were organised by the team of the University of Urbino, either as coordinator of the WP6 or as part of the WP4 core teams, while the IFs were carried out by both the University of Urbino and the University of Genoa in their respective local context. The various PAs served different and multiple purposes according to the time of their implementation in the project's work and the packages they referred. Moreover, while the IFs were organised separately by local teams in their own contexts, all PAs were implemented in strict connection with similar initiatives carried out by national teams that were part of the core team of the relevant WPs.

In particular, the first WP6 PA consisted of a discussion with relevant experts in the field of education and training in order to refine the expert survey at the core of the research work for the package. This was held separately in each WP6 core teams' country (Italy, Finland, and Portugal), later considering results jointly. A second PA was implemented at the end of the survey to discuss preliminary findings with a different group of experts, mixing together stakeholders from the three core teams' countries. For what concerns WP4 PA, this involved professionals gathered within the local context of the Marche Region to discuss the main WP4 findings and the WP4 graphic outputs to be used in the Innovation Forum. Even in this case, the PA was run in parallel with other organised in the WP4 core teams' countries – i.e. Italy, Greece and Spain.

As far as the IFs are concerned, a pilot Innovation Forum was firstly organised by the University of Genoa and Codici Ricerche teams in Genoa. Following this experience, the team from the University of Urbino organised a second Italian IF in Fano, a town in the same province of the university, following the guidelines provided by Codici Ricerche and the University of Genoa and the reported experience of the first IF in Genoa. In this case, the IF was based on the graphic output of only three packages – i.e. WP4, WP5 and WP6. Details about the PAs and IFs are provided in the following sections.

**b. Participatory Action(s) along the empirical WPs**

*b1. Participatory Actions in the WP4*



The Italian PA for the WP4 was held on the 6<sup>th</sup> of November 2024 in an online format with the support of a Power Point presentation to show the graphic outputs used during the activity. The PA was designed with two primary objectives: 1) to discuss the research results and findings, especially those from the International Policy Review Report (CLEAR D4.1) with professionals directly impacted by education policies; 2) to test, co-design and improve the graphic output elaborated by Codici Ricerche and UNIGE for including WP4 results in the Innovation Forum. The output, which was at the core of the activity, consisted of a series of posters containing exemplary situations of people in learning and education extrapolated from WP4 interviews with some annexed questions asking to imagine either which characteristics the individual(s) had, or which paths they could take to realise their objectives. Out of the six local stakeholders who accepted to participate in the PA, only four (3 men and 1 woman) took part: a secondary school professor and guidance expert in the field of ICT, a manager of a training agency and trainer himself who also worked in public school in the past, a primary school teacher with past experience in other school levels and as a researcher in the education field, and a vice-director and teacher of a Provincial Centre for Adult Education.

As for the structure of the PA, this was based on four main steps developed through a 90 minutes timeframe. First, an introductory moment provided an overview of the CLEAR project, the structure and main results of WP4 and an explanation about the purpose of the PA itself. This passage was especially relevant since some of the people involved were not so familiar with the project, not being involved in any of the previous steps. Then, the discussion was stimulated, firstly starting from one output of the first type – the Biographical Profiles Prompt – and then proceeding with one from the second group – the Mobility Pathways Prompt. In both cases, prompts were adapted to the participants, focusing on the conception and consequences of (under-)achievement within training and education paths of different individuals. Prompts were provided in a single slide, highlighting the main text and guiding questions and, despite two prompts per type being initially selected, there was only time for one each. Finally, after prompts were discussed with similar procedures as those used in the IF, participants were asked to evaluate the tool, highlighting strengths and weaknesses and proposing possible improvements.

During all the activities, no difficulties were encountered in engaging participants within the discussion, being them committed since the beginning with the aim and topics of the PA. Indeed, once the prompts were presented and their functioning explained, they went on independently, directly confronting among themselves with the research team only providing some additional inputs on particularly relevant topics that emerged. Even in the final part, participants manifested interest and satisfaction for the prompts and their potentialities, giving some feedback and ask the team to be involved in future project's activities when possible. Despite their different backgrounds, the mix of participants also worked very well, with a common ground rapidly emerging among actors after the first rounds of discussion. In the end, the responsiveness of participants allows the PA to

simultaneously serve as a discussion platform and extension for the WP4 findings, as well as for the graphic output for using them in the IFs' participatory setting.

In particular, integration of findings included a better understanding of the aspiration gap between young people in education and training and what is required outside these paths and in the labour market, but also the claim to integrate the perspective on achievement and soft skills' formation with a wider consideration about people's aspirations and personal capacities. As for the graphic output, they recognise the novelty and utility of these kind of tools and their general structure, pointing out that they probably required to be discussed longer to catch all their potential and not cut fruitful dialogue for time constraints. Ultimately, the PA was successful in both its aims thanks to selected participants and the effectiveness of the employed supporting tool. Yet, some takeaways to improve future implementation of similar initiatives can still be worth mentioning. Indeed, the online environment – despite facilitating the participation of people during working days – represented sometimes an obstacle for the discussion, complicating some interactions mostly due to technical issues. Moreover, the importance of balancing the speaking time was an ambivalent issue, torn between an active moderating role, that seemed needed to engage participants on key findings, and a listening stance, suitable for exploratory purposes.

### *b2. Participatory Actions in the WP6*

As mentioned earlier, two PAs were implemented within the context of WP6. A first Italian meeting with national-level stakeholders was held on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2023, involving four participants with academic, policymaking and professional backgrounds. The aim of the activity was to inform the construction of the expert survey used within WP6 to understand diverse conceptions of learning outcomes and future and desirable scenarios regarding their future usage. In this sense, the PA structure was similar to that of a traditional focus group with the main difference being in the looser moderation and more open protocol. In this case, giving the supralocal scope and national focus of WP6, collected results were directly confronted with those from similar PAs organised in Portugal and Finland, so as to modify accordingly the first draft of the survey. Participants provided insights on how learning outcomes are implemented in their national context, the definitions of learning outcomes and (under)achievement, as well as the main trends they are seeing in connection with these notions. The PA thus allowed to enrich the work done up to that point in designing the questionnaire for the survey, also pointing to some elements to particularly stress, such as the necessity to also account for scenarios of crisis, and to stress the importance of technological change.

The second PA was organised on the 4<sup>th</sup> of June 2024, after the preliminary analysis of survey results were concluded. In this case, instead of having separated event, the three WP6 core teams opted to gather together stakeholders from their respective countries – Italy, Finland and Portugal – in a single PA, to foster transnational discussions on some of

the most important initial findings emerged from the WP6 survey. The final aim was thus to enrich the results that were used for CLEAR D6.1 and D6.2. A total of 12 people participated in the PA, maintaining the gender balance (6 males and 6 females) and providing equal representation from all three countries (4 each). Five of them had an academic background, while the rest were policymakers or high-rank professionals at the national level, with the exception of one regional decision-maker within the Italian group. Unlike other PAs, the inclusion of participants from different countries forced to use English as the main language. This potential barrier was bypassed through various mechanisms. First, participants were selected among those with a certain level of proficiency in English and provided with an informative fiche, summarising the aims of the PA and the main issues to be discussed. Then, the event was carried out in an online environment using a Padlet workspace, which allows to write instead of talking if someone felt uncomfortable. Finally, the research team provided translation or targeted explanations when needed.

The PA started with a presentation of the project and a presentation of the main topics. Then, it proceeded with the discussion of the main topics from the CLEAR research. Due to the large scope of the survey, only two guiding questions were selected to be discussed for their relevance in the WP6 and more general CLEAR research aims: a) in your experience, are self-efficacy and social class important in shaping educational inequalities and learning outcomes, or are there other equally or more relevant elements? b) how can learning outcomes' policies consider individual factors and related inequalities within an increasingly individualising education?

The questions were pinned in the Padlet workspace with additional information about their premises and implications according to WP6 survey results. Participants were thus asked to write a short comment – either anonymous or signed – and publish it as a memo in the Padlet, so as everyone could see it. Then, the research team quickly wrapped up the main points emerged from the writing moment and open the floor to the general discussion, in which participants confronted about their views and overarching themes that emerged.

Valuable insights were provided during the PA, enabling a critical examination of some of the key findings emerging from the WP6 survey. Notably, it confirmed the strong tie between social class, self-efficacy, and, more broadly, the social environment in which individuals in education find themselves. While this issue was only alluded to in the survey results and hypothesised through their relation to existing literature, the activity provided new evidence to substantiate this claim. Furthermore, it demonstrated that policymakers, as well as researchers, are very much aware of this connection even across different countries. Similarly, regarding the second selected topic, participants provided essential insights into issues that remained ambiguous in the survey. These included the actual impact of neoliberalisation and the individualisation of education at the individual level,



particularly in relation to increasing inequalities. In addition to the research aims, the participatory activity also served as a bridge between research findings and the practical implications for policymakers, emerging as a pivotal tool for translating the report's findings into the policy brief. The only challenge encountered was the necessarily limited time available, which constrained the overall discussion and restricted the opportunity to fully observe the debate on the selected issues. Time was an issue also because participants were located in three different time zones.

Unlike WP4 PA, the digital setting was not perceived as a limitation, being well compensated by online tools to ensure the full involvement of all participants. Such tools also allow to offset unbalances in the general discussion, in which some actors - notably participants from the research field - tended to occupy more time than others. Overall, the level of commitment of participants to the Padlet was an unexpected success. All of them left at least one thought per issue, ensuring that the voices of all involved stakeholders are heard in some way. The Padlet also informed very well the discussion with participants easily approaching it to find hints to start the debate. In the end, despite time constraints, the participatory activity was satisfying in providing useful and new insights on the selected issues and also helped in the dissemination of some the WP6 main takeaways.

### **c. Innovation Forum**

Since the forum held in Genoa was a pilot, the entire process of designing and implementing it was conceived as an initial experience of a participatory space like the IF. The goal was to test and evaluate it in order to develop tools, suggestions, and recommendations for the subsequent forums planned in the partner countries. The teams from UNIGE and Codici decided to co-design the forum step by step, scheduling three online meetings between December and January. An important and consistent part of the preparation concerned the choice of the IF venue in Genoa. After analyzing the pros and cons of different venues, the location that best met the spatial and logistical requirements was chosen and "tested" for group activities during the project consortium meeting held in Genoa in September 2024: Condiviso, a communication and design factory with coworking spaces at the ancient port. In addition, a nearby solution was found: an art gallery with a large, well-equipped hall. Thanks to this additional space, forum activities were split between the two adjacent locations, allowing plenary sessions and group sessions to take place in dedicated areas.

The IF agenda was as follows: registration time; opening session (in plenary - 15'); dialogue session (in subgroups - 1h20'); closing session (in plenary - 30'); aperitivo time (around 60'). Consistent with the choice of involving as many teachers as possible within the professional sub-group of participants, we have focused on the impact of evaluation (in terms of rationale, process, and measures) in school environments on students' feelings, aspirations, and future planning. Participants were divided into 4 groups, combining the



3 profiles to ensure mixed points of view at each table. The group division was managed right before the event. Starting from a selection of the results of the WP3 statistical analyses, for the group 1 a poster was created displaying four statements related to the potential perceptions and expectations of young people when thinking about their educational futures and building their project plans. The four statements, corresponding to four possible project profiles, were developed based on the analysis of data from different economic contexts and, consequently, the varying opportunity structures of the countries involved in CLEAR. For the group 2, drawing from the WP4 analysis of the institutional framing and dominant understanding of LO(s) at a national level, a discussion starter was created, asking participants to discuss the following scenario: "Imagine two people who grew up together. They lived in the same neighborhood and attended the same schools. In school, they were both considered low achievers, but their fates have been very different: one of them is unemployed, while the other is an established professional. What could have led them down such different paths?". For the group 3, three scenarios of possible (but not necessarily desirable) evolution of national education systems were derived from WP6. This resulted in a poster through which participants could discuss the gap between the plausibility and desirability of these scenarios. Finally, for the group 4, starting from a quote extracted from the WP5 interviews, participants were asked to share views and opinions, focusing on their experiences in education (as students, teachers, and/or professionals). The quote was selected for its resonance with a prominent feature of current intergenerational relationships in the Italian context, where young people are often blamed by older generations for their supposed inadequacy, immaturity, and unwillingness to commit to work and, more generally, to challenging activities. In addition, as "transversal" stimuli, some of the information reported in the WP7 national discussion papers was introduced to the discussion tables by the UNIGE research team, providing participants with further content about the Italian national context, as well as comparisons with other partner countries.

The nature of the event and its location led us to adopt an invitation-only approach, using a targeted stakeholder mapping process. This process began in October, identifying at least one close and influential contact for each target group (institutions, experts, and young adults). These contacts were not only invited to participate, but also encouraged to help spread the word in order to facilitate a 'snowball effect'. For this reason, square-format graphic materials were designed for distribution via email and messaging platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram. The engagement of participants was mainly achieved by drawing on the personal and professional networks of the UNIGE research team. This approach helped build trust and proved effective, as reflected in the number of people attending the IF. More specifically, professionals (school teachers at different educational levels) and policy-makers were selected and invited based on contacts established during previous research conducted by the team at a local level. The invited young people were targeted and reached through personal contacts, with only one WP5



interviewee being included. The invited young people were also asked to try to engage other youths, which worked in the case of one participant. In addition, news about the IF was posted on the official social networks and news channels of the University of Genoa. Once the first round of direct contacts was concluded, the invited individuals were sent a short text describing the aims of the IF by email.

According to *D8.1\_Strategy\_Paper\_for\_Transversal\_Participatory\_Approach*, traditional ethical requirements of informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and ownership of the research have been followed. In particular, regarding data collection: participants' data only included personal details (name and surname, occupation, organization (when applicable)). Email contact was requested only to send a report of the event to participants; contents collected during the discussions were shared in the plenary and in the notes, respecting anonymity; a final report to participants systematized the collected data, avoiding any reference to names or sensitive information. In a broader interpretation of ethics in participative events, the IF was conceived as a safe space for participants. A safe space is a supportive, non-threatening environment where all participants can feel comfortable expressing themselves and sharing experiences without fear of discrimination or reprisal.

The discussion of content was carried out within the individual groups, while the plenary sessions focused on broader reflections concerning the practical and logistical organization of the Innovation Forum held in Genoa. In this context, it is useful to present the outcomes of the participatory process—namely, new research questions and policy recommendations—attributing them to the specific groups that developed them.

#### Suggestions for Further Research:

Group 1: What is the role of those “concentric circles” that play—or should play—a mediating function between the structural context and the micro and family context? What role do mediators—primarily teachers—play in incorporating and addressing the vulnerabilities and effects of inequality in starting conditions? Do they have an equalizing or amplifying function?

Group 2: What role do professors, educators, and trainers play in the construction and evaluation of learning outcomes (LOs) achieved by students, in relation to the organizational structures of the educational systems in which they work? Is it possible to imagine a school that places the desires and ambitions of young people at the center, instead of focusing on the needs of production systems? New research should explore young people's perspectives on the school they would like to have, the evaluation systems they envision, and the values that contemporary educational systems should embody.

Group 3: What experiments (and with what outcomes) are being applied in the national school system today regarding alternative models of school assessment (e.g., narrative



assessments, self-evaluation, etc.)? How much and in what ways does the intergenerational distance in terms of language and imagination affect the relationship between students and teachers (particularly in high schools)? What opportunities are created to find common ground in terms of language?

Group 4: What alternative assessment methods, different from those currently in use, could reduce performance anxiety in students and improve the learning process? What role do teachers play in this? Which teacher-student relational dynamics could reduce student anxiety during assessment tests of learning levels?; how can the concepts of merit and excellence be rethought to promote equity and inclusion, while preventing the emergence of new forms of inequality and/or expanding existing ones? Which stakeholders contribute most to how the concepts of merit and excellence are defined and applied in educational systems? How can we foster the participation of all stakeholders (primarily students, families, and teachers) in the definition and application of these concepts?; what impact would an educational system less reliant on scores, grades, and rankings have on student motivation and well-being? What implications would a system that more strongly supports the enhancement of out-of-school activities in the assessment of student learning levels, equating formal and non-formal learning, have?

Recommendations for Policy-Makers:

Group 1: Schools should be seen as a facilitating system in promoting the relationship between young people and their social and economic environment. The teaching staff should be trained to support young people in vulnerable conditions, whereas teachers often end up stigmatizing and inhibiting the activation of young people. There should be more opportunities for students, professors, and policymakers to meet, exchange ideas, and get to know each other. Occasions like the IF allow those in different roles to develop greater empathy. This would improve the school both functionally and in terms of personal relationships, having a positive impact on young people who find it more difficult to integrate and build their personal path.

Group 2: Educational institutions should provide structured moments of confrontation among all components of school communities. Horizontal exchanges among students, professors, educators, and technical-administrative staff generate trust and recognition and stimulate young people to express the limitations and strengths they identify in educational institutions. This confrontation would promote agency and civic participation in the younger generation. The teaching staff should be more stable and less precarious to enable them to build long-term pedagogical programs that are capable of fitting into the context and characteristics expressed by each classroom and pupil. The teaching staff should be larger, and class sizes should be reduced, to allow teachers to focus more on the needs and desires of each student.



Group 3: The Italian school system tends to reduce students' autonomy both in terms of managing the mediation between the institution and family (for example, through the use of the electronic register, which involves direct parent/school communication), and in terms of the opportunity to engage with certain content choices (e.g., the choice between readings deemed interesting and/or useful from the student's subjective point of view). It is important to give students opportunities to gradually measure themselves with forms of autonomy by introducing margins of flexibility in school curricula, allowing them to personalize (at least part of) their educational path. This could increase their sense of involvement and belonging, stimulating active and conscious participation in learning processes. Teacher training should integrate reflective strategies aimed at building empathic relationships with students to promote active listening practices. This would help teachers better understand students' subjective experiences in relation to profoundly changed contexts (of life, work, and education), facilitating a more attentive assessment of individual learning processes.

Group 4: Rethink the school evaluation system by expanding the concept of learning beyond the numerical grade, integrating more formative, cooperative, and personalized evaluation methods that foster individual growth; avoid the polarization between excellence and mediocrity, between "A" and "B" pathways, by valuing everyone's abilities and ensuring equity in the provision of educational and developmental opportunities to all, regardless of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds; review school and career guidance policies so they enable students to explore and develop their talents, beyond labeling and categorization that risk limiting opportunities and possibilities for aspiring to certain educational and professional careers.

In the closing session, aimed at collecting feedback, participants were asked two questions:

1. How did it go today, also in relation to what you expected?
2. What suggestions could we give to those who will organize IF in other countries?

Participants were free to share their answers if they felt comfortable speaking in the plenary. Spontaneously, someone broke the ice and started to share their thoughts. Others followed, sharing in response to what they had heard, including young participants. The plenary session that closed the Innovation Forum represented a valuable opportunity to gather suggestions for improving its model. Here are some particularly meaningful pieces of feedback gathered from young participants:

The IF was:

- Stimulating: "IF prompted so many thoughts and emotions," "I noticed greater self-reflection starting from the experiences brought by others," "I really appreciated the adult stories I heard."

- Welcoming and non-judgmental: “I said things that I can’t say at school,” “I was able to talk to unknown people,” “The first reaction to the IF proposal was defensive. But the topic touched me personally. Perceiving the humanity of adults was liberating and not feeling like I was being pointed at or judged.”
- Decentralization: “I was able to see the same thing from different points of view.”

In addition to general satisfaction with the IF experience, the participants identified a series of possible directions for improvement. Specifically:

- It would have been desirable to have more time to speak, thus extending the working time of the discussion tables.
- It would be worth multiplying similar experiences by trying to involve even more dissonant voices, pushing for a more pronounced divergence of viewpoints.
- It would be interesting to bring this method of reflection into schools/institutions (e.g., middle or high schools) because it would reduce hierarchical dynamics, rebalance roles, and provide an opportunity for comparing different ages and positions.
- Occasions such as IF should be encouraged in which the biographical narration of the participants is “processed” as scientific evidence.
- There is a need to recover forms of self-organization to give voice to the desires and needs of those who experience school.

Finally, about the dissemination processes, the materials collected during the discussions with the participants were transcribed, systematized, and reworked into two different forms:

1. A very detailed, technical, and faithful transcription of the contents collected during the discussions (namely the document you are currently reading ). It is meant to inform the partners about how the discussion groups took place and what emerged from them.
2. A very brief version, written in more approachable language and without technicalities, intended to be sent to the participants as a mini-report of the day.

The report for participants has been sent by email and through WhatsApp for those who hadn’t registered their email addresses. After the event, in addition to providing a report for participants, we prepared a news article for the Clear project website and a post for its LinkedIn account. Both were accompanied by event photos taken by a professional photographer.

### *c2. The Innovation Forum in Fano (Codici, Uniurb)*

The second Italian IF was held on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2025 in the town of Fano, within the Pesaro-Urbino province – the same of the University of Urbino Carlo Bo. The place was chosen for its reachability, being on the main railway line of the Marche Region, which allows for an easier involvement of people across the regional territory. In the end, the IF involved 15 participants, including 4 policymakers from the Fano area, either at the municipal or supralocal level, 5 professionals dealing with secondary education and VET, and 6 young people from secondary school of the territory, bachelor university programmes, and youth associations. Participants were mainly involved sending invitations to relevant stakeholders for each of the three targets and then proceeding via snowballing. The main downside of this strategy, that nonetheless proved to be effective from a general recruiting perspective, was that it was very difficult to involve marginalised targets within the three reference stakeholder groups. At the same time, it also allowed to have a balance between young people and other targets, which are usually in higher positions of power, placing the voice of the former at the core of the discussion within the IF. To ensure this, the research team was also careful in avoiding the recruitment of participants from the similar environments to avoid the existence of direct power relations that could have hinder proper participation, such as that between teacher and student.

In terms of the structure of the IF itself, this was firstly introduced by a brief presentation of the project and the aims of the participatory initiative. Then, participants were divided into three groups, in which moderators from the Uniurb research team used WP4, WP5 and WP6 graphic outputs provided by Codici Ricerche and UNIGE to stimulate the discussion about relevant issues emerged in the CLEAR project. Specifically, the WP4 IF group followed a similar method as during the WP4 PA, starting from illustrative situation of people in education or training and imagining their background or future paths. The WP5 group used a particularly relevant quote from that package's interviews as the main input, writing then down participants' thoughts issued from that on a blank poster. The WP6 output consisted instead of a compass where people positioned themselves according to the likelihood and desirability of different trends taken from the survey results, which were then discussed in relation to the general WP6 findings and to possibilities to close the likely-desirable gap. This central part of the IF was organised as a World Café, creating groups as diverse as possible and rotating them among the different outputs in the course of the event. At the end, a person from each group presented the main points emerged from the various discussions, and the research team wrapped up some final remarks in a plenary session.

The IF was guided by the aim of integrating findings from different WPs through the views of relevant stakeholders who design, implement or experience learning outcomes. At the same time, the IF was also conceived as a moment of dissemination and as a payback of the research to the local community. Mostly thanks to the use of graphic output and the commitment of participants, both these objectives were successful. As for the first, the IF

helps – among other things – to understand how a public discourse centred on “merit” and achievement downscales at the local level and what consequences this has on education experiences and life transitions of young people in education. Regarding the second aim, participants reported high level of satisfaction, especially for the occasion to confront between actors who, despite working together, rarely have the time and occasion to have frank chats about overarching processes interesting them all. It was also praised the choice to give voice to young people in a similar context, with other stakeholders manifesting surprise and interest in hearing their viewpoint. Moreover, upon request of participants themselves, a small report in Italian language containing the main results of the IF was provided to all people who accepted to take part in the event, including those who could not make it but express nonetheless the willingness to be kept posted.

In the end, the IF successfully produced additional research findings and better connection between these and local policymaking arenas, also highlighting the potentiality of graphically supported participatory methods for both these aims. Indeed, the methodology allows for participants to easily make the project’s main results presented through the graphic outputs as theirs, being capable to argue their own views on the selected topics. Together with the variegated mix of profiles, this leads to a dialogic and dialectic process in which the confrontation among different positions ends up into a consensus around a set of key elements. In particular, participants acknowledge the necessity to redesign the education system in Italy around the aim of valorising personal capabilities and passions – something that the idea of “merit” and a strict and quantitative conception of learning outcomes are seen as incapable of. According to them, this should be pursued by creating safe space of self-expression for learners and a learning and teaching environment based on reciprocal understanding of involved actors more than on power relations and predetermined paths. Ultimately, a similar approach is also seen as more inclusive and capable of developing the skills required – at least formally – by the labour market, such as so-called soft skills, but also to be more cognisant of one’s own position, refusing mechanisms of (self-)exploitation sometimes hid behind soft skills discourse.

**Table 1. Summary of the main characteristics of participants.**

	<b>Genoa Innovation Forum</b>	<b>Fano Innovation Forum</b>
Gender		
Male	5	3
Female	18	12
Other	0	0
Actor type		
Policymakers	2	4

Professionals	7	5
Young people	14	6
Territorial scope		
Same municipality	22	6
Same province	0	8
Same region	1	1
Another region	0	0
TOTAL	23	15

#### **d. Conclusions/reflections of the national teams on the use of participatory approach in CLEAR**

The adoption of the Transversal Participatory Approach (TPA) in the Italian case studies (Marche and Liguria) has highlighted the opportunities and transformative potential offered by participatory processes in research focused on educational contexts, from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. The activities analyzed — structured through various Participatory Actions (PAs) and two Innovation Forums (IFs) — enabled a comparative assessment of how participatory research tools can contribute to disseminate findings obtained through standard methodologies (e.g., questionnaires, interviews, document analysis). In particular, the use of TPA allowed the diverse actors involved (stakeholders, experts, young people, etc.) to collaboratively construct shared meanings and priorities, which are crucial for shaping educational policies in the relevant contexts.

A key insight emerging from the analysis of these activities concerns the effectiveness of participatory approaches not only as tools for dissemination, but also for the critical re-elaboration of research findings. The PAs implemented in WP4 and WP6 — though differing in scope and timing — demonstrated that engagement with diverse stakeholders, both nationally and transnationally, allows for the testing and refinement of research instruments (e.g., questionnaires, interviews). Moreover, such engagement elicited context-specific interpretations of complex phenomena, such as educational inequality or the impact of policies based on concepts like Learning Outcomes (Los). These dynamics were particularly evident in the second PA of WP6, where discussions among actors from different countries facilitated both cross-contextual comparison and the reformulation of conceptual frameworks, through a horizontal and collaborative dialogue.

The innovative use of visual tools — employed in both the PAs and Ifs — proved effective in bridging research content and outcomes with participants' lived experiences. These tools promoted reflection, empathy, and dialogue, fostering an open and inclusive discussion. In particular, the use of prompts and posters facilitated the active engagement





public policy, and citizenship. Strengthening its role ultimately entails acknowledging that the production of knowledge cannot be separated from dialogue with those who live, endure, or enact that knowledge in their everyday lives.





## **Work Package 8**

Framing and Implementing the Transversal  
Participatory Approach

### **Deliverable D8.3**

National Participatory Report

**Portugal**

**University of Porto**

Tiago Neves, Helder Ferraz

**University of Lisbon**

Natália Alves, Liliana Zeferino

## Executive summary

This report presents the national implementation and outcomes of the participatory approach within the CLEAR project, focusing on the Portuguese case. It synthesises the rationale, methods, and key findings of the participatory activities (PAs) carried out across different Work Packages (WPs), with a particular emphasis on the Innovation Forum (IF) held in the Municipality of Amadora, in the Area Metropolitana de Lisboa (AML) region, a territory marked by socio-economic vulnerability and educational inequalities.

In total, three PAs were conducted by the Portuguese team: two under WP6 (one to validate and enrich the survey framework, and another to discuss and validate findings from the survey) and one under WP5 (focused on designing the qualitative interview schedule targeting youths and defining strategic approaches to young people in vulnerable situations). These actions engaged education and training professionals, researchers, and local stakeholders, with the objective of contextualising research instruments, refining analytical categories, and ensuring relevance and inclusivity throughout the project.

The Innovation Forum was the culmination of this participatory trajectory. Drawing on prior collaborations and situated knowledge, it brought together 11 participants, including young people, educators, social workers, researchers and policymakers, to collectively reinterpret research results through creative and dialogical methodologies. Activities such as storytelling, fictional prompts, and narrative excerpts from youth interviews served as catalysts for critical reflection and proposal-making.

Key outcomes included:

- A set of policy recommendations centred on territorialised education, intersectoral coordination, youth voice, teacher training, and inclusive evaluation.
- New research questions focusing on youth agency in adverse contexts and the effectiveness of formal/informal support mechanisms.
- Strengthened local networks and ongoing collaboration, including an invitation to present findings at the July 2025 Amadora Child Protection Conference.

The participatory approach was characterised by ethical care, methodological plurality, and relational depth. It succeeded in bridging empirical research with community-based insight and policy dialogue. The Portuguese experience affirms the value of embedding participation at all stages of research, not as a formality, but as a transformative method for knowledge production and social change.



### **a. Introduction: The national context of implementing a Transversal Participatory Approach by the national teams**

Throughout the CLEAR project, three PAs were carried out: two under WP6, one under WP5. In addition, the Innovation Forum was organised under WP8. These activities involved education and training specialists and were designed to gather informed perspectives to support the design and contextualisation of the project's tools and analytical frameworks.

The implementation of the Transversal Participatory Approach within the CLEAR project was deeply anchored in a territorial logic and in long-standing relationships established during previous phases of the research process, conceived to accompany and inform the implementation of the project. Through focus group discussions, interviews, and an innovation forum, they aimed to progressively deepen knowledge of the Portuguese national, regional and sub-regional contexts.

At the national level, two PAs contributed to the development of the survey on learning outcomes (LOs) and a debate about the results achieved (WP6). At regional and sub-regional levels, the PA conducted under WP5 involved education and training professionals whose input was crucial for adapting the interview guides used with young adults. Their involvement also facilitated access to participants and helped ensure the contextual relevance of the data collection process.

The main objectives of the PAs were to:

- Ensure the contextual relevance and accuracy of the research instruments (national survey and interview scripts for young adults);
- Deepen the knowledge about the factors that influence the LO and life paths of young adults;
- Inform policy dialogue and the drafting of recommendations.

The national IF took place in the Municipality of Amadora, in the AML, a territory marked by high levels of socio-economic vulnerability, strong ethno-cultural diversity, and persistent educational inequalities. This setting was strategically chosen given its relevance to the objectives of the project and the empirical fieldwork developed under WP5.

The IF aimed to create a dialogical space where research results could be critically discussed and re-appropriated by local stakeholders, including young people, educators, professionals in the fields of education, social inclusion and employment, community organisations, and local policymakers. Its objectives were to foster collective reflection on the research findings regarding inequalities in educational and professional transitions, with a special focus on youth experiences in vulnerable territories; to test participatory methodologies proposed in the CLEAR IF Toolkit, promoting inclusive and situated



discussion formats; and to co-produce recommendations grounded in the lived realities of participants, strengthening the links between empirical research, policy dialogue, and community-based action.

What was proposed was not simply the dissemination of findings, but the collective re-elaboration of meanings, drawing from personal trajectories, professional insights, and shared social challenges. The national team designed and facilitated two group sessions focused on different project components:

- The first group worked with the activity "*What if you lived elsewhere?*" (based on WP3 results), to explore territorial inequalities and their influence on educational opportunities.
- The second group used the activity "*Young People's Voices*" (based on WP5), to engage with youth narratives collected in the AML area and reflect on systemic obstacles and institutional responses.

Overall, the IF in Portugal reflected a strong commitment to participatory ethics, contextual relevance, and community engagement, in line with the transversal approach advocated by the CLEAR project.

#### **b. Participatory Action(s) along the empirical WPs**

##### *WP6 – Focus Group with national experts for survey's construction*

As part of WP6, the PA4 was carried out in the form of a focus group with national education and training specialists, with the aim of gathering critical input for the construction of the LO survey. This initiative aimed to understand how the concept of LOs is being interpreted and operationalised in the Portuguese context, considering current and future educational policies and contemporary social challenges. The activity was conducted jointly by the two Portuguese teams, Porto and Lisbon (extra WP6 Core Team). Participants recognised the potential of the LO paradigm, but pointed out various limitations to its effective application, particularly: a) its recent introduction into the Portuguese education system; b) the difficulty of articulating legislation, assessment and pedagogical practices; and c) the weak link between LOs and the transition to the labour market. Despite the difficulties, there was consensus on the growing importance of relational skills, civic participation and citizenship, dimensions considered relevant to inclusion and equity.

##### *WP6 – Discussion of the survey data*

Following on from the national focus group, a transnational PA was held as part of WP6, bringing together experts from Portugal, Italy and Finland to comment on the preliminary results of the survey on LOs. The aim of this initiative was, on the one hand, to validate the initial interpretations in the light of different educational contexts and, on the other,



to promote a critical and comparative reading of the current and future challenges linked to LOs.

The PA5 was successful, allowing significant contributions to be made to the analysis and problematisation of the data collected, with a direct impact on the research by refining the analytical categories and raising new hypotheses for interpretation.

In terms of dissemination, the session contributed to the production of materials and summaries to be used at the Innovation Forum, helping to identify relevant key messages for different audiences. In terms of the national context, it was emphasised that, in Portugal, the debate on LOs remains poorly attended and dominated by technical discourse, with few voices from civil society, young people or families. This action has therefore made it possible to broaden the interpretative spectrum of the research.

*WP5 – Focus Group with regional education and training stakeholders for the construction of the young adults' interviews*

As part of WP5, PA3 consisted of two participatory activities carried out in the form of focus groups with education and training specialists, one conducted in the Municipality of Amadora (in the AML region) and the other in the city of Porto (in the Norte region). Although both activities shared the same objectives and structure, they were independently organised by the two Portuguese teams: Lisbon (WP5 Core Team) and Porto (WP5 extra Core Team). The aim was to deepen the understanding of the vulnerabilities and inequalities experienced by young adults who face challenges while at school. The design of this PA stemmed from the need to adapt the data collection instruments to the local context and ensure that the perspectives of professionals working directly with young people were integrated into the research.

During its implementation, several challenges were encountered, particularly regarding the mobilisation of local entities and the heterogeneity of participants' profiles, which required careful moderation. Nonetheless, the diversity of experiences enriched the debate, allowing for a deeper understanding of the difficulties young adults face throughout their educational journeys and during the transition to the labour market, particularly evident were: the greater vulnerability and lack of support for people with disabilities; the undervaluing of vocational education; the limited diversification of labour markets, which remain focused on low-skilled and poorly paid jobs; the weight of the family context; mobility difficulties; and the limited role of the school in combating social exclusion.

The PA with local stakeholders was important for framing and supporting the conduction of interviews with young adults, for assisting in their recruitment, for providing spaces “more familiar” to conduct the interviews, as well as for gaining a better understanding of the characteristics of local contexts and the extent to which these characteristics either hinder or enhance opportunities for young adults.



In the Portuguese case, this action was conceived taking into account a national scenario where the public discourse on LOs is dominated by statistical indicators and where the voices of the most vulnerable young people, especially those who are not integrated into any formal system, are often absent. It was therefore decided to involve representatives of institutions that work with traditionally under-represented audiences, ensuring that the construction of knowledge was more inclusive and sensitive to the structural inequalities that affect young people's paths.

**Table 1 - Features of the Participatory Actions**

PA	WP integration	Stage of integration of the PA into empirical research	Purpose	Team	Applied method	Participants	How it contributed to Innovation Forums
PA 3	WP5	Finetuning research tools; sharing interviewees engagement strategies	Design of the qualitative interview schedule targeting youths; define strategical approaches to young people in vulnerable situations	Lisbon	Focus group	7 local experts (5F, 2M)	None
				Porto (extra Core Team)	Focus group	7 local experts (6F, 1M)	
PA 4	WP6	Finetuning research tools; finetuning of the profiles to be targeted by the survey	Validate and enrich survey framework	Porto & Lisbon (Extra Core Team)	Focus group	4 experts (2M, 2F)	None
PA 5	WP6	Discussion of the survey data	Discuss and validate findings from the survey	Porto	Online workshop	12 experts (6M, 6F) from Italy, Finland and Portugal	Shaping materials (see "future scenarios" poster) to be discussed with a non-academic wide audience in the IFs

### **c. Innovation Forum**

#### *Strategies of Participant Engagement and Ethical Considerations*

The strategy for participant mobilization in the IF in Portugal was grounded in the continuity of relationships established with stakeholders previously involved in the activities developed under Work Packages 3 and 5. This approach was essential to ensure an atmosphere of mutual trust and to reinforce the articulation between research and local action. The invitation process was carefully designed to ensure the representation of a wide range of stakeholders (young people, educational actors, policymakers, researchers, and institutional representatives), reflecting the sociocultural diversity of the Municipality of Amadora.

Initial communications were deliberately planned and executed according to a personalised and relational approach, consistent with the participatory principles guiding the CLEAR project. The first contact with potential participants was made via telephone, in a direct and personal manner, as all of them had previously collaborated with the project, either by participating in the focus group organized in October 2023 under WP3, through their involvement in community mediation processes with young people interviewed for WP5, or through other earlier engagements. This initial outreach was intended not only to extend the invitation, but also to strengthen pre-existing trust, create a space for dialogue and listening, clarify the purpose of the event, and address any questions, motivations, or expectations raised by the invitees.

Subsequently, the invitation was formalised through an email sent from the institutional accounts of the research team, providing official recognition and legitimacy to the process. Further emails were then sent, offering detailed information on the objectives of the IF, the participatory methodology to be adopted, the themes to be discussed, and all logistical aspects (such as schedule, location, accessibility, and supporting materials). This structured and progressive communication aimed to ensure a transparent, inclusive, and fully informed mobilisation process, allowing each participant to clearly understand the framework and their potential role within the event.

Despite deliberate efforts to achieve gender balance among the invited participants, the final composition revealed a predominance of female attendees, a trend often observed in civic and community-based initiatives.

Regarding the ethical management process, all participants signed informed consent forms authorising the use of photographic images for scientific and institutional dissemination purposes. No personal or identifiable data were collected or stored, in full compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation. No ethical, legal, or moral concerns were raised before, during, or after the event.

In the national context of public debate on LOs, dominant voices are typically those of policymakers and pedagogical experts, often aligned with European regulatory



frameworks. The IF sought to challenge this trend by actively listening to local educational, social and institutional actors, as well as to young people in vulnerable situations, whose lived experiences remain underrepresented in education and qualification policies.

### *IF Methodology and Documentation*

The session was structured around participatory methodologies, with a particular focus on small group work and the use of visual and narrative materials. The choice of methods such as *storytelling*, horizontal dialogue, and critical reflection on testimonies from interviewed young people aimed to foster the active engagement of participants, building from their own experiences to co-construct interpretations and recommendations. These methodological options were aligned with the guidelines set out in the CLEAR IF Toolkit, especially with regard to the formation of heterogeneous working groups, the use of graphic and fictional resources as stimuli for debate, and the creation of an informal, accessible, and trust-based environment.

Each group worked with a distinct set of research materials. Group 1 developed the activity *“What if you lived elsewhere?”* proposed in the IF Toolkit to support the discussion of WP3 findings, focusing on territorial inequalities and their impacts on educational and professional trajectories. Group 2 implemented the activity *“Young People’s Voices”*, also featured in the IF Toolkit, drawing on real-life narratives collected under WP5, based on excerpts from interviews with young people living in vulnerable areas of the AML. These testimonies served as a starting point for exploring the constraints and opportunities experienced by young people in contexts shaped by structural inequality, exclusion, and resistance.

This articulation between empirical data and situated life experiences deepened the critical reflection and enabled the formulation of context-sensitive proposals. In Group 1, participants proposed rethinking the rigid grouping of students in vocational tracks, which often reinforces segregation and limits aspirations. They also called for greater curricular autonomy in schools to enable more flexible and localised teaching practices. In Group 2, the strong emotional impact of the youth narratives led to proposals such as the integration of non-formal education into school life, the creation of paid peer-mentoring schemes, and the revision of teacher recruitment processes to prioritise interpersonal and contextual competences. These examples illustrate how research outputs were reinterpreted through the lens of local knowledge and professional experience, giving rise to concrete and realistic proposals rooted in the socio-educational dynamics of the AML.

The documentation of the sessions was carried out in written and photographic formats, without the use of audio or video recordings, in order to respect the informal and confidential nature of the space. The presence of researchers with clearly defined roles (facilitators and rapporteurs) ensured rigour in the recording and systematisation of the contributions.



### *Guiding Research Questions and Issues Identified*

The guiding questions that framed the IF focused on educational and professional transitions in contexts of disadvantage, youth agency in the face of institutional constraints, and the role of various social and educational actors in the construction of inclusive life trajectories. These questions reflect central concerns of the CLEAR project, integrating multiple levels of analysis (individual, school, territory, and public policy).

No major obstacles were reported during the implementation of the IF. However, the number of attendees (11) was lower than the number of confirmations received (15), a common limitation in voluntary events. This did not compromise the quality of the discussions, which were in fact enriched by the depth and intensity of the contributions made.

### *Participant Feedback*

Participants provided highly positive feedback, emphasising the relevance of the topics discussed, the horizontal nature of the methodology, and the authenticity of the exchanges. Many described the emotional impact of engaging with youth narratives, referring to the experience as “a punch in the stomach” that triggered critical awareness and empathy.

The value attributed to the diversity of voices, including those of young people, was repeatedly highlighted as a key condition for designing more just and effective responses. The absence of formality, mutual listening, and the collaborative atmosphere were seen as fundamental factors contributing to the success of the event. Several participants expressed interest in replicating this approach in school settings or within inter-institutional networks.

### *Outcomes and Recommendations*

- The IF generated relevant insights for future research and concrete recommendations for public policy. Two core research questions emerged:
- How do young people in contexts marked by multiple disadvantages experience and interpret their educational and professional transitions, and how are these shaped (or disrupted) by existing public policies?
- What formal and informal support mechanisms are most effective in promoting successful educational transitions in vulnerable territories?
- At the policy level, several key recommendations were identified:
- Develop territorialised education policies that recognise local specificities and promote contextual justice.
- Strengthen intersectoral coordination, integrating education, health, social services, and community-based initiatives.



- Actively listen to young people and involve them in the design and evaluation of policies that affect their lives.
- Promote continuous professional development focused on intercultural mediation, relational work, and the management of transitions.
- Reconfigure evaluation models, incorporating qualitative indicators related to well-being, belonging, and personal fulfilment.

### *Dissemination of Results*

The dissemination of the IF was carried out in a coordinated manner through multiple institutional and personal channels, with the goal of promoting participation and ensuring alignment with the project's principles of transparency and openness. The event was publicly announced in advance through the social media platforms of the CLEAR project and the IE-ULisboa, and was also shared by members of the research team on their personal pages. The platforms used included:

- CLEAR Project LinkedIn:  
<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7311142054838550529>
- IE-ULisboa LinkedIn:  
<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7323314852351959040>
- IE-ULisboa Instagram:  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/DJEeIW9MKr5/>
- IE-ULisboa Facebook:  
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1228437502616601>
- Institutional website of the Institute of Education – University of Lisbon:  
<https://www.ie.ulisboa.pt>

Each participant received a certificate of attendance and promotional materials from the project (notebooks, reusable water bottles, and pencils).

The dissemination of the IF results was carried out more selectively, via posts on the personal LinkedIn profiles of the local research team members, and on the official CLEAR project page on LinkedIn:

- CLEAR Project LinkedIn (results):  
<https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7330611230220406784>

In addition, the event and its outcomes were shared through the official social media channels of the Institute of Education, University of Lisbon, including Instagram, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

During the IF closing session, participants were also invited to attend the project's Final Conference, and several expressed interest in remaining involved in its ongoing activities.

**Table 2 Summary of the Innovation Forum – Portugal (AML)**

Item	Description
Number of Innovation Forums conducted	1
Venue	6 de Maio Social Centre, Amadora, AML
Total number of participants present	11
Gender distribution	9 women 2 men
Participant profile distribution	2 young adults (1 male and 1 female); 4 professionals/consultants (all female); 2 teachers (1 male and 1 female); 1 researcher (female); 1 specialist in prior learning (female); 1 local policy maker (female).
Number of research sites involved	2 - Municipality of Amadora, (a territory marked by strong ethno-cultural diversity and educational inequalities) and Municipality of Alenquer, both located in the AML region.
Types of stakeholders involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Young people</li> <li>• Teachers</li> <li>• Researchers</li> <li>• Local policy-makers</li> <li>• Specialists in RPL</li> <li>• Representatives from social and community organisations</li> <li>• Local employers</li> </ul>

#### **d. Conclusions/reflections of the national teams on the use of participatory approach in CLEAR**

The participatory approach implemented by the Portuguese team in the CLEAR project was grounded in a commitment to contextual relevance, territorial engagement, and ethical sensitivity. Our strategy combined focus groups, innovation forums, and collaborative design processes, ensuring that diverse voices, particularly those of young people in vulnerable contexts, were at the centre of knowledge co-construction.

Three PAs were carried out during the project: two under WP6 and one under WP5. These activities involved education and training specialists and were designed to gather informed perspectives to support the design and contextualisation of the project's tools and analytical frameworks. The IF, held in Amadora, stands out as a culmination of this effort. It engaged local actors (from youth and educators to policymakers and social workers) in a dialogical and creative reinterpretation of research findings. By using storytelling, fictional scenarios, and narrative excerpts from real interviews, participants not only shared insights but also co-produced grounded, context-sensitive policy recommendations.



Key strengths of our approach included:

- Relational mobilisation: building on pre-existing ties with stakeholders fostered trust and increased the relevance of engagement.
- Heterogeneous group design: combining different profiles ensured a plural and balanced discussion.
- Ethical care: all interactions respected autonomy, confidentiality, and informed consent.
- Methodological plurality: visual tools, open-ended questions, and non-hierarchical facilitation promoted deep critical reflection.

These participatory methods contributed significantly to refining research tools, shaping analytical categories, and enhancing the dissemination and relevance of results.

Recommendations for Future Social Science Research Integrating Participation:

- Move beyond consultation: Foster co-creation processes where participants are involved not only in responding, but in shaping research questions, tools, and outputs.
- Strengthen territorial anchoring: Acknowledge spatial inequalities by designing locally embedded participation mechanisms, sensitive to the realities of underrepresented groups.
- Prioritise relational methodologies: Invest in time, presence, and trust-building to establish ethical, reciprocal engagement.
- Diversify epistemologies: Combine narrative, visual, and artistic tools to make research accessible and expressive across literacy, age, and cultural boundaries.
- Ensure continuity: Avoid extractive logics by creating feedback loops, follow-up spaces, and opportunities for long-term collaboration.

The CLEAR experience demonstrates that, when participation is authentic and grounded in mutual recognition, it can transform research from observation into transformation. This transformation manifested itself in several ways. On an individual level, participants, particularly educators and local professionals, reported changes in their perspectives, revealing a renewed sensitivity to the constraints faced by young people and a willingness to rethink pedagogical and institutional practices. On an inter-institutional level, the Innovation Forum fostered connections between actors who operate in the same territory but rarely engage in collective reflection, creating space for new synergies and collaborative potential. This led, for example, to an invitation for the research team to present the project findings at a municipal child and youth protection conference scheduled for July 2025 - specifically, the 13th Meeting of the Amadora Child Protection Commission with the School Clusters of the Municipality of Amadora (in Portuguese, *XIII*



*Encontro da CPCJ da Amadora com os Agrupamentos de Escolas do Concelho*). Finally, at the epistemological level, the process affirmed the legitimacy of non-traditional tools, such as fictional prompts and biographical excerpts, not merely as illustrative devices, but as instruments for producing situated knowledge through shared reflection and recognition.

In this sense, the Innovation Forum did not merely communicate research outcomes; it created a space of encounter in which empirical evidence, personal experience, and institutional knowledge were brought into critical and creative conversation.





## **Work Package 8**

Framing and Implementing the Transversal  
Participatory Approach

### **Deliverable D8.3**

**National Participatory Report**

**Spain**

**University of Barcelona**

Sara Gil, Martí Manzano, Xavier Rambla

## Executive summary

The UAB team has conducted a Participatory Activity with some participants in WP4 and has organised two Innovation Forums in Barcelona (Catalonia) and Castelló (Comunitat Valenciana). These conversations have discussed the challenges of learning against the background of social vulnerability and ambitious policy reforms. While everybody acknowledges that socio-economic conditions have improved between the post-pandemic period and the aftermath of the Great Recession, new issues have emerged regarding the long-term consequences of bullying, mental health and career guidance.

Six practitioners, four women among them— were invited to discuss the interviews with professionals that were carried out in WP4 on policy analysis. These participants considered that the prompts related to the following topics were informative and relevant: territorial disparities, policy evaluation, discrimination, and the challenges of young immigrants. They argued that issues of migration status and location of residence are not considered comprehensively when the recent expansion of VET programmes is openly addressed.

The young participants in the Castelló forum raised concerns with discrimination, misrecognition of cultural diversity and economic obstacles due to the price of housing and the hidden costs of internships. An interesting debate emerged about the available information. In Barcelona, migration and material deprivation became the focus of the conversation.

These innovation forums provided insight into the following research questions of CLEAR.

- How do young people construct their own life course through the choices and action they take within the opportunities and constraints of history, and social circumstance?

In both cities the young participants complained of continuous pressure to move on. They felt that teachers, counsellors and employment officers pushed them to enrol in further education programmes regardless of their interests and their plans.

- How do young people frame their learning outcomes as part of their own positionality?

The young attendants to all the innovation forums complained of disrespect. They regretted that higher-school teachers neglected their concerns and did not help them elaborate a project.

- How do young learners experience, interpret and manage the obstacles they face?

Precarious jobs and housing were obstacles in both Castelló and Barcelona. In the former, an insufficient transportation network was also an issue.



- What kind of data sources about young people are available? What are the gaps or missing data?

In Castelló, the group of professionals did not agree on the prospects of performance-based management. For some, this method of policymaking would become hegemonic soon, while others were more doubtful about this diagnosis. However, both groups agreed that merit should be the cornerstone of education and training policy.

The youths vindicated a holistic view of their circumstances. In Castelló, they complained that the regional employment service only offered lists of training programmes to them, but nobody cared about their motivation and engaged in a fruitful discussion about their projects for the long term. Significantly, in Barcelona a group concluded that policies should guarantee opportunities to all, foster local skills ecologies and improve working conditions. This group also noticed that mainstream frameworks and indicators overlooked such crucial aspects as the credentials that many youth had obtained before coming to Spain and the widespread practices and pernicious effects of school in secondary schools.

#### **a. Introduction: The national context of implementing a Transversal Participatory Approach by the national teams**

In Spain, the CLEAR participatory activities have attempted to facilitate a meaningful conversation between the two protagonists of the policies related to learning. During the Great Recession, central and regional education and training authorities committed themselves to curb early leaving from education and training. Between 2020 and 2022, a series of acts have reformed school education and have revamped the institutional system that integrates three types of vocational education and training: school programmes, public employment services and continuous education and training delivered by employers. To the extent that VET teachers have managed in-company internships for some time, they will probably play a similar role in the larger internships through which the 2022 act aims at generalising dual vocational education and training.

Insofar as they have become the main target group, CLEAR has endeavoured to engage disadvantaged youths in debates about the policies that must impinge on their learning. In the country, the drivers of social vulnerability do not differ from most of the EU: parental low socio-economic status, negative experiences at school, mental health problems, migration status, ethnic discrimination and several effects of gender hierarchies (e.g., stereotypes about masculine and feminine engagement with education, uneven employment opportunities, polarisation of VET specialities). Although indirectly related to education, housing is a huge social problem in most regions, and young adults have raised issues about mobility and accommodation in the main cities.



Educators and public employment officers have been the other protagonists of this conversation. All of them face two new challenges in the country. First, their workload significantly increases as the majority of young people understand that leaving education without an upper-secondary education degree is no longer acceptable. While before 2010 large sectors of the population tolerated that about a quarter of each cohort did not attain the certificate of lower secondary education, the number of candidates for second-chance programmes has dramatically increased afterwards. Second, the ongoing reforms require further endeavours to build a full-fledged system of connected pathways. As a consequence, educators and public employment service officers must coordinate equivalent programmes in the school and employment sectors, educators must assess candidates to validation of prior learning, and several committees must propose how to train the company tutors that will work on the new large internships.

The UAB team has carried out the following participatory activities in CLEAR:

- As the leader of the activity consisting of interviewing professionals (WP4), it has led a workshop with educators and other experts in VET policies in Barcelona and Castelló.
- The team has successfully organised an Innovation Forum with VET students, teachers, public employment service officers and other experts in Castelló (CastlIF).

The UAB researchers also organised an Innovation Forum in Barcelona, but the original plan was severely disrupted by the general blackout that affected Portugal and Spain on April 28<sup>th</sup>. However, on June 30<sup>th</sup> and July 3<sup>rd</sup> the UAB team organised small-scale innovation forums in a couple of second-chance schools in the city (BCNsmallIF1 and BCNsmallIF2).

#### **b. Participatory Action(s) along the empirical WPs**

On 14<sup>th</sup> October 2024, a UAB researcher discussed the findings of the International Policy Review Report (CLEAR D4.1) with a group of teachers, leaders of educational non-profits, social workers, public employment service officers and trade unionists.

The participants were based in the two CLEAR regions in Spain, that is, the city of Barcelona and the Province of Castelló.

In this pilot group, some of the tools being developed by CODICI were tested in order to understand their effectiveness in the Spanish context and to anticipate potential adaptations of the materials to the idiosyncrasies of local actors.

The researcher from UAB introduced the CLEAR project to the participants, under the premise that rather than a one-way presentation of results, the aim was to spark conversations around a series of prompts inspired by CLEAR's conclusions. This approach would allow us to better prepare future participatory activities within the Innovation Forums with the different actors involved. He had prepared several prompts drawing on



the reports of the Work Packages 4, 5 and 6, which CODICI had translated to simple and expressive figures.

The participants considered that the prompts related to the following topics were informative and relevant:

- Territorial disparities.
- Policy evaluation.
- Discrimination.
- The challenges of young immigrants.

Six practitioners were invited, four women among them. Four could attend the meeting:

- The leader of a non-profit working on second-chance education in Barcelona.
- A trade unionist based in Barcelona.

A representative of one of the Catalan employers' associations.

An expert on education policy in Castelló.

The meeting was successful in triggering lively debates about learning in both sites. Employers, unionists, non-profits and experts do have diverse views, but discrepancies are seldom fully recognised. Participants felt comfortable, were happy to engage in a discussion with a diverse group of colleagues and praised the interest of feedback from researchers.

It is interesting to note that the third sector representative and the expert on Castelló contributed with information that core discussions on VET and learning often disregard in Spain. Issues of migration status and location of residence are not considered comprehensively when the recent expansion of VET programmes is openly addressed.

We concluded that the willingness to participate and engage in discussion is high among the invited actors, and therefore, the role of the facilitators in this type of participatory activity is more about guiding the conversation than generating it.

The foresight exercise recently conducted by the Catalan VET Agency has been the theme of several pieces of news and sparked public debates. In contrast, in the Valencian Community there has not been an open debate on these issues.

Both in Catalonia and the Valencian Community the voices of teachers and street-level non-profits are not properly recognised in the discussion of VET policy. CLEAR's interviews and participatory activities partially compensate for this bias.

Remarkably, the opinion of young people is seldom considered. Although the meeting still reproduced this bias, the participatory scheme of CLEAR at least insisted on the importance of this pitfall.



The following table summarises the main description of the participants.

**Table 1 - Participants' features**

	Barcelona		Castelló	
	Invited	Participated	Invited	Participated
Male	3	2	1	1
Female	1	1	1	0

### c. Innovation Forum in Castelló (Comunitat Valenciana)

The first Innovation Forum (CastIF) was held at the Castelló Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber was one of the stakeholders interviewed during the development of WP4 and one of the most interested both in the event itself and in the possibility of inviting young people from their training courses. It is a private actor.

The CastIF started at 10:00 and ended at 14:00, with a total duration of 4 hours.

The first step in the organisation of the CastIF was contacting the interviewees and the collaborators in the fieldwork conducted in 2024 to collect the opinion of practitioners and policymakers (WP4) and young students (WP5). Drawing on the previous invitation at the time of the interviews, in 2025 these actors were updated on the new activity. Between April 7<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>, they were reminded of the research project and encouraged to seek possible participants.

The main challenge in the engagement process was the involvement of young people interested in the CastIF. On this occasion, this issue was resolved thanks to the Chamber of Commerce, which invited an entire group of young participants currently enrolled in a foreign trade training course.

The rationale for the invitation was based on the objective of involving both professional and technical staff and young people. For the group of professionals, technicians, and policymakers, the aim was to represent the key institutions in the educational and employment sectors in the region. For the youth, the goal was to involve a diverse sample of individuals aged 18 to 29.

The session started with three split groups facilitated by UAB researchers. Educators and officers from diverse non-profits and governmental agencies gathered in one of these groups. The other two ones were formed by another researcher and several youths. After a short break, the students presented their conclusions in a plenary session and discussed the main takeaways with the experts.

Several excerpts of the interviews conducted with young adults in 2024 proved very significant for the discussion. The researchers brought the following illustrations to the CastIF:



- The problems of a young immigrant who cannot have a foreign bachelor's degree recognised and must work in the hospitality sector.
- The bad experiences of a Roma young person who was bullied at school and suffered the despise of a male teacher although a few female teachers were supportive to him.
- The available opportunities for an early school leaver who aspires to attain the lower secondary education certificate after working some years in precarious conditions.
- The dilemma of a young person who wants to stay close to his/her family in a small town but is also considering opportunities in bigger cities.

In the final plenary session, several representatives of the young participants raised concerns with discrimination, misrecognition of cultural diversity and economic obstacles due to the price of housing and the hidden costs of internships. An interesting debate emerged about the available information. Both experts and youths agreed that career guidance had to be better organised and funded. However, young people complained that experts relied too heavily on open course lists, as this information was not so accessible as expected and lacked usefulness without a proper framework of guidance.

The discussion provided insight into the individual experience of the life course of young people, particularly on the following research question:

*How do young people construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history, and social circumstance?*

In the small groups, some participants highlighted a perverse effect of the mainstream priority to diminish early leaving and reduce the rates of young people who were neither in education and training nor in employment. They felt under such pressure to move on that many eventually enrolled in courses that did not appeal to them. As a result, they experienced fatigue of meetings where they were told what to do rather than encouraged to elaborate and pursue their own life projects.

The youth addressed two issues of their experience of intersectionality.

*How do young people frame their learning outcomes as part of their own positionality?*

One of the two initial groups discussed discrimination in education and training, which consisted of uneven treatment and guidance.

*How do young learners experience, interpret and manage the obstacles they face?*

The two groups highlighted a number of obstacles that hindered their opportunities in the region. While precarious jobs and high prices of housing are problems anywhere, in Castelló they noticed that transportation eventually constrained their choices and reduced their capacity to apply for jobs. Since the core of the region is made up of a string



of small towns with very limited public transport, they always had to consider what was accessible before making any decisions.

The experts engaged in a controversy that indirectly reveals a structural dimension of intersectionality in the region. The point is that a top-down understanding of young people's interests leads to an information bias.

*What kind of data sources about young people are available? What are the gaps or missing data?*

The CastIF did not show a consensus among experts about the ongoing trends of educational policymaking. While a group of practitioners and policymakers thought that performance-based evaluation of education and training would likely become the rule, another group of participants did not expect this method to prevail in the short term. However, all of them agreed that the ideas of merit and excellence should become the core principles of educational policymaking. The final discussion with the young participants showed that this confidence on merit relied on too simple assumptions about the relevance of course lists published on the website of the regional public employment service. For this reason, the forum highlighted that the official information system overlooked data about the need and impact of guidance.

The interviews had revealed that the public employment service often delivers courses for employable jobseekers while outsources training and guidance for the most disadvantaged to private nonprofit organisations. Although private schools did not accept the invitation to the CastIF, the participants expressed their gratitude for an occasion to discuss the situation with other stakeholders. Remarkably, an officer of the public employment service was disappointed to know that the young participants did not assess public information about courses sufficiently helpful.

After the plenary all the participants shared a snack. There, two young women of migrant origin approached the team to share their satisfaction with the prompts that reflected their own situation as migrants with unrecognised university degrees. Most of the young participants praised an occasion to share their thoughts and demands with the main policy stakeholders. The sense of being heard and feeling empowered was quite widespread. At the end of the session, some young people declared their interest to repeat similar events more frequently. A few days later, we received an email from another participant thanking us for the invitation to the CastIF.

After a two-pronged discussion, it is plausible to gather the recommendations issued by young people at the CastIF under three broad labels:

First, ensure that everybody has opportunities

- Simplify procedures for recognising foreign diplomas.
- Design career guidance for both labour market relevance and family-work balance.

- Train counsellors and equip them with the necessary instruments.
- Facilitate clear and user-friendly information on training courses.
- Teach the local languages to immigrants.
- Prepare immigrants to face on-the-job exploitation.

#### Second, foster local skills ecologies

- Tackle the high cost of housing, particularly in urban areas where opportunities are concentrated.
- Improve accessibility and quality of public transport to ensure equitable access to education and employment.
- Expand the offer of training courses and improve the visibility and accessibility of information about them.
- Encourage educational policy to actively influence the local economic structure, not just adapt to it.

#### Third, improve working conditions

Address labour market precarity, especially in apprenticeships and entry-level jobs.

Bridge the gap between educational institutions and companies to ensure internships provide meaningful, practical learning experiences.

These recommendations are also illustrative of further research questions. Actually, the youth argue that their vulnerability would be significantly alleviated by a mix of social and economic policies. This is in line with economic geography. Their further point that such response takes the sense of rootedness and place into account retrieves a theme of youth studies. So, the connections between local development and sense of place are certainly a frontier for further research.

The dynamic itself allowed all participants to be aware of the discussions and proposals emerging from the different working groups. No dissemination activities related to the IF were carried out beyond the event itself.

**Table 2 - Features of the participants**

Male experts	3
Female experts	7
Male youth	6
Female youth	8
Foreign-born youth	4
Native youth	10



#### **d. Small Innovation Forum in El Llindar school in Barcelona**

Like in Castelló, the practitioners and the youth who had been interviewed for WP4 and WP5 were informed the WP8 Innovation Forum in Barcelona. When they participated in these activities in 2024, they were informed that further discussions would be carried out one year later. The UAB team encouraged them to propose other participants to join the event in 2025 and considered all their ideas about potential participants to be contacted. Additionally, the UAB team circulated invitations among all the stakeholders of lifelong learning policies in the city, non-formal education actors and public services providing youth support and guidance.

However, the initial appointment on April 29<sup>th</sup> had to be cancelled because an electric blackout forced the whole of Portugal and Spain to discontinue all activities the day before. Afterwards, it proved difficult to find a new date that suited all the stakeholders. For this reason, the UAB team organised smaller-scale forum sessions with young adult students of basic skills programmes such as El Llindar second-chance school (BNCsmallIF1). This initiative is run by a non-profit that attempts to bring prior early leavers back to education and training by means of a pedagogy that is explicitly and systematically respectful of their experiences. Remarkably, “llindar” means threshold in Catalan, thus underpinning the idea that everybody is capable to go through the main transitions in the education and training system.

The BNCsmallIF1 started at 9:30 and ended at 13:30, with a total duration of 4 hours.

The UAB team proposed the participants to discuss a set of imagined scenarios that Codici had extracted from the interviews. They were encouraged to read short prompts, write their thoughts in post-it notes and put their own ideas in graphs that portrayed the main findings of those interviews. This procedure facilitated discussing personal experiences from a safe position that did not require to share further details.

The outputs were classified in parallel lists of problems for individual educational trajectories and solutions that might facilitate seamless transitions from compulsory to further education. A few representatives of the group used these lists to present the conclusions to two educators from the very El Llindar school.

Several excerpts of the interviews conducted with young adults in 2024 proved very significant for the discussion. The researchers brought the following illustrations to the table of discussion:

- The problems of a young immigrant who cannot have a foreign bachelor’s degree recognised and must work in the hospitality sector.
- The bad experiences of a Roma young person who was bullied at school and suffered the despise of a male teacher although a few female teachers were supportive to him.



- The available opportunities for an early school leaver who aspires to attain the lower secondary education certificate after working some years in precarious conditions.
- The dilemma of a young person who wants to stay close to his/her family in a small town but is also considering opportunities in bigger cities.

El Llindar small forum (BCNsmallIF1) addressed several research questions through which the CLEAR project investigated student underachievement across the life course of students as well as intersectional inequalities that hindered their learning.

The BCNsmallIF1 delivered clues on the individual level of life courses, to be precise, on the following research question:

*How do young people construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history, and social circumstance?*

The participants agreed that migration was the cornerstone of their reflections and put the references to this theme at the centre of the figure organising their post-it notes. They reported that they were unable to enter standard employment relationships because of their irregular administrative status, which did not allow them to follow the regular education and training pathways and even was an unescapable hindrance to get a driving license. They argued that these barriers threw them into an informal labour trap triggering spirals of precarity and vulnerability.

These youths addressed individual effects of intersectional inequalities on learning and opportunities.

*How do young people frame their learning outcomes as part of their own positionality?*

A broad consensus about differential treatment emerged from the conversation. Many voiced the feeling that high schools compelled them to adapt to a linear progress of stages without any recognition of their subjective experiences. They considered that teachers had not equipped them with the conditions to move forward in appropriate ways. One remarked that the whole education and training system did not accept them as they were.

More precise claims about the linguistic and economic barriers underpinned the opinion that they felt misrecognised. Language had become a huge problem for those who could not speak neither Catalan nor Spanish, not least because they could not engage in most courses and this problem was a handicap to find jobs in the hospitality sector. The outcome was exclusion and conflict.

They considered that material deprivation dampened their potential access to vocational and higher education. Although they discussed information about social benefits and academic scholarships, they concluded that these measures were insufficient. In their view, the current institutional schemes entailed that middle-class and affluent socio-



economic backgrounds were indispensable to enrol in certain post-compulsory programmes.

*How do young learners experience, interpret and manage the obstacles they face?*

The discussion contrasted the views of opportunities in their school with standard high schools. They reported feelings of disrespect and lack of support in the former, with a young woman bluntly saying that “I didn’t exist for my teachers”. In the latter, however, they praised a personalised and supportive approach in which educators listened to their concerns, understood their position and did their best to accompany them during their transition to meaningful stages of an educational pathway.

Finally, the participants contributed to answer CLEAR questions about the structural level of intersectionality. They gave clues on the following issues:

*What kind of data sources about young people are available? What are the gaps or missing data?*

A prompt triggered an intense discussion of the flawed procedures established for recognising prior academic degrees. The point was that extremely long processes eventually impeded them using certain qualifications that had nevertheless been accredited in their countries of origin. Many had been funnelled to basic- skills programmes because the Spanish Ministry of Education did not consider their diplomas were valid. For them, the consequences had been irrelevant courses, sense of frustration, awareness of constrained opportunities, and eventually, resignation to drop expectations to enrol in higher education. This issue translated into a structural circumstance insofar as official statistics simply classify these youngsters among those with the lower ISCED levels.

Another prompt introduced such a poignant theme as bullying in lower secondary education. Many felt they had been sidelined and attacked due to racial discrimination, gender prejudices and sheer disrespect for socio-economic disadvantages. A young female student dared to share her troubling memories of being mistreated for being black.

The blackout completely disrupted the initial appointment in late April for an Innovation Forum in Barcelona. Although the UAB team managed to arrange two smaller-scale forum later in July, it became impossible to keep policymakers engaged for these alternative meetings.

The participants in the BCNsmallIF1 reported satisfaction at the end of the session. Several were grateful for an occasion to discuss their perspective with peers, and moreover, concluded that the reiteration of disappointing memories was a proof of structural discrimination.



As previously mentioned, a young female student told how she had been a victim of aggressive behaviour during her compulsory education for racial reasons. That girl declared she had felt relieved after disclosing such an intimate incidence.

The teachers praised an activity in which they had learnt about memories and opinions that were seldom expressed amid routine.

The general feeling, also shared by the researchers who conducted the BCNsmallIF1, was that a space of trust was created in which the young participants were able to talk about sensitive and relevant topics, sharing their personal experiences.

A straightforward takeaway for policymaking has to do with administrative procedures. Although simplification of administrative requirements is a mainstream topic of political debates, public opinion remains ignorant of the burden that many young newcomers bear. Addressing this bias would certainly strengthen social cohesion.

Two further lessons on structural racism and teaching require careful approaches that balance research, policy design and systematic programme evaluation. On the one hand, the participants denounced that racism is structural insofar as explicit prejudices are only the top of a much bigger iceberg made of cultural, economic and pedagogic barriers that remain effective although nobody is actively damaging minorities. This is a well-known concept of the social sciences that should be researched more widely in Catalan high schools so that teachers and educators reviewed and improved their strategies on the grounds of the resulting evidence. In a very similar vein, the contribution of educational and welfare programmes to the neutralisation of the mechanisms of structural racism should be taken seriously.

On the other hand, the report of this forum observed that teachers struggled with paternalistic responses when the students presented their views. Since these educators were also counsellors who delivered career guidance, they were genuinely worried about the subjective reaction of the students. This point reminds of the need to produce grounded evidence on the pedagogic intricacies of second-chance education. A further policy recommendation could consist of encouraging action-research evaluations of this type of programmes.

The participants received leaflets about CLEAR, particularly the final conference in Lisbon. But the forum did not produce online news because any media were invited for the sake of confidentiality.

Nine young people took part in this session: seven young women and two young men. Only one of the participants was not of migrant origin. At the end of the session, the two lead teachers from the school Beauty and Hospitality courses also joined the group.



**Table 3 – Participants’ features**

Male students	2
Female students	7
Local-born students	1
Foreign-born students (Dominican Republic, Pakistan, Mali, Guinea-Bissau, Colombia, and Morocco)	8
Second-chance education teachers	2

**e. Small Innovation Forum in the Second-Chance School in Barcelona**

The UAB team attempted to trigger a snowball effect by announcing the innovation forum to the interviewees in 2024. When trying to compensate for the disruption of the initial call for the Barcelona 2025 forum, it reminded them of the new event. After several emails and discussions, the Barcelona Municipal Second-Chance School accepted to engage students and teachers in the BCNsmallIF2, which basically resulted from the same engagement project as BCNsmallIF1. Both of these small forums followed the same engagement process and the same methodology.

Since the municipality directly runs this school, the teachers invited an officer and a photographer. However, the report can hardly argue that the forum triggered a proper conversation with policymakers.

The BNCsmallIF2 commenced at 9:00 and concluded at 12:00, lasting 3 hours.

The participants received the scenarios that CODICI had extracted from the interviews. In both BCNsmallIF1 and BCNsmallIF2, they elaborated on a few short excerpts and pool conclusions through graphic depictions of the main findings. This was a way to approach personal experience from comfortable positions that favoured mutual respect.

Like SmallIF1, the outputs were classified in parallel lists of problems for individual educational trajectories and solutions that might facilitate seamless transitions from compulsory to further education.

Several excerpts of the interviews conducted with young adults in 2024 proved very significant for the discussion. The researchers brought the following illustrations to the table of discussion:

- The problems of a young immigrant who cannot have a foreign bachelor’s degree recognised and must work in the hospitality sector.
- The bad experiences of a Roma young person who was bullied at school and suffered the despise of a male teacher although a few female teachers were supportive to him.



- The available opportunities for an early school leaver who aspires to attain the lower secondary education certificate after working some years in precarious conditions.
- The dilemma of a young person who wants to stay close to his/her family in a small town but is also considering opportunities in bigger cities.

In CastIF, BCNsmallIF1 and BCNsmallIF2 young people examined key correlations and connections between learning and social vulnerability among eighteen- to- thirty- year-olds.

The BCNsmallIF2 conveyed very significant insights on the individual level of life courses, which contribute to answer one of CLEAR's research questions:

*How do young people construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history, and social circumstance?*

The educational challenges of migration of teenagers became a telling theme. Young newcomers face considerable impediments to have their prior education recognised in Catalonia and Spain. The procedures are complicated and the timing unpredictable. Parents also bear the frustration of feeling useless because they don't know the local education system.

The participants acknowledged that the second-chance school helped them tackle the main obstacles by means of a personalised pedagogy that facilitated authentic learning. However, they were worried about the further transition from this school to academic and vocational upper secondary education.

These interlocking concerns with migration and transition between school levels reflect the biographical dilemmas that young people face when they cannot provide convincing evidence of attaining the learning outcomes of lower secondary education. While school education establishes points of evaluation, the eventual experience of students comprises longer life periods and wider areas of life.

The protagonists of the BCNsmallIF2 became aware of the effects of intersectional inequalities on individuals' learning and opportunities. Two of CLEAR's research questions express this point.

*How do young people frame their learning outcomes as part of their own positionality?*

The participants described feeling vulnerable to powerful forces of disengagement, often linked to their struggles with mental health. Many recounted experiencing lower secondary education on the verge of dropping out, largely due to emotional distress stemming from family problems and conflicts with peers and teachers. They emphasized that support from teachers was crucial, as thoughts of leaving school were frequent. These challenges were often intensified by untreated mental health issues, which made it even harder for them to stay engaged in their education.



*How do young learners experience, interpret and manage the obstacles they face?*

The young participants stressed economic deprivation and irrelevant curriculum as important obstacles to achieve better in education. Since the more promising programmes were offered by private schools and any period out of employment entailed a cost of opportunity, they observed that low family income became an unsurmountable obstacle. In a similar vein, they complained of an abstract curriculum that sidelined interesting themes such as personal finance, career guidance and household management.

Finally, the participants addressed the structural level of intersectionality through the data gaps.

*What kind of data sources about young people are available? What are the gaps or missing data?*

Their collective exploration of education and training noticed that information about their prior education simply became invisible after migration. Additionally, they point out that the timing of grants did not help anybody prepare a course comfortably due to long delays. Focusing on education was a greater challenge when economic security could not be taken for granted.

The blackout completely disrupted the initial appointment in late April for an Innovation Forum in Barcelona. Although the UAB team managed to arrange two smaller-scale forums later in July, it became impossible to keep policymakers engaged for these alternative meetings.

BCNsmallIF2 started with the identification of key issues in small groups and triggered debate on solutions in a larger grouping. The young ended with a presentation of their conclusions to the professional staff of the school.

All the parties agreed on the value of participatory activities that facilitate shared understanding. While young people mostly stressed the sense of empowerment, teachers were open to a type of feedback that helped review and improved their own work.

The core recommendations of BCNsmallIF2 revolved around education and training policy. In the view of the participants, the Catalan education and training system was in urgent need of agile procedures for recognising foreign academic degrees. They also vindicated that the teachers who did not respect certain types of students were removed from their positions. They missed social educators, youth workers and psychologists in high schools. They claimed for better career guidance and flexible approaches that facilitated balances between education and work. The general feeling was also that grants were poorly designed and implemented.

The participants received leaflets of the CLEAR final conference in Lisbon.



A professional photographer took pictures of the event, which will be published as an official piece of news.

Ten young people participated: four young women and six young men. Three of the young men and one of the young women were of Latin American origin, while the rest did not have a migrant background.

At the end of the session, the results were presented to nine professionals from the centre:

- 1 director of the school
- 5 teachers from different courses
- 2 counsellors
- 1 technician in the educational policy area of the local council

**Table 4 – Participants’ features**

Male students	4
Female students	6
Native students	6
Foreign-born students	4
Second-chance education teachers	8
Municipal education departement officer	1

#### **f. Conclusions/reflections of the national teams on the use of participatory approach in CLEAR**

Since UAB led the Work Package interviewing practitioners and policymakers (WP4), it organised a meeting with these participants after the fieldwork had been completed in Autumn 2024. In a lively discussion, a group of experts highlighted several important aspects that were often disregarded, for example, territorial disparities, policy evaluation, discrimination and the challenges of young immigrants.

A group of educators and employment officers joined the CastIF. They reached a consensus on the importance of merit and excellence but remained uncertain on the potential of performance-based policy evaluation. Interestingly, these professionals realised in the very meeting that young people complained about the transparency and the utility of public information about training programmes in the Valencian Community. This is a telling input for further evaluation studies, since the simple analysis of the usability of interfaces may become a crucial source of information. Afterwards, two small-scale forums were organised in second-chance- schools in Barcelona (BCNsmallIF1 and BCNsmallIF2).



Initially, the UAB team was doubtful about the potential of participatory activities involving disadvantaged young adults. Although Latin American sociologists like Orlando Fals Borda and educationalists like Paulo Freire have convincingly shown that participation empowers even the most destitute, we struggled to see how young students could really discuss their own problems publicly with educators and policymakers who inherently hold an uneven power relationship with them.

However, the innovation forums have convincingly shown that the findings of social research may inspire participation experts like CODICI to elaborate short sentences and graphs that prompt authentic discussions between these students, their teachers and even some policymakers. In our view, an important takeaway is that these findings become very relevant when casting social vulnerabilities in terms of a multidimensional (individual, institutional and structural) account of the life course of people. It has been extremely interesting to observe how the young participants elaborated sophisticated analyses of the perverse effects of material deprivation, certain ungrounded expectations on the language skills of migrants and the irrelevance of school curricula for the education of young generations that are more diverse than the older generations of teachers, policymakers and social researchers in European countries.

In Spain, recent policy reforms attempt to implement the European ideal of building institutional pathways that help disadvantaged adults progress from basic- skills training to upper secondary and even tertiary education. This may open new opportunities in a country where early leaving from education and training had been naturalised for decades. However, at the end of the day we consider that an individualistic interpretation of these reforms leaves little room for authentic career guidance not to say for participatory deliberations.

On these grounds, we dare to propose an approach that takes the voices of youth seriously despite the appalling social vulnerability they face in many cities and regions. Such approach could investigate themes that bridge the crucial discrepancies that several studies have noticed between the prevailing understanding of education among youth and educators.

The results of the innovation forums that the UAB team has conducted in Barcelona and Castelló indicate that at least the following themes might be relevant for such endeavour:

- How can the official information about education and training be exhaustive? The CLEAR interviews and innovation forum have identified important shortcomings of the available data. Interestingly, neither the main monitoring reports nor the emerging foresight exercises capture so crucial issues as the prior diplomas of the newcomers youth, the multisided implication of mental health, the interaction between information systems and meaningful career guidance and the perverse consequences of school bullying in later stages of life.



- What do young people recommend to local and regional education and training authorities? While the professional discourse focuses on labour shortages and individual deficits, the innovation forums have elaborated on better informed and more promising issues. Remarkably, the discussions on balancing life, work, and lifelong education—as well as on the relevance of the curriculum to individuals' life experiences—highlight deeply significant concerns that affect the plans and prospects of real people.

In sum, further research projects that examine the perspective of diverse people and policy actors on these themes can articulate conventional and participatory research in ways that deliver more reliable findings about the problems and the potential of education and training in the cities and regions of Europe.

