

From Classroom to Community – Experiential learning through research in Youth Work Education

Name of the organisation

Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem

Website of the organisation

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Good practice aspect(s)/themes of youth work

- Cross-sectore cooperation
- Competence development of youth workers
- Capacity building of youth work organisations
- Research and evidence-based youth-work development

Good practice category

A practice of processes and methods

Good practice aim & purpose

It is common in Hungary that university students often lack practical learning experiences connected to their field of study. At the same time, youth work organizations frequently face challenges in competences and resources when it comes to evidence-based practice development. For this reason, in 2022 at ELTE University's youth work program, we began partnering with local youth work organizations to design experiential learning opportunities for students through small-scale research projects. Since 2022, we have implemented four research camps. We aim to develop research-competent, reflective youth worker graduates, while supporting the field in making more evidence-informed decisions. In the longer term, we hope to strengthen the connections between academia and professional youth work practice in Hungary. The cooperation is built on mutual benefit. As a university, we engage students in real-life professional scenarios. For under-resourced youth work organizations, the partnership offers a valuable opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the needs of local young people — a win-win arrangement. Each spring semester, we reach out to youth workers in different municipalities with a cooperation proposal: we provide expertise in mixed-method research, including data collection and analysis, while youth work partners contribute to shaping the research questions and implementation.

Good practice description

This good practice runs along two parallel tracks: the pedagogical track, which concerns the design of the curriculum and the learning process, and the research track, which concerns the planning and implementation of the actual research project. What we describe here is primarily the pedagogical practice — how we structure experiential learning for youth work students in a way that is meaningful both academically and professionally.

The process begins with evaluating the experiences of the previous research camp together with partners and students, identifying success stories as well as areas that need improvement. All partners need to align these practical learning experiences with the principles of non-formal learning. University staff and students actively take part in producing a research summary as a closure of the cooperation.

Building upon these experiences, in the Fall semester we identify possible partners by actively building connections with youth workers — inviting organizations and practitioners as guest lecturers to our university for 1-2 sessions, and participating with students in the annual youth work conference in Budapest. All our research proposals target local settings outside Budapest and the bigger cities, as youth work is not an institutionalized field of practice in Hungary and rural areas often lack resources.

Before the start of the Spring semester, we contact possible partners with a cooperation proposal, clearly outlining what we can provide for the youth worker organization (and, if relevant, the municipality). Upon agreement, we begin preparing the semester by co-designing the research project with students and practitioners, supported by teachers. The co-design process takes place through online and in-class workshops, while all materials, documents and interim findings are shared via a cloud-based system to ensure smooth collaboration across locations. This cooperation is particularly appreciated by local youth workers, as they do not necessarily have a professional background or experience in research — and sometimes they have only 1-2 paid colleagues, for whom implementing a research project independently would be difficult.

Through the design process, we identify the main research interests together with practitioners and, in some cases, with local young people (depending on their availability). These interests often focus on young people's experiences in the labour market, the effects of different substance use, and the role of civic space, community, and participation in youth work.

The 12-week semester is structured so that students gradually develop a mixed-method research project, combining quantitative survey tools with qualitative methods such as interview and focus group protocols. Throughout the semester, a continuous feedback loop with the partner organization ensures that the research remains relevant and responsive to the local context.

At the end of the semester, we visit the local setting for data collection and for an exchange of experiences with local young people and youth workers. This closing field visit opens up the possibility not only to practise research skills in a real-world setting, but also to build meaningful relationships between students and young people — something that goes well beyond what a traditional classroom can offer.

Good practice result & concrete effects

In all cases, the research directly or indirectly contributed to the creation of a local — and once regional — youth strategy, reflecting a strong willingness from youth work partners to utilise research findings and evidence in planning or influencing youth policy processes.

Beyond policy impact, the practice produces concrete benefits at multiple levels. For students, the experience of conducting real-world research in a local setting outside their contexts significantly develops their professional competencies — not only in research methodology, but also in communication, teamwork, and adaptability. As participants come from different year groups, the course also creates a valuable peer learning dynamic, where more experienced students naturally mentor and support those in earlier stages of their training.

For partner organizations, the cooperation provides access to research capacity they would otherwise lack. The jointly produced research reports have been used to support funding applications, justify new youth work initiatives, and open dialogue with local decision-makers.

For local young people, the research process itself creates a rare opportunity to have their voices heard on topics directly relevant to their lives, such as labour market challenges, community belonging, and civic participation.

Good practice chapter of the European Charter on Local Youth Work

Youth work policy