

# Navigating Socio-Economic Barriers: Inclusion Practices in Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges



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# Abstract

With the growing emphasis on inclusion in the European youth policies, the Erasmus+ Youth Exchange Program offers an opportunity to foster social inclusion for youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds. This research investigates how youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds are included in Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges, with a focus on the strategies and facilitators employed during project design, planning and implementation phases. Moreover, the research examines what barriers youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds face when assessing and participating in these programs.

This research employed a qualitative research design. The data was collected through 7 semi-structured interviews with organizational representatives and three Youth Exchange facilitators. All respondents came from different countries and work with a diverse range of target groups. The data was analysed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of Economic, Social and Cultural Capitals was introduced during the analysis as an explanatory lens to better understand how inequalities manifest in programs such as Youth Exchanges.

The research results reveal that youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds face multiple complex and interconnected barriers to participation. These include financial constraints such as travel costs and limited personal spending money, language and education limitations, lack of awareness, reduced access to social networks and psychological factors. These barriers often overlap with factors such as migration backgrounds and living in rural areas.

This research identifies a range of adaptive strategies that are used by organizations and facilitators to foster the inclusion of youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds. These include covering travel costs in advance, offering additional support during cultural activities, and encouraging inclusive group dynamics. Furthermore, high emphases are put on experience facilitators and group leaders, as well as strategic partnerships that work closely with youth with fewer opportunities.

Moreover, the study shows that participating in Youth Exchanges has the potential to be a transformative experience that enables youth to gain confidence, social networks, intercultural competence and develop professionally. These long-term impacts help youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds accumulate forms of capital that can help their social status. However, these outcomes are not automatic and depend on well well-resourced, context-sensitive and

intentional inclusion strategy that addresses the specific needs of youth with lower socio-economic background.

The study concludes that addressing inequalities that youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds face requires changes in funding structure, the program policies and implementation practices. This research has identified a gap between policy intentions and their practical application, which limits the program's ability to effectively support the inclusion of those with lower socio-economic backgrounds.

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# Introduction

With the shift in the current political landscape, where support for far-right parties is on the rise, there is a growing concern for the future of European values and democracy. (Youngs, et al., 2025) In order to foster sustainable democracy and face these challenges it is important to promote active youth involvement. (Lelwic-Ojeda & Akintola, 2024) The European Union (EU) recognizes the significance of youth participation within the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027:

*“Providing pathways of engagement for young people in their daily lives but also in democratic life is vital for a functioning democracy and for society at large. Focussing on the participation of young people is particularly important, since any decision taken today will have the longest impact on the current generation of young people.”*  
(European Union, 2018, p. 3)

This strategy focuses on creating meaningful political, social, economic and civic youth participation. Furthermore, the goal of this strategy is to promote equality and inclusion for groups that face discrimination or have fewer opportunities. (European Union, 2018)

One of the EU programs that directly contributes to the objectives of Youth Strategy is the Erasmus+ Mobility project for young people also known as Youth Exchanges. These projects are non-formal learning mobilities that range from five to twenty-one days and bring together young people aged 13 to 30. The projects must involve at least two participation organizations from two different countries, which can be non-government organizations (NGOs), non-profit organizations, associations, companies within the social responsibility sector and public entities. (European Commission, 2024)

Youth Exchanges are aimed at helping youth develop skills and competence both for professional and personal life. Moreover, through teaching youth about socially relevant issues the program intends to create involvement in democratic life and help young people take an active part in society. As mobility projects happen between participants from multiple countries, it fosters intercultural exchange. The countries that are eligible for participation are all the EU member states, countries from the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and Candidate countries. (European Commission, 2024)

EU Commission names “Inclusion and Diversity” as one of the dimensions that must be considered when designing a Youth Exchange project. Young people with fewer opportunities should be considered through all phases of the project. Socio-economic status is a factor that falls under this dimension. (European Commission, 2024) The emphasis on this is also seen in the EU youth strategy: *“Socioeconomic exclusion and democratic exclusion go hand in hand. Youth struggling with disadvantages are generally less active citizens and have less trust in institutions. Europe cannot afford wasted talent, social exclusion or disengagement among its youth.”* (European Union, 2018, p. 1)

The inclusion of youth from lower socio-economic background is crucial, as more than 17 million young people, ages 15-29, in the EU (Including some countries from EFTA and Candidate countries) were at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2022. This represents 24,5 % of youth in these countries. (Eurostat, 2024)

Young people who experience socio-economic challenges such as low income or education level are less likely to be active participants in politics and civic life within European democratic processes. (Deželan, 2023) Studies show that youth from the lower-social class are less active in community involvement, and both traditional forms of political involvement and online participation. (Grasso & Giugni, 2021)

Moreover, socio-economic status is associated with the ability to acquire skills and therefore the ability to enter the labor market. Youth with lower Socio-economic status tend to have weaker social and cultural capital, limited ability to relocate and have bigger knowledge gaps which affects their ability to enter high-quality workplaces. (Schepper et al., 2023) For instance, students who are economically disadvantaged experience a variety of barriers to internships and therefore miss out on skills and experiences. (Schalewski, 2021)

Socio-economic background also limits youth’s international opportunities as those who are facing financial and social barriers are less likely to access international opportunities than their peers. For example, they are underrepresented in Erasmus higher education mobility programs because of financial constraints, limited access to information, social responsibility, institutional obstacles and negative self-efficacy. (Granato & Schnepf, 2024)

When looking at the Erasmus+ Youth Exchange goals and the challenges of youth from lower socio-economic background, it becomes evident why it is important to create effective inclusion of this group. Because of the short duration of these mobility projects, they are seen

as appropriate for disadvantaged youth and can offer them opportunities to gain international experience, network skills and knowledge. (European Commission, 2024) However, the previously mentioned challenges such as low social and cultural capital, lack of information, financial constraints and negative self-efficacy can also be barriers for participating in short-term mobilities. (Moxon et al., 2025)

## Problem formulation

Taking into consideration the previously mentioned challenges faced by youth from lower socio-economic status and the alignment with Erasmus+ Youth Exchange goals these programs have a potential to address these barriers. While the European Commission puts emphasis on social inclusion in their program, it is necessary to understand how organizations that work with Youth Exchange projects include youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds in practice. This research aims to explore how youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds are included throughout the project design and implementation process.

Problem formulation:

***How do organizations and facilitators that work with Erasmus+ Youth Exchange include youth with a lower socio-economic background and what strategies they use during designing, planning and implementation of a project? Furthermore, how having lower socio-economic status and having fewer opportunities impacts youths' inclusion in Erasmus+ Youth Exchange programs and how these challenges are addressed within the program?***

With this problem formulation, this research seeks to understand the barriers that disadvantaged youth face to be effectively included in Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges. This research examines inclusion by not only looking at how organizations make sure youth with lower socio-economic background is participating in the program but also how the program makes sure that they are able to gain benefits during participation.

This problem formulation will be researched through qualitative research methods. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with representatives of organizations that work with Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges and individuals who have facilitated a Youth Exchange. It is deemed as fitting to interview both organizational representatives and facilitators to gain a comprehensive understanding of the design process and the inclusion during participation. Each interview will be transcribed and analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis.



This research offers insights into the inclusion practices and the barriers faced by youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds during different phases of Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges. By identifying barriers these youth face, the strategies employed by organizations and facilitators and the existing gaps in current practices, the finding highlight challenges and opportunities for more inclusive Youth Exchange programs. Moreover, by contributing to a deeper understanding of the inclusion of youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds in Youth Exchanges, this research can help inform future program design and organizational practices aimed at fostering equal accessibility and social inclusion.

# Literature review

## Socio economic status and social exclusion

Socio-economic status is a measure that identifies an individual's or a group's social and economic position in relation to others. The most common measurements for socio-economic status are income, education and occupation. (Broer et al., 2019) When looking at young people's socio-economic status, parental attributes are often used as determinants. These include parental education level, parental occupation and household or family income. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012) The socio-economic dimensions not only reflect financial and social standing but also highlight the access to opportunities and resources within society. Moreover, socio-economic status reflects subjective perceptions on where an individual fits within social hierarchy. (American Psychological Association, 2017)

Several studies have explored the experiences of youth with lower social background, drawing attention to association with lower life satisfaction and increased exclusion in schools. Research on youth aged 13-14 showed that youth who experience material disadvantages are more likely to receive reduced teacher and peer support. (Redmond, et al., 2022) Similar outcome was seen in study that looked at 11–15-year-olds, where lower socio-economic background corresponded to lessened relationships with peers and heightened cases of bullying. While the correlation between status and social inclusion was weaker in Norway, the researcher found that additional disadvantages for youth with lower socio-economic background lowered social inclusion more. (Veland et al., 2009) Furthermore, a systematic review of 28 studies examining young people aged 4-18 found that those with lower socio-economic status were more likely to be victimized by bullying. (Tippett & Wolke, 2014)

Looking at socio-economic status association with pursuit of higher education inequalities are evident. Research in the United Kingdom found that students with lower socio-economic status in school had lower sense of their voice being heard in the classroom compared to their peers. But those students who had stronger sense of voice were more likely to manage their learning process and aspire to attend university. (Cunninghame et al., 2020) An Australian study found that youth from lower socio-economic background with average school grades were less likely to attend university than their peers with equal academic performances. This study also drew a correlation between parental education level and youth's enrollment in higher education. (Tomaszewski et al., 2024) Moreover, lower parental socio-economic status lowers job prospects as they have less resources to invest in their childrens education while higher socio

economic status allows them to benefit from higher cultural, human and social capital. (Tessema, 2022)

Studies show that perceived possible socioeconomic mobility is an important factor in shaping disadvantaged youths' engagement in beneficial opportunities. Perceived mobility is the belief that it is possible to move socio-economic status within their society. The article "How economic inequality shapes mobility expectations and behaviour in disadvantaged youth" highlights that youth with lower socio-economic status, who have stronger belief in social-economic mobility are more likely to engage in positive opportunities that could improve their status. (Browman et al., 2019) Young adults who believe in economic mobility are more likely to practice money management and attain savings. (Szendreya & Fialab, 2018) Moreover, researchers that have explored how perception of socioeconomic mobility influences students' academic involvement, found similar correlation. When students believed that socio-economic mobility is possible, they showed higher resistance to academic challenges and greater desire to persist. (Browman et al., 2017) (Zhang & Huang, 2025) These findings emphasize the need for initiatives that foster youths' belief in their capabilities. Erasmus+ youth exchanges can serve as a tool to address this need as they develop young people's personal and professional skills. Statistics show participants from Youth projects reported higher self-confidence and were more likely to act upon opportunities after the program. (Herranz, et al., 2024)

## Erasmus+ Inclusion

The EU Commission put emphasis on the importance of inclusion for youth with fewer opportunities in Erasmus+ Youth exchanges. (European Commission, 2024) While the short-term mobility projects aim to create inclusive space that develops skills and fosters opportunities, there are still challenges to ensuring access for youth with lower socio-economic status.

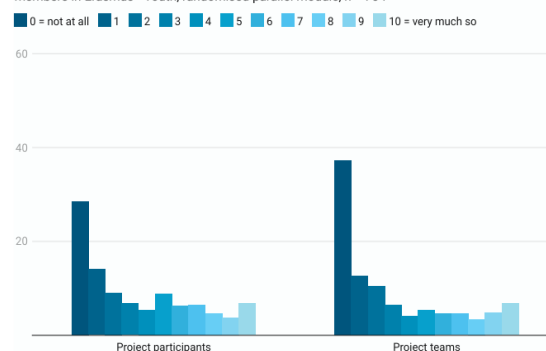
RAY-MON research conducted from 2014 to 2020 looked at the experiences of Erasmus+ Youth-focused program participants and project teams. The survey revealed that 71% of the responding project leaders in Youth exchanges claimed that they included youth with special needs or fewer opportunities in their working field. Although the data does not show a further specific percentage breakdown for Youth Exchanges, it is notable that for overall youth projects the results vary significantly depending on countries. With 33% of inclusion in Iceland and 88% in Belgium, indicating that Youth Exchanges follow a similar pattern. (Böhler et al., 2022) Furthermore, a recent report by the European Youth Forum showcases that Erasmus+ youth

field mobilities had the highest inclusion of participants with fewer opportunities compared to other mobility fields, making up 27% of all youth mobility participants. (Moxon et al., 2025)

However, despite the relatively high inclusivity a survey that explored aspects of the Erasmus+ Youth program for projects that had finished between 2021 and 2023, revealed that the majority of participants had experienced or observed some level of barriers to inclusion during projects. (see image) When asked about overcoming these barriers, 76% of the participants had positive experiences mitigating them, 19% did not agree or disagree, while 5% had not overcome them. Furthermore, 43,6% of the surveyed participants reported facing barriers to fulfill their own potential, while 29,8% stated that they experience less opportunities compared to peers. (Herranz, et al., 2024)

**Project participants on having observed or experienced barriers to inclusion (PP) vs project teams having observed or experienced barriers to inclusion (PT)**

Project participants in Erasmus+ Youth, randomised parallel module, n = 1.142 & Project team members in Erasmus+ Youth, randomised parallel module, n = 704

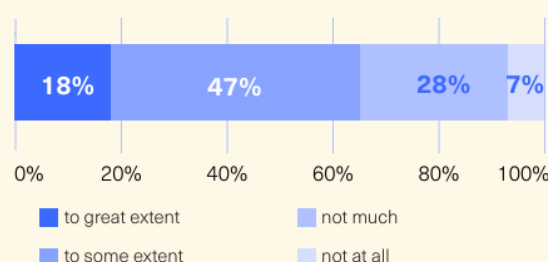


*Figure 1 Project participant on having observes or experiences barriers to inclusion (Herranz, et al., 2024)*

The European Youth Forum report further reveals challenges in youth project inclusion efforts. Youth Organizations' capability to support inclusion is challenged by limited funding from the EU, with 35% of respondents saying that the available funds cover little to no costs to support youth with fewer opportunities. (see image) (Moxon et al., 2025)

Furthermore, Youth Organizations recognized multiple barriers that challenged the inclusion of disadvantaged youth, such as high costs for

**Graph 6.1a: To what extent the funds gained through the EU Youth Programmes allow your organisation to cover support for YPFO?**



*Figure 2 To what extent the funds gained through the EU Youth programmes allow your organization to cover support for YPFO (Moxon, Bárta , & Bacalso, 2025)*

specialised external experts, visa costs and attainment, costs for youth with disabilities or those coming from rural areas and insufficient resources for outreach. The organizations that specifically work with youth with fever opportunities criticized the financial structure for these projects as some youth cannot afford basic daily life expenses in the new destination. Moreover, the reimbursement system was criticized as the necessary 80% of attendances can be

challenging for disadvantaged youth and the long waiting time for reimbursement creates economic challenges. (Moxon et al., 2025)

The study “Exploring inclusion in Erasmus+ Youth in Action: effects of inequalities on learning outcomes” examined how different inequality dimensions affected youth in Erasmus+ youth projects, with 55% of the respondents having participated in Youth Exchanges. (Mayers et al., 2020) The three learning outcome categories researched were: learning and personal development, intercultural interaction and participation in society and democratic life. The research discovered that young people with a lower educated parental background experienced slightly higher learning outcomes. Moreover, youth that perceived more obstacles for education and job attainment reported higher outcomes, especially in the learning and personal development category. A similar outcome was seen with youth that had 2<sup>nd</sup> generation immigrant status or those that had never been abroad before. While slightly higher learning outcomes were seen with most inequality types, the opposite effect was identified with youth that had experienced unemployment for at least 3 months in the last year. The research suggests, this might be because of lack of targeted approach addressing needs of unemployed youth. (Mayers et al., 2020)

## Research gap

While there is a wide variety of existing literature on exclusion and challenges that youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds face, research frequently focuses on formal education contexts, such as schools or universities. There is limited literature on short-term non-formal education mobility programs such as Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges. Existing research within this topic frequently explores lower socio-economic youth inclusion within mixed Erasmus + youth projects without a specific focus on Youth Exchanges. Moreover, there is limited literature on how organizations deal with the barriers and challenges that youth with lower socio-economic status face in short-term Youth Exchange programs. This research aims to address this gap in literature by focusing on inclusion in Erasmus + Youth exchanges, specifically regarding youth with lower socio-economic status.

## Theoretical background

This research employs Pierre Bourdieu’s economic, cultural and social capital theories as a theoretical lens to explore how youth with lower socio-economic background experience

barriers and how they are addressed within the Erasmus+ youth exchange program. The theoretical framework provides insights into how different forms of capitals for these young people are unequally distributed. Furthermore, it explains the interconnection between the three capitals and how they impact youth's ability to benefit from such initiatives as youth exchanges. As this research is exploratory in nature, it is not assumed that all capitals inherently influence youth's experience in Youth exchanges. Rather, it explores whatever and how each capital is recognized and addressed by organizations and facilitators.

## Economic capital

Economic capital is material and financial resources that can be directly converted into money or goods. This type of capital can be institutionalized through property rights. (Bourdieu, 1986) As it is measured in tangible assets, economic capital is the most measurable and "objective" capital in Bourdieu's theory. (Smart, 1993)

Economic capital serves as a foundational element for social and cultural capital. Bourdieu argues that in order to understand the social world and how opportunities are distributed, all capitals have to be taken into consideration as they are interconnected. By enabling the attainment and preservation of other forms of capital, economic capital shapes social hierarchies. As economic resources are distributed unequally, individuals do not have equal opportunities to acquire other types of capital, which give those who are born in high capital families disproportional benefits. (Bourdieu, 1986)

As this researcher focuses on youth with lower socio-economic status, economical capital is a crucial factor to understand the barriers they face. By looking at how economic capital shapes the opportunities of youth within the context of Erasmus+ Youth exchanges, it is possible to gain insight into how unequal economic resources affect inclusivity. Economic capital also serves as a lens to understanding how organizations and facilitators address financial constraints that youth with Lower socio-economic status face. Furthermore, how low economic capital then interacts with other capitals.

## Cultural capital

Bourdieu defines cultural capital in three main forms, which are embodied, objectified and institutionalized state. Embodied cultural capital includes personal skills, knowledge, habits and cultural awareness that are connected to an individual's body. Unlike economic capital, embodied form cannot be instantly transferred and can only be acquired through time and

effort. (Bourdieu, 1986) Furthermore, Bourdieu points out: “...*initial accumulation of cultural capital, the precondition for the fast, easy accumulation of every kind of useful cultural capital, starts at the outset, without delay, without wasted time, only for the offspring of families endowed with strong cultural capital...*”. (Bourdieu, 1986) This means that this type of capital is acquired through socializing and those born in what is deemed by social and institutional standards high cultural capital families benefit from early accumulation. (Bourdieu, 1986) Part of this socialization process is taste, which reflects class-based preferences for cultural goods such as music and art. Taste/preference is viewed as a marker of distinction between the dominant class and others and reinforces the separation of classes. Children who are raised in families with dominant taste shape their preferences early on and therefore position them in higher social hierarchies. (Bourdieu, 1984)

The objectified state stands for material objects that have cultural meaning, such as art, books, instruments or tools. In order to use these materials, one has to possess embodied cultural capital or have access to someone who has it. Therefore, while an individual can buy cultural objects by having economic capital, the understanding and usage cannot be as easily transferred. This creates a hierarchical dynamic where those with economic capital have control over the objectified state, but skilled workers have embodied state to use them. (Bourdieu, 1986)

When embodied state such as skills and knowledge is formalized into academic qualifications or certificates, it creates an institutionalized state. Holding academic degrees or certificates validates an individual's embodied capital in to an officially recognized, stable form. This makes it comparable and sometimes interchangeable. The institutionalized state makes it possible to convert cultural capital into economic capital and the other way around as economical resources can be used to gain academic certification and that in reverse can give advantage in labor market The economic value of qualifications depends on its' scarcity and societies and labor markets standards. (Bourdieu, 1986) Lastly, Academic institutes favor those from dominant groups, which reproduce social hierarchies between those with and without cultural capital. (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990 )

## Contemporary evolution of cultural capital

The concept of cultural capital has evolved in contemporary society, especially regarding younger generations. Even though the form of cultural capital has changed, it still marks

distinguishment between classes as shared characteristics and preferences separate the dominant youth from the rest. (Prieur & Savage, 2013)

With the digital era, the objectified state has changed as “dominant” youth are less interested in traditional high culture materials such as classical music. Digital skills and access to devices have created new kinds of objectified and embodied cultural capital, as taste now can be shared through social media and streaming services. The availability of digital devices showcases higher cultural and economic capital. (Prieur et al., 2023) Although high traditional culture is not as important as it was for older generations, it still remains relevant as elite mark of cultural capital, it is displayed subtly. They balance popular and traditional culture to maintain their status within society. These people are known to be culture omnivorous. (Peterson & Kern, 1996)

Moreover, political beliefs and understanding of global issues are used as indicators of cultural capital. (Prieur et al., 2023) This relates to cosmopolitan taste, which means that individuals are more open to international influence and global outlook. (Prieur & Savage, 2013)

When looking at the institutionalized state, scarcity and rarity are no longer seen as valuable as academic degrees have become widespread. The new marker for high institutionalized high cultural capital is the certificate from prestigious schools. (Prieur, Savage, Flemmen, & Paalgard, 2023)

Understanding contemporary cultural capital is especially relevant to this study as it is investigating young people’s experiences. According to cultural capital theory youth with lower socio-economic status tend to have non-dominant taste and lack access to high cultural goods. (Bourdieu, 1986) These differences in cultural capital between them and other youth in Youth Exchanges could affect access or ability to benefit from the program. By looking at whatever and how embodied, objectified, and institutionalized cultural capital is affecting their inclusion, it is possible to gain a better understanding of how inequalities are manifested within Youth Exchange programs.

## Social capital

Social capital represents the available or potential resources and benefits that an individual acquires through being part of a network and having a membership in a social group. There are two different schools of thought when talking about social capital theory. James Coleman and



Robert Putnam, who represented the American school of Sociology, looked at how social capital can create benefits to society. (Asquith, 2019) Coleman focused on social capital through shared values, trust and reciprocity as means to improve individual and community opportunities. (Coleman, 1990) While Putnam was concerned with how social capital fosters social cohesion and civic engagement. (Putnam, 1995)

Bourdieu, on the other hand, looks at how social structures maintain social hierarchies. According to him, relationships are sustained through material or symbolic exchanges which are part of the practical state. They can also be institutionalized relationships that are established by a shared name, such as a family name or belonging to a political party. The membership is actively formed and reinforced within these networks, which takes effort and time. For example, gifts and rituals are used to create mutual recognition and maintain group identity. These then set boundaries for the group of who belongs and who is excluded. (Bourdieu, 1986)

The strength of social capital is dependent both on the size of the network and the resources individuals have within it. Recognition within a network is often based on objective homogeneity, making social capital interconnected with economic and cultural capital. This also means that social capital enhances the value of other capitals, which Bourdieu labels as the multiplier effect. (Bourdieu, 1986)

Maintaining social capital requires not only effort but also skills in understanding how to build and benefit from connections. An individual that has greater social, economic, and cultural capital brings higher value to connections and therefore also attracts more beneficial relationships. Moreover, inherited social capital such as a prestigious name heightens social capital, which means that an individual does need to put extensive effort into establishing and maintaining connections. (Bourdieu, 1986)

While Bourdieu's capital theory is widely used within research scholars have criticized its vagueness and inconsistency. This critique is especially applied to social capital as it is difficult to measure because of its nature of intangibility. Social capital is dependent on concepts such as obligation and trust, which are unpredictable. For example, it is impossible to know if a favor will be returned until the moment it is done. (Smart, 1993)

For young people with lower economic status, limited social capital may hinder their access to network that provides information, opportunities and help in the context of Erasmus+ Youth

Exchange. Moreover, according to Bourdieu's theory, group membership is based on factors such as resources or shared rituals, which not all youth have access to. (Bourdieu, 1986) Looking at whatever and how social capital affects youths' experience in Youth Exchanges, provides valuable insights into the process of inclusion or exclusion. Furthermore, the research aims to look at how all capitals interconnect and influence the inclusion of Youth with lower socio-economic status in the program. This will also provide an understanding of how and if organizations and facilitators are addressing these challenges.

# Methodology

## Ontology

Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality and whether the researcher believes that social phenomena are objective or constructed. (Bryman, 2016) This research aligns with a social constructivist ontological stance, which assumes that reality is not objective but is constructed through human activity. This means that individuals continuously interpret, make meaning, and negotiate reality through social interactions and engagement with their environment. (Amineh & Asl, 2015) In this research, the inclusion of lower socio-economic youth is not a static and objective concept. Terms such as inclusion, exclusion, class, and fewer opportunities are socially constructed classifications that are dependent on the context and who is defining them. The inclusion of youth with lower socio-economic status in Youth Exchanges is shaped by how these concepts are interpreted and addressed by organizations, facilitators, policy makers, and other relevant entities. Every time relevant actors encounter social phenomena such as lower socio-economic status, they engage in negotiation and interpretation of these categories and how they are addressed within projects.

Furthermore, from a social constructivist perspective, reality is highly contextual and dynamic. It is shaped by a multitude of aspects such as history, discourse, language, collective practices, social interactions and cultural context. As these elements evolve with shifts in societal beliefs and values, social categories such as class are continuously redefined and reproduced. (Pretorius, 2024) The importance of context is particularly relevant to this research as Erasmus+ + Youth Exchanges are international and involve stakeholders and participants from a variety of countries. The barriers youth face and inclusion strategies are impacted by national, institutional, cultural and organizational context, alongside the past experiences of both participants and program implementors. Moreover, youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds perceive their belonging and opportunities based on social interactions and past experiences. This also means that youth reevaluate and redefine their sense of inclusion and available opportunities when encountering information about Youth Exchanges or taking part in them, which can either challenge or reinforce their beliefs.

## Epistemology

Epistemology refers to the nature of knowledge, determining what is seen as valid knowledge and how individuals acquire it. (Bryman, 2016) This research employs interpretivist epistemology, which aligns with the social constructivism ontology. The interpretivism paradigm recognizes that knowledge is not objective, and it is subjectively created by people's experience and interpretations. Moreover, knowledge is dependent on context, and it is relative to cultural, social and historical settings. (Levers, 2013)

Interpretivism recognizes that in order to understand social phenomena, researchers have to look at how they are interpreted by individuals and what meanings they assign to experiences. As Porta and Keating explain:

*“This approach also stresses the limits of mechanical laws and emphasizes human volition. Since human beings are ‘meaningful’ actors, scholars must aim at discovering the meanings that motivate their actions rather than relying on universal laws external to the actors.”* (Porta & Keating, 2008)

In the context of this research, inclusion is understood as context-dependent, shaped by cultural, social and historical factors. To gain an understanding of how organizations and facilitators include youth with lower socio-economic background in Youth Exchanges, it is essential to investigate how they interpret and address barriers. Each stakeholder perceives inclusion through their own experiences, values, and institutional frameworks, which shape their inclusion strategies.

The interpretivist epistemology stance acknowledges that the researcher is an active participant in the interpretation process rather than an objective observer. (Porta & Keating, 2008) In this research, it is recognized that the researchers' background and experiences shape the interpretation of data. Moreover, the researcher is directly engaging with facilitators and representatives of organizations and, therefore, is an active participant in the knowledge creation process.

## Research design

This research follows a qualitative research design in order to explore how youth with lower socio-economic status are included in Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges throughout the planning and

implementation phases of projects. A qualitative research approach emphasizes context and subjectivity, intending to gather rich data rather than numerical and static results. (Bryman, 2016) A qualitative research design is seen as the most fitting for this research, as the goal is to explore the complex nature of including youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds in the planning and implementing stages. Furthermore, the qualitative method allows the researcher to investigate what challenges and barriers are recognized from the perspective of organizations and facilitators and how they connect to inclusion practices.

This research employs abductive relationships between empirical knowledge production and theory, which means that rather than starting with a fixed theoretical framework, the researcher moves iteratively between empirical findings and theoretical concepts. In abductive reasoning, the researcher starts with an observation and then looks for the most plausible explanation. (Thompson, 2022) This matches the qualitative nature of this research, as the goal is to explore complex social phenomena through emerging insights derived from data.

In this research, the process started with interviews with organizations and facilitators, which were then analyzed directly from participants' answers, without a predefined theoretical framework. After themes were created from the data and an empirical foundation was established, Bourdieu's Capital theory was introduced as an explanatory tool. (Bourdieu, 1986) The abductive method was also seen as fitting, as it allows for flexibility, as the insights do not have to strictly fit into a theoretical framework.

While the main focus of this research is on youth with lower socio-economic background, it acknowledges intersectionality as a relevant lens that emerged from the empirical material. As organizations and facilitators work with a variety of different groups of youth with fewer opportunities, social categories such as lower socio-economic status and migration background often overlap. Intersectionality looks at how different social categories, such as race, gender and class, intersect and create unique experiences of privilege or disadvantage. (Weldon, 2008) This intersection impacts the inclusion in Youth Exchanges and the barriers youth face. Although intersectional is not used as a guiding theoretical framework in this research, it is occasionally reflected upon in the analysis to better illustrate the complexity of inclusion for youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds in Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges.

## Data collection

In order to investigate the inclusion of youth from lower socio-economic status in Youth Exchanges, the primary data collection method of this research is semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview is a flexible qualitative data collection method that allows for in-depth exploration of social phenomena. This type of interview is characterized by an interview guide that is not strictly followed, allowing for additional questions to arise during the interview. (Wengraf, 2001) Furthermore, it does not have to follow a fixed order, which makes it adaptable to the flow of the interview and leaves space for exploring unexpected insights.

This was seen as a fitting data collection method as it allows in-depth investigations into how inclusion is understood and practiced from the organization and facilitator perspective, and what kind of barriers and struggles they recognize that youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds face. As the research is looking at a variety of different organizations and facilitators from different countries and different scopes, the ability to ask additional questions is crucial to explore nuanced aspects of this topic.

The interviews were done online through either Google Meet or Microsoft Teams, as all interview participants come from different countries. This method offered flexible scheduling and made it possible to include a diverse range of facilitators and organizational representatives.

The interviews began with thanking the participants for taking part in the interview, a brief explanation of the topic and a request for consent to audio record the meeting. All audio recordings were transcribed.

## Sample

In total, there were ten interviews conducted, of which seven were organization representatives and three were facilitators. Although the interviews were categorized as either facilitator or organization representatives, the distinction between the roles was not clear-cut. Most participants had experience in all phases of Youth Exchanges, which led to overlapping perspectives that contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of inclusion.

In this research, the term “organization” is used as an umbrella term to include various entities that are involved in planning and implementing Youth Exchanges, such as associations and non-governmental organizations.

Participating organizations were chosen through purposive sampling as they had to match pre-defined criteria. (Bryman, 2016) Organizations were identified through the European Commission project result platform, which is a publicly accessible database with information on past Erasmus+ funded projects. (European Commission, 2025) In the platform, projects were filtered by activity type under “Ka105: Youth Mobility” and “Ka152-You: Mobility of young people” with project end date no older than 2020. These filters were chosen to ensure relevance and representation of the current practices in the Erasmus+ framework. Organizations were chosen from multiple project descriptions, where they were either the coordinator or a partner. Furthermore, organizations were chosen from different countries in order to provide diverse insights and provide a nuanced understanding of socio-economic status and inclusivity in various contexts. Lastly, organizations had to have visible participation on their website or social media in at least two Youth Exchanges as either a coordinator or partner.

Initial contact with organizations was made through email that was found on their website or social media accounts. The e-mail explained the purpose of the research and asked if anyone from their team would be available for an interview. If there was someone from the organization who expressed interest in taking part in this research, a time was scheduled for an online interview. Additionally, they were sent the consent form and information on how their data was processed in email. (More on this in “Ethical Considerations” p. 29) In some cases, the interview guide for organizations was provided if it was requested prior to the interview.

The organizations represented were from a variety of countries: Croatia, Bulgaria, Armenia, Austria, Greece and the Czech Republic. One of the interviewees (Located in Belgium) who is included in the “organizational representative” category is not associated with a specific organization but is an active volunteer and freelancer across various youth projects and has experience in all phases of Youth Exchanges. For this reason, the organizational interview guide was adjusted to reflect their position and relevant expertise.

Facilitator interviewees were found through purposive and snowball sampling, which means that initial participants recommended other relevant individuals who matched the criteria. (Bryman, 2016) This was the chosen sampling method for facilitators as information on their

involvement in Erasmus+ projects is not always publicly available and most commonly is not their primary professional role. The facilitators had to have previous experience with Erasmus+ projects and have been the main facilitator in at least one Youth Exchange, so as to ensure that they were familiar with the Erasmus+ framework. In order to provide diverse perspectives, facilitators from different countries were chosen.

The first contact with facilitators was directly made through the contact information that was provided from snowball sampling, which was either through email or their social media pages. Once accepted, the participants were sent an e-mail with a consent form and information form on how their data would be processed. (More on this in “Ethical Considerations” p. 29)

## Interview guides

The organization representative and facilitator interviews had separate interview guides. When designing the guides, it was crucial that the questions were simple to understand, relevant and did not include multiple aspects in the same question. (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015) The questions were open-ended and formulated to avoid prior assumptions or leading language, letting participants share their insights freely. As these are semi-structured interviews, the guides were followed with flexibility. Depending on the answers, the interviewer used follow-up and probing questions in order to explore insights more deeply. Interpretation and qualification questions were used to make sure that the information was interpreted as intended by the interviewee. (Bryman, 2016)

### Interview guide for organizational representatives

The interview guide for organizations consisted of 14 questions, which were divided into four sections, in order to structure the discussion and ensure comprehensive data collection. (Appendix 1)

- 1. Company introduction:** two questions introducing the organization and the representative's role and experience.
- 2. Project design and implementation:** five questions exploring the importance of the inclusion of youth with lower socio-economic status and organizational inclusion strategies in different phases of projects.



**3. Barriers, challenges and access:** four questions investigating what barriers and challenges the organizations recognize that may affect youth with lower socio-economic status in accessing and benefiting from Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges. Furthermore, this section explores how organizations mitigate these challenges and how they create outreach to youth with lower socio-economic status.

**4. Success and long-term impact:** three questions looking at how organizations measure the success of inclusion of youth with lower socio-economic background, identifying long-term benefits and suggested improvements.

(Appendix 1)

## Interview guide for facilitators

The interview guide for facilitators consists of 15 questions which are separated into three categories. (Appendix 2)

**1. Experience and awareness:** five questions exploring facilitator background, relevant training and experiences with Youth Exchanges projects. This category also looks at their awareness and perceived importance of youth with lower socio-economic status inclusion in Erasmus+ Youth exchanges.

**2. Barriers and mitigation:** six questions investigating the challenges and barriers that facilitators have observed in Youth exchanges for youth with lower socio-economic background. Furthermore, it examines the challenges youth with lower socio-economic background face compared to their peers, strategies and practices of mitigating these issues and examples from their experiences.

**3. Success and long-term impact:** four questions focusing on the positive outcomes observed for young people with lower socio-economic status and how they measure the success of the inclusion efforts. Here, facilitators additionally reflect on possible improvements for inclusion in the planning and implementation phases.

(Appendix 2)

## Thematic analyses

Thematic analyses were used to analyze the collected data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method for identifying and analyzing patterns and themes within qualitative datasets. This research follows Braun and Clarke's six-step reflexive thematic analysis framework, which is a systematic but flexible approach to data analysis. (Braun & Clarke, 2021) Reflexive thematic analysis emphasizes the researcher's active role in the analysis process, as it is believed that knowledge generation is subjective and based on interpretation. (Braun & Clarke, 2022) As Braun and Clarke argue:

*"Themes are not waiting in the data to "emerge" when the researcher "discovers" them; they are conceptualized as produced by the researcher through their systematic analytic engagement with the data set, and all they bring to the data in terms of personal positioning and metatheoretical perspectives."* (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 9)

This is seen as a fitting analysis method for this research as it offers a structured yet flexible approach to interview analysis, making it possible to explore nuanced insights on inclusion in Youth Exchanges in a coherent way. Since the research is exploratory in nature, reflexive thematic analysis allows the themes to be organically shaped by the dataset rather than pre-existing categories. (Braun & Clarke, 2021) This means that the analysis method is suitable to explore topics such as inclusion in the international environment across a variety of relevant actors, making space for unexpected insights to arise. Adaptability makes it particularly beneficial when exploring complex and context-dependent concepts such as perceptions, experiences and practices of facilitators and organizations in Erasmus+ Youth exchanges. The reflexive nature of the thematic analysis means that the researcher actively evaluates their position while exploring inclusion, ensuring transparency and reducing the risk of misinterpretation. (Braun & Clarke, 2021)

Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic analysis:

1. **Familiarization:** In this phase, the researcher carefully reads through their datasets or listens to recordings multiple times and becomes immersed in the data. Initial insights and reflections are noted. (Braun & Clarke, Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide, 2021)
2. **Coding:** The research goes through all data sets, finding important or interesting features that are then assigned a code. A code is a label that encapsulates the meaning of a

segment. The coding process is done systematically and repeatedly, where the labels can be adjusted, split into multiple or merged together. In this research, the coding process is inductive, which means the codes derive directly from the data rather than theory. (Braun & Clarke, 2021)

3. **Generating initial themes:** The third phase involves actively exploring the codes and clustering them together by common patterns. When similar codes are examined, the researcher identifies candidate themes. (Braun & Clarke, 2021)

4. **Reviewing and developing themes:** In this step, the researcher looks at how effectively the candidate themes represent the data. The themes are compared to the codes and the whole data set. It evaluates if the core concept for each theme is clear, if they accurately tell the story of the dataset and if they are relevant to the problem formulation. While reevaluating the themes, they might be combined, split, or discarded. (Braun & Clarke, 2021)

5. **Refining, defining and naming themes:** This is when the themes are refined for the last time, and they are given their final title. The researcher writes out the scope and the definition of each theme and sub-theme, while evaluating if the themes are clear and representative of the data. (Braun & Clarke, 2021)

6. **Writing up:** Finally, the themes are written out into an analytical narrative. This includes the core concepts of each theme, analysis and data extracts that support the analytical claims. The themes are then linked to existing literature and theory. (Braun & Clarke, 2021)

## The analytical process

The reflexive thematic analysis was applied to this research as follows: Firstly, the researcher began by listening to the audio recordings and reading the interview transcripts twice to familiarize the data. During this process, the initial reflections and important insights were noted.

After the familiarization with the data, the author started to code the datasets. This was done by going through the transcripts by paragraphs and identifying important and relevant information. These quotes were assigned to a label that summarized the core point of the text.

Given the extensive dataset, this process employed color coding, which means that each part was assigned a color by recurring concepts. Starting to recognize similar codes in the starting process helped the researcher systematically organize the data, making the transition into the theme development stages more efficient and coherent. All quotes and codes were entered into the quote-code table. (see image 3) The coding process was done multiple times, in which the codes were adjusted to accurately represent the data.

And then some of them are like, when is the next one? You know, you did a good job then because if they're happy and they're excited about trying that again, it's a good sign.	O1 Repeated participation as a measure
We don't really follow up a lot with the participants after the dissemination. I think that's where we are most involved during the project and after the dissemination.	O1 Organization does not follow up long term
So about long-term benefits, I'm not really sure, but I would guess based on the people that I have talked to, that maybe boosting their confidence, believing in yourself more are some of the things that end opening your mind to different opportunities because youth exchanges are just one of the ways to participate in the European community, because there are other programs that you can be part of and there's a lot of other ways that you can experience the European Union in general. I think that even gaining the knowledge of this is a benefit.	O1 By taking part in YE youth gain confidence and belief in themselves O1 YE fosters awareness and openness to opportunities in EU
Well, I think first the most important thing is that people with fewer opportunities find out about this. So, access to information is one of the things that's very important for inclusion	O1 Need to raise awareness for YLSEB

Figure 3 Example of Coding Process (Raudzena 2025)

The codes were then grouped together into a new table, where the initial themes were created by collecting the same color codes together and assigning candidate theme titles. The next step was to review and further develop the themes. The researcher made sure that all codes represented the themes correctly and created sub-themes. This process involved changing placement, merging and clarifying the codes. The themes were also reflected upon in comparison to the whole data set to assess how well they represented the data. Following this, the themes and sub-themes were given their final title. All the finalized themes and codes were displayed in a thematic map, which serves as the basis for the further analytical process (Appendix 5). Furthermore, the researcher created a detailed description of each theme and sub-theme.

Each theme and sub-themes were analyzed into a cohesive narrative with supporting quotes. The quotes ensured that the interpretation was grounded in participants' perspectives instead of the researcher's assumptions. Lastly, the themes were linked to an existing theoretical framework, highlighting how the findings align with established theories on socio-economic factors.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are a crucial part of qualitative research, especially when the focus is on sensitive topics such as youth with socio-economic backgrounds. The research must ensure that

there is no harm done to either the participants of the research or the youth who are discussed (Mirza et al., 2023).

## Informed Consent

By obtaining informed consent, the researcher makes sure that the participants are aware of the research objectives, methods, ethics and data processing. This ensures that the participant is making conscious and voluntary choices about taking part in the research and therefore their autonomy is respected. (Pietilä et al., 2020)

In this research, the process of obtaining informed consent started with the initial emails, which included a short description of the aim and the scope of the research. Then the respondents who expressed interest in having an interview were sent a “Consent and Information” form that they had to sign and return. (Appendix 6 and 7) This form was created with a template provided by Aalborg University, which follows the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). (Aalborg University, n.d.) The form includes a description of the topic, research objectives, participants’ rights, anonymity, contact information and how their data will be processed. To further ensure that the participants were aware of the research subject, they were once again explained the aim of the research at the start of the interview, and they were asked for consent to audio record the meeting. It has to be noted that the participants had the right to withdraw their consent at any point in this process. (Pietilä et al., 2020)

## Anonymity and confidentiality

In ethical qualitative research, it is crucial that participant personal information is not disclosed or misused in a harmful way. Anonymity helps to not only protect the participants’ privacy but also creates a sense of safety that encourages the participants to share their thoughts and experiences. (Pietilä et al., 2020) It is also crucial that personal data is not shared with any previously nondisclosed third parties. (Mirza et al., 2023).

In this research, anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research. Taking into consideration the sensitivity of the topic, all personal and organizational names were removed from transcripts. The participants were given titles with their assigned category and number, such as “Organizational Representative one” and “Facilitator two”. Moreover, the data was used solely for academic purposes and handled in accordance with ethical research guidelines.

## Research Reflexivity

It is acknowledged that previous experience and professional involvement with Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges might influence the way data is collected and interpreted. A Reflexive approach was employed to reduce the impact of previous personal experiences and bias. Reflexivity is understood as an ongoing process in which the researcher critically reflects on their own assumptions, role and influence within the research process. (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022) In this research, reflexivity was maintained by designing interview guides that remained open-ended while avoiding assumptions and leading questions. The structure of the guide ensured neutrality and allowed participants to express their opinions without being influenced by predefined expectations. Furthermore, as English was not the first language of most of the respondents, it was crucial to avoid misinterpretations influenced by personal biases. To avoid uncertainty, clarification questions were used to refine understanding. Lastly, reflexivity was used in the analysis process by maintaining interpretations close to the participants' responses, ensuring that results are grounded in the dataset

## Analysis

This section presents the findings of the reflexive thematic analysis of Organizational Representative (Appendix 3) and Facilitator interview transcripts (Appendix 4). The analysis is based on the perspectives and experiences of facilitators and organizational representatives who work with Erasmus+ Youth exchanges. The section explores the inclusion of youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds in Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges, focusing on the barriers they face, and the strategies used to address and mitigate these challenges.

By applying Bourdieu's Capital theory, this analysis highlights how unequal distribution of Economic, Cultural and Social capitals limits access to Youth Exchanges. (Bourdieu, 1986) Moreover, it examines the strategies used to overcome these limitations and how participation in Youth Exchanges can help youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds accumulate capitals and foster inclusion. Through the thematic analysis, seven themes emerged: Financial and Travel Barriers, Language and Education, Awareness and Reach, Trust, Beliefs and Attitudes, Actors and Responsibilities, Strategies and Structure and Long-Term Impact.

The code map was developed to support this section by providing a visual illustration of the themes, subthemes and the codes. (Appendix 5)

### Financial and Travel Barriers

Interviews with organizational representatives and facilitators revealed that financial and travel factors are significant barriers for youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds. This theme describes the different ways these barriers affect the inclusion of youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds in Youth Exchanges in different phases of the projects and what strategies are there to mitigate them. Furthermore, the theme talks about risks connected to the mitigation strategies. Financial and travel barriers are combined under one theme, as travel barriers were largely linked to economic capital.

Organizations recognize that youth with lower socio-economic background face economic barriers that affect their ability to take part in activities and exclude them from social contexts: *"And young people with fewer social and economical opportunities, they just can't afford any additional costs of traveling, seeing the world. They have restricted mobility opportunities. They have restricted social engagement, even visiting a cafe or a restaurant or some meet-ups, etc."* (Appendix 3, O3, p. 18) From the capital theory perspective, this low economic capital limits youths' physical mobility and access to social spaces where they could increase their

social capital, such as networks that support social inclusion and future opportunities. (Bourdieu, 1986) Furthermore, this reflects how the capitals are connected, as the limited social engagement restricts the acquisition of cultural capital by restricting young people's exposure to cultural experiences, knowledge and skills. As one form of capital may reinforce others, social inequalities are reproduced. (Bourdieu, 1986)

Moreover, Organizations two and three pointed out that in certain national contexts, the disparity of wealth is more pronounced as high poverty levels affect youths' ability to afford anything beyond basic necessities. The expressed difference in national contexts reveals that capitals are contextual and relational. The same amount of funding may not have an equal impact on youth in different countries, especially regions with extremely limited resources and public support.

### Economic barriers during Youth Exchange

Six of the respondents discussed how a lower socio-economic background affected youths' inclusion during youth exchange because of limited personal spending money. While the main costs during the official hours of the project are covered, participants have free time outside scheduled activities. The money that is associated with the free time activities can cause division or feelings of exclusion. As mentioned by Organizational Representative one:

*"And if the others are showing off, like buying a lot of stuff and things like that, they might not feel good about it. Sometimes people get extra food or alcohol or whatever or go out in the evenings and people with social-economic obstacles might not be able to do that. So, they might not feel good about it."* (Appendix 3, O1, p. 3)

This illustrates how differences in economic capital may stop youth from lower socio-economic status from taking part in leisure activities with their peers. This further showcases how low capital impacts youths' ability to acquire social capital, as informal meetings outside official activities are opportunities to build social connections. Since Youth with lower socio-economic background have limited economic resources, their ability to develop social capital through shared activities is reduced.

Similarly, the split between youth from different economic statuses was recognized by another Organization Representative:

*"So, we have seen this gap a lot of times where basically the group splits into two, there's one group that stays at the hostel or like the venue play board games and Just make some tea and*



*have some juice in the training room and then the other groups it goes to Amusement park in Vienna and go to all the expensive games and play all of the games.”*(Appendix 3, O5, p. 49)

The visible difference in socio-economic background can reinforce a hierarchy that can result in negative feelings and sometimes even conflict during Youth Exchanges. Facilitator one gave a concrete example of a time a group of youth were clearly displaying wealth difference, which caused conflict: “...*they separated, and they started kind of hating those people.*” (Appendix 4, F1, p. 5) This division reflects how economic capital inequality affects youths’ ability to acquire social capital in Youth Exchanges. If young people form divisions based on social classes, youth with lower socio-economic status risk being confined to a limited social network. Therefore, this inequality may not only negatively affect interpersonal dynamics but also reduce the ability to build lasting networks and relationships beyond peers from the same social class.

Moreover, Organizational Representative seven mentioned that monetary spending that is associated with cultural nights, where youth present their countries, can be a divider for youth. Participants with higher economic capital might buy more products for these activities to indicate their economic well-being, while others have limited resources. The ability to present cultural expression in material way reflects access to objectified cultural capital through economic capital. (Bourdieu, 1986) Thus, cultural nights can reinforce social hierarchy, where youth from lower socio-economic status might not have equal opportunities for participation. When cultural expression becomes tied to material display, youth with lower economic capital might feel excluded and inadequate compared to peers with higher economic and cultural capital. These examples show how limited economic capital influences youth beyond just access to Youth Exchanges by restricting their ability to be socially included during the program.

## Mitigation

The organizations that had mentioned this as a barrier revealed multiple mitigation strategies to avoid conflict and separation. Two of the organization representatives stated that creating common group activities for free time could foster inclusion in free time. Organizational Representative one talked about encouraging youth to hang out in shared facilities: “...*you can suggest to everybody that they have drinks together in the venue or somewhere that you don't have to go to a bar to talk to the people...*” (Appendix 3, O1, p. 4) Moreover, Organizational

Representative five mentioned that they try to take all youth to some common paid activities, but they are limited by a tight budget so it cannot be done often.

By creating shared activities or providing common areas where youth can spend time together, organizations can reduce visible differences between youth with different economic capital and foster inclusion. This enables youth with lower socio-economic status to engage with peers in informal settings, which can positively impact their social capital.

Moreover, small group inclusion was seen as an acceptable alternative to whole group inclusion by Organizational Representative one. Activities that fostered friendships for youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds were seen as fitting:

*“So that's another thing you can, you know, make them into little groups that do things together. I think treasure hunts are my favorite activity because then you separate them in little groups and they have different things to do and it helps them become friends faster.”* (Appendix 3, O1, p. 4)

This kind of group structure can facilitate social bonding and therefore increase youths' social capital. Moreover, this shows an approach that does not rely on financial resources but focuses on creating social dynamics that foster inclusion across different social status groups.

One of the facilitators mitigation strategies was to encourage youth to be mindful of how they spend money: *“Which is a free day, you can do whatever you want but our approach was to tell them to not to do that because the opportunity should be equally for everyone...”* (Appendix 4, F1, p. 5) Providing common resources and encouraging shared activities rather than group separation shows organizational efforts to reduce inequalities during Youth Exchanges.

Similarly, it was seen as an appropriate approach to mitigating economic disparity in cultural nights where youth were encouraged to purchase inexpensive things, cook together or create cultural products themselves. If Organization Seven has a leftover budget, they also offer to buy ingredients, or if notified in time, they can financially support purchases for cultural nights.

Lastly, Organization 7 runs a “necessity library” where youth can borrow any necessary products for the projects, such as tents. When hosting they also purchase daily necessities to decrease spending for youth with lower socio-economic background: *“But we also buy, for example, stack of shampoos, shower gels, and this like cosmetics, let's say things, for the youth exchange to be used there.”* (Appendix 4, O7, p. 65)

While there are mitigation efforts to foster inclusion regarding social inclusion and personal money limitations, the results showcase that economic capital affects what kind of social participation is possible for youth with lower socio-economic status during Youth Exchanges. (Bourdieu, 1986) Youth who do not have the same personal spending money risk being excluded from free time experience with their peers, which might further limit their social capital. Strategies such as shared free time activities and small group inclusion can help mitigate some of these barriers, but organizations might not be able to completely eliminate these disparities because of the lack of authority over youth's free time and limited funding.

### Participation fee

Three of the organizations have a non-obligatory participation fee for taking part in youth exchanges. All organizations with this fee mentioned that youth with lower socio-economic status are not required to pay this contribution. This organizational practice acknowledges the unequal distribution of economic capital and lessens financial barriers to Youth Exchanges for youth with lower socio-economic status. (Bourdieu, 1986)

Organization seven additionally revealed that the participation fee that is collected from other participants is used towards inclusion: *"But we always write that if you are facing any economics problems, let us know and this fee is not for you. So, and with this fee from other participants, we can support more youth with low economics background."* (Appendix 3, O7, p. 67) Redistribution of financial resources is used as not only a mitigation strategy to ensure access to Youth Exchanges, but also as a support for broader inclusion measures. By reallocating participation fees, the organization can support more equal participation for youth with lower socio-economic status throughout the exchange and address disparities in economic capital. (Bourdieu, 1986)

### Financial Digital Barrier

While only Facilitator two talked about financial restraints to digital tools, it is an important insight as it showcases how limited economic capital restricts youths' ability to equally participate in activities during Youth Exchange implementation. Facilitator two noted that having cheaper phones can be a barrier: *"We do a lot of activities where participants have to make a video. And it's usually very difficult, usually, Android phones, there's more cheaper options than iPhones."* (Appendix 4, F2, p.9) The facilitator explained that it is more difficult to edit or receive videos from cheaper phones. This puts youth who do not have the financial capital restricted to certain roles in activities: *"So sometimes they might feel less included. If*

*they have to make a video, usually the participants with socioeconomical difficulties are often just put as actors in those things as opposed to also editing or sending.*” (Appendix 4 F2, p.9)

Moreover, access to mobile data for youth traveling internationally was recognized as a challenge. Participants might have limited data, or they come from outside of the European Union and do not buy a new SIM card when in Youth Exchange abroad.

This reflects a form of contemporary cultural capital, where the embodied and objectified cultural capital are shaped by access to certain technology and digital skills. (Prieur et al., 2023) This means that limited access to digital tools due to low economic capital impacts youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds by not only restricting their full participation but also hindering their ability to gain these digital skills. As young people with low economic capital might be restricted to acting roles, they do not have the chance to learn such skills as editing and therefore they are limited in their ability to acquire contemporary cultural capital.

The facilitator also explained how they mitigate this challenge: *“I don't single them out, I put them into groups to make sure there's at least other participants who have roaming data or are from straight up from the country.”* (Appendix 4, F2, p.10) By strategically grouping youth with different digital resources, the facilitator allows youth with lower economic capital to participate in activities that otherwise might not be available to them. Furthermore, this encourages social capital accumulation by encouraging collaboration and building a network. (Bourdieu, 1986) Even though the facilitator chooses to not single out youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds, this does not fully address the unequal distribution of economic and cultural capital, as they do not have the same roles. Furthermore, not having the ability to contribute equally might affect integration with peers, which indicates that they still face more barriers to social capital than peers who have higher economic capital. (Bourdieu, 1986)

## **Travel**

Travel was often recognized as a category when talking about youth with a lower socio-economic background. Four of the respondents acknowledged that youth from lower socio-economic status have limited mobility capacity and face barriers to travel. One of the organizational representatives mentioned that limited travel experience is not only restricted to going abroad but also mobility outside of their city. Furthermore, another drew a connection to limited mobility with further social exclusion:

*“So like you have so much information about different places and if you haven't visited any, it's very difficult to participate. Like even in conversations with your friends, if you haven't traveled and haven't seen anything, it's difficult to, you know, socialize even.”* (Appendix 3, O1, p.5)

This quote identifies how restricted mobility may negatively affect youths' cultural capital, such as knowledge and experiences with foreign countries. Moreover, it implies that the lack of knowledge and experiences results in weaker social bonds, which result in lower social capital, representing the interconnected relationship between different types of capitals. (Bourdieu, 1986)

In this context, Erasmus+ Youth exchanges are seen as important opportunities for youth from lower socio-economic status to gain a chance for mobility and gain travel experience. Many young people with lower socio-economic status experience their first travel through Youth Exchanges, as mentioned by Facilitator 2: *“Because a lot of such participants with socioeconomic issues, it's actually the first time they even travelled abroad. Especially for Cyprus, first time they're in a plane, they have to come here with a plane.”* (Appendix.4, F2, p.11) When connecting this to the previous quote, Youth Exchanges can be seen as an opportunity for youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds to gain access to mobility, which may foster the accumulation of cultural and social capital.

### Travel Costs

While Youth Exchanges were recognized to be a gateway to mobility for youth with lower socio-economic status, the costs associated with travel for these projects were one of the most commonly recognized barriers to participation. Multiple respondents mentioned that participants need to purchase the tickets requires significant economic capital: *“With the economic barriers there are some cases where the participants could not get their tickets because you get reimbursed after you already purchase your tickets.”* (Appendix 4, F1, p.4) This means that while youth will be receiving money for tickets back, they initially have to purchase them themselves, which can be a barrier if youth do not have enough economic capital. Additionally, it was mentioned that the reimbursement process can be a barrier, as it can take a long time:

*“...600 euros you have to spend before and know that you are going to be reimbursed this amount maybe after 2, 3, 4 months, 5 months after the project. I don't know, it really depends. If your family earns 500 euros per month, it means that for one and a half months of the total*

*gross income you have to spend on one project. Not every family can afford this.*” (Appendix 3, O3, p.26)

This quote illustrates how large upfront costs are a significant challenge for youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds and represent structural inequality, which provides easier access to opportunities to those with higher economic capital, while further enforcing social hierarchies. (Bourdieu, 1986) Youth with larger economic capital are better positioned to manage temporary costs, thus accessing opportunities more easily. This also means that youth who could benefit most from mobility abroad are the ones likely to be excluded. Additionally, Facilitators one and three also mentioned smaller costs that are associated with travel, such as transport to or from the airport and meals during their travel, as these do not fall into the general budget. This creates further financial barriers to participation for youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds.

### **Mitigation**

Six of the interview respondents mentioned that the organizations either always cover travel ticket expenses or sometimes purchase them for youth who face economic challenges. Two of the organizations also state that they will financially support travel if there are unforeseen travel challenges, such as war or natural disasters. Smaller costs such as local transport, insurance, visa and luggage are also covered by organizations or an exceptional cost fund. However, some organizational representatives also mention that it is not always possible to purchase travel tickets for youth with fewer opportunities as they have limited budget: *“...we cannot support the cost of their travel because as a sending organisation, we don't receive any budget”* (Appendix 3, O4, p. 33)

While multiple organizations talked about buying travel tickets instead of participants, two of the organizational representatives explained the risks that are associated with this mitigation strategy. Organization five has experienced buying travel tickets and youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds dropping out of the program which is a financial risk for the organizations: *“...we buy tickets, and people don't show up for the flight, or they miss it, or they don't return, or like a lot of bad things happen...”* (Appendix 3, O5, p. 47) Because of this, the organization feels a dilemma as they do not see it as ethical to ask youth from lower socio-economic status to repay this money, while they also have responsibility over the organization. This showcases how, while mitigation strategies aim to offer equal opportunities, they are also limited by the organization's own economic vulnerabilities.

Similarly, Organization seven has had a negative experience with purchasing travel tickets instead of the participants because of low involvement: *“They were always missing, and they didn't even care about the project. They basically go for free holidays. And it sometimes happens when you pay them in advance, they don't care about the project much.”* (Appendix 3, O7, p. 65) This organization also do not request the youth with lower socio-economic status to return the money, but they use a blacklist to not give these opportunities to low involvement youth again.

Notably, Facilitator three also talked about dealing with the challenge of food not being paid for while traveling by advising youth to bring their own snacks while fostering a feeling of inclusion:

*“And in that case, we usually advise people to bring some snacks like some sandwiches or stuff like that so that they don't need to buy at the airport that is super expensive. And usually when that happens, I am myself also bringing my own snacks to level it, so that they don't feel the difference.”* (Appendix.4, F3, p.18)

This example shows the form of inclusion that does not rely on financial redistribution but rather on behavioural adaptation. Moreover, the facilitator removes the visible distinction between themselves and youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds by taking food themselves. Such practices highlight how important social awareness is when mitigating inequalities, as this adjustment can foster a feeling of belonging and equality, which may result in higher social capital.

## Region/Area Travel

Two of the respondents noted traveling from certain regions or rural areas as barriers for youth with a lower socio-economic background. The organizational Representative four mentioned two different barriers associated with traveling from rural or certain areas. Firstly, traveling from rural areas can be logistically difficult and time consuming: *“Also, if they live in a rural area or an island, most of the times, there will be no connection to the airport or there will be no buses, or they will travel like 24 hours.”* (Appendix 3, O4, p. 33) This can be difficult for a young person to do alone, and it also will affect their involvement in the Youth Exchange negatively: *“...they will reach their venue and they will be super tired. They will not be engaged at all.”* (Appendix... O4, p.33) This indicates that regional barriers may decrease involvement during Youth Exchanges, which limits the youth's ability to build social and cultural capital through activities.

Secondly, traveling from rural areas or islands is usually more expensive and the organization is not able to cover the extra costs as they are out of their budget, in which case the participant has to cover the extra costs. This was also mentioned as a barrier by Facilitator one, with additional mention of a challenge with a visa. There is a risk associated in cases where a participant is coming from regions where there is a requirement for a visa, as a visa rejection can end up creating financial strain if travel tickets were already purchased. As explained by Facilitator one:

*“...be when participants are coming from this region in Armenia or those part where they need visa, sometimes they get rejected because of that before the project and then you need to somehow.... you can't really help them because they already purchased for the tickets...”*  
(Appendix 4, F1, p.2)

For youth with a lower socio-economic background, this presents a significant barrier as they may not have the economic resources to be able to handle the costs associated with a rejected visa. While all participants face the possibility of a rejected visa, youth with lower economic capital experience a significantly higher financial burden. (Bourdieu, 1986) This kind of experience can discourage them from attending mobility opportunities in the future. This indicates that the Erasmus+ institutional funding framework may create unequal opportunities for youth with a lower socio-economic background.

Furthermore, this highlights how economic and spatial inequalities become barriers to mobility projects such as Youth Exchanges. Living in a region or area that is affected by these limitations negatively affects the chances of mobility for youth with lower socio-economic status. Furthermore, this showcases how bureaucratic processes such as visa applications can interact with low economic capital and foster exclusion.

## Budget

Multiple interviewees mentioned that rigid and insufficient Youth Exchanges budget limits the organization's capacity to support and foster inclusive Youth Exchanges. The limits not only affect travel cost support but also overall inclusion of fewer opportunity youth. Organizational Representative seven mentions that as participants are chosen after the budget proposal is accepted, they cannot predict what kind of inclusion fund will be needed: *“For example, when you have people with disability and you want a company person, you need to apply for this extra money in advance. But when you are writing project, you don't know if you have person with disability.”* (Appendix 3, O7, p. 72) Furthermore, some of the organizations think the



budget for inclusion is too small, especially if Youth Exchange is taking part in expensive countries: “...if the training is taking place in one of the Scandinavian countries or one of the high-income countries. If I want to have a specialist on the ground, the specialist would cost me 500-600 euro a day.” (Appendix 3, O5, p. 48)

To improve inclusion in Youth Exchanges, the respondents mentioned the need for a higher budget and a flexible budgeting process. As Organization seven mentioned that flexible ability to apply for inclusion fund after the project was accepted would improve their inclusion efforts: “When you know that someone who is facing economics barrier disabilities apply for project, you can write your national agency: You know, we have these participants, we would appreciate, for example, money for this...” (Appendix 3, O7, p. 72) Moreover, organizations mentioned that flexible budgeting, depending on the country's expenses, would be beneficial for inclusion in Youth Exchanges.

The constraints of tight and fixed budgeting are disproportionately affecting youth with lower economic capital, as they have lower capacity to self-fund, making them more likely to be excluded from Youth exchanges. Furthermore, this is negatively affecting the inclusion of other fewer opportunities groups such as youth with disabilities or those who come from rural areas. These findings highlight how the current institutional funding system creates structural barriers, limiting organizational capacities to fully support the inclusion of youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds.

## Language and Education

Language and education were recognized as a significant barrier of inclusion for youth with lower socio-economic status. This theme explores how organizations and facilitators perceive a general connection between lower socio-economic status and language/education, how they affect youth's participation in Youth exchanges and how this program fosters positive changes in these categories.

### Language and Education Barriers

The interview results show a strong connection between language and education barriers and youth with lower socio-economic status. The results indicate that categories of youth with lower socio-economic status, immigrants and those with non-traditional educational backgrounds often overlap, reflecting the intersectionality of factors that impact inclusion. Organizational representatives and facilitators explained that these young people often have a

lower quality educational background, a non-traditional educational background and lower language skills:

*“Second, they usually, because of the low-income background, they probably also didn't have the best education. They have also gone through some experiences like immigration, asylum and so on. So, they didn't really have the options to invest in learning English, which is usually the language of the exchange.”* (Appendix 3, O5, p. 44)

This showcases how economic capital shapes access and quality of educational opportunities and therefore impacts youths' ability to acquire cultural capital in the form of institutionalized qualifications and embodied skills such as language proficiency. (Bourdieu, 1986) For example, Organizational Representative three explained the economic pressure education can put on families in Armenia: *“And if you have also students at your family, the cost for education can reach, let's say, 3-4 thousand Euros per year for one person. But your family income is around, let's say, 500 Euros, maximum 1,000 Euros.”* (Appendix 3, O3, p. 18)

The imbalance of income and costs of education underlines the economic barriers that may impact youths with a lower socio-economic background's ability to accumulate cultural capital. Furthermore, Organizational Representative six, who works largely with youth who have non-traditional education backgrounds, mentioned that past experience of exclusion from education can shape how these young people perceive and interact with Youth Exchanges. Organizational Representative six discussed that youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds lack experience with non-formal education, which can strengthen the association with formal education and contribute to a feeling of alienation. The low economic capital can exclude youth from non-formal learning spaces, which are often structured as paid extracurricular activities:

*“...these kinds of activities are very often associated with like after school clubs. And in order to do that, in a lot of cases, it's something that your parents have paid for, for example, right? Or this is an extra activity. So yeah, I think that these youngsters have less experience with non formal education in that kind of way, for sure.”* (Appendix 3, O6, p. 60)

The connection between economic capital and access to non-formal education reveals how youth from lower socio-economic status lack opportunities to gain familiarity with different types of learning opportunities. This means that their low cultural capital further stops them from opportunities that could improve their institutional and embodied cultural capital.

(Bourdieu, 1986) The low cultural capital may impact aspects such as communication skills and sense of belonging, which can result in self-exclusion:

*“I think exclusion also works on two different levels. I think we can be physically excluded. And this is definitely exclusion. But there's also like when we self exclude ourselves from a conversation because we don't feel like we belong in that group.”* (Appendix 3, O6, p. 59)

This unfamiliarity also reflects low social capital as these youth may lack a peer network and connections to be aware and engage in these activities. The internalized sense of not belonging limits youths' willingness and ability to participate in Youth Exchanges, which lowers their chances of improve both cultural and social capital. This represents the cycle where low cultural and social capital initially restricts participation, which then prevents youth from accessing other opportunities. (Bourdieu, 1986) These structural disadvantages reproduce social inequalities as young people from lower socio-economic status are less likely to access resources that could help improve their social position.

The connection between education and youth with lower socio-economic status also affects language skills. Language was seen as a barrier by multiple respondents, impacting youths' capability to engage in Youth exchanges: *“Another problem is the language barrier. Normally, those young people also don't get a good education. They don't have the possibility to learn foreign languages.”* (Appendix 3, O3, p. 20)

This highlights how low economic capital restricts access to quality language education and opportunities to learn foreign languages, which reflects low cultural capital in the form of linguistic competencies. Without sufficient language skills, particularly English as it is usually the language of Youth Exchanges, youth are restricted in communication and participation. This in turn limits their ability to build social capital as they might be constrained in their interactions with peers and facilitators during Youth Exchanges, making it hard to build relationships and network. Several respondents expressed that youth who do not speak fluent English feel unqualified to join youth exchanges and face language insecurities:

*“...some participants, they don't believe that they can participate in these projects with the language barrier.”* (Appendix 4, F2, p. 3)

*“One situation that I encounter frequently is before participating the first time, some youngsters may feel that they are not at the same level because they are not at the same level of English.”* (Appendix 4, F3, p. 17)

These feelings reveal that lacking embodied cultural capital may impact self-perception and feelings of belonging that can stop Youth from taking part in opportunities. Furthermore, Organizational Representatives five and six noted that youth with immigrant backgrounds are especially affected by the language barrier. As emphasised: *“So, if you have someone who does not have proper English and does not fluently speak German, in our case, then it's hard to include them.”* (Appendix 3, O5, p. 44) In these cases, language barriers intersect with their social capital as they have to rely heavily on communication with peers or group leaders who speak the same language. This reliance reflects limitations in their social networks and access to broader social resources.

This can negatively affect youths with immigrant background independence and feeling of safety: *“For example, if they get lost in a train station, if they are asked something at the airport, they are dependent on the group leader who speaks a language.”* (Appendix 3, O5, p. 44-45) This dependency on a narrow social network can restrict their ability to navigate unfamiliar environments in foreign countries autonomously. It can also affect their ability to participate in activities: *“If this group leader is tired today and just decides to stay in the hostel and not go out, they cannot move around much.”* (Appendix 3, O5, p.45) These challenges emphasize how low cultural and social capital interact with each other and impact the ability of youth to navigate and participate fully in Erasmus+ Youth exchanges. Youth who face lower socio-economic challenges and come from immigrant backgrounds face intensified challenges accessing cultural and social capital, reflecting intersectionality. This means that not all youth from lower socio-economic statuses face the same level of barriers to participation in Youth exchanges.

## Mitigation

While most mitigation strategies focus on language barriers, the Organizational Representative six highlighted the importance of addressing barriers that stem from past experiences with education. They explained that the format of activities is crucial to not trigger association with formal education and exclusion:

*“... when you put them in a circle, and you give them a piece of paper, or if you do something like that, it's automatically, I feel like you kind of go back to the schemes that you know from school. And this is where this logic of like, okay, maybe this is not for me.”* (Appendix 3, O6, p.59)

To counter the feeling of not belonging and association with past experiences with education, outdoor activities and sports were seen as a fitting strategy: *"...doing something outside something that doesn't feel like a classroom doesn't feel like a learning environment at first, and then start talking about I don't know, participation, democracy, human rights."* (Appendix.3, O6, p.59) This method is used to counter the lack of familiarity with non-formal education that youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds may face, helping them feel more included and open to participation in Youth Exchanges. Moreover, Organizational Representative six also noted that it is important to use youth-friendly language while avoiding professional terms. This ensures that the communication feels relatable and is not associated with formal education. By creating a less formal educational environment and fostering engagement during Youth Exchanges, youth from lower socio-economic status can develop their cultural capital. Through active participation in Youth Exchanges, youth can heighten their embodied cultural capital through the development of new skills and familiarization with non-formal education. (Bourdieu, 1986) The familiarity with non-formal education then may encourage youth from lower socio-economic statuses to take part in other opportunities that further develop their cultural and social capital.

Regarding language barriers, Organizational Representative seven and Facilitator three noted that basic English skills are necessary to take part in Youth Exchanges. Other respondents focused on more flexible and inclusive communication strategies to include youth who face language barriers. For example, Organization three mentioned, including a disclaimer that English proficiency is not a strict requirement in the Youth Exchange description.

Five of the respondents mentioned that the team and group leaders have an important role in mitigating language barriers. Organizational Representative seven shared an example of a Youth Exchange where the inclusion of youth with language barriers was possible because of the group leader:

*" And this Portuguese group doesn't speak English well. But the sending organisation sent us a group leader who was also a translator. So, then they can include these people with social and language barriers to enter the project."* (Appendix 3, O7, p.66)

Similarly, Facilitator Two explained that having a linguistically diverse facilitator team is used as a mitigation strategy. Moreover, the Organizational Representative five talked about the role of a diverse team that can act as translators:

*“But then we are likely to have people in our team who speak other languages like Arabic, French and so on. And for example, Bosnian as well, but also people who speak Ukrainian and those in the teams and then they help to basically be somehow mediators and communicate.”* (Appendix 3, O5, p.44)

In addition to a diverse organizational team, facilitators and team leaders, Organizational Representatives three and five underscore the importance of choosing a participant team for Youth Exchanges that can support participants with language barriers. Organization five allows youth to pair with peers who speak the same language and criticizes forceful push for intercultural as it can negatively affect learning for those with language barriers: *“So, at some point we don't mind that you work with someone that they feel comfortable with too and just speak their own language because they still get to learn from their own communication.”* (Appendix.3, O5, p.44) Combining youth from the same nationalities for speaking heavy exercises is also utilized by Facilitator two.

While these strategies help youth with language barriers to access Youth Exchanges and be actively involved in them, they also reveal fundamental limitations. Youth who face language barriers often remain restricted to interact with small groups that share the same language, which limits their ability to expand their network. Their limited cultural capital may hinder their ability to increase their social capital. This also may reduce meaningful interactions with youth from different cultural backgrounds, narrowing the cultural capital they can gain from cross-cultural exchange. (Bourdieu, 1986)

Moreover, Facilitator two explained multiple practical approaches that they use to mitigate language barriers during Youth Exchanges. In order to be inclusive of youth who face language barriers, it is crucial to be flexible and adaptable with the activities: *“For example, you should put more theatrical activities where acting out is more important than the dialogue they're saying. You can show to other participants what your character is without necessarily having dialogue.”* (Appendix 4, F2, p.11) From the perspective of capital theory, these strategies can be understood as an effort to expend cultural capital to youth with lower language skills. (Bourdieu, 1986) By employing visual and theatrical tools, the facilitator lowers the barriers that limit the accumulation of cultural capital that are associated with linguistic competences.

Facilitator two also emphasises the importance of visual communication, encouraging youth to use translating tools: *“... I make sure I also do everything visually, which means they can bring a phone and just click translate.”* (Appendix 4, F2, p.10) Additionally, to ensure inclusivity for

all participants, they translate evaluations into a variety of languages. Using translation tools and having access to evaluation in multiple languages enables youth who have language barriers to access information and reflect on their experience in Youth Exchanges, therefore possibly increasing their cultural capital. (Bourdieu, 1986) Furthermore, Facilitator Two also mentions including an excessive number of icebreakers to create friendships, thus fostering inclusion despite language barriers. This reflects an attempt to compensate unequal cultural capital by strengthening social capital.

## Education and Language Development

Education and language were not only mentioned as barriers for youth with lower socio-economic status but also as positive outcomes from participating in Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges. Multiple organizational representatives and facilitators recognized that Youth Exchanges contributed to motivation and skill development related to learning and languages.

Facilitator three had observed that in a few days, youth become more confident in their English as they realise that it is not their peers' first language either. One of the Organizational Representatives recounted a time a young person was motivated to improve their English proficiency:

*“But they had the chance to improve their English. And for example, one boy, first day, he didn't speak with me at all. And after this week, he was smiling, speaking with people with basic English. But I think it really encouraged him to continue to learn English and so on.”*  
(Appendix 3, O7, p.71)

This illuminates how Youth Exchanges can initially expose youth from lower socio-economic status to intercultural communication, which can increase their confidence and motivation to learn languages. This showcases how these programs can increase youths' embodied cultural capital in the form of intercultural communication and linguistic skills. Moreover, the increased confidence in international contexts not only benefits the development of cultural capital but may also increase their social capital. Language skills can foster relationships and networks beyond their linguistic groups.

This is further supported by Organizational Representative three, who talked about how youth who face disadvantages become motivated to learn foreign languages to connect to their international peers. This indicates that language learning emerged from the desire to engage socially during and after Youth Exchanges:

*“Young people, especially those from need groups, not included in education, employment or training, after the project they get really motivated to learn at least foreign languages, to be able to communicate with foreigners, with their peers. Second, very often they get very interested into the topic of the project.”* (Appendix.3, O3, p. 29)

This provides insight into how the desire to build a social network can motivate youth to develop embodied cultural capital, which in return makes them more capable of building and maintaining cross-cultural relationships, hence improving their social capital. (Bourdieu, 1986) This represents how capitals can interact in a loop where development in one can strengthen the other as a continuous process of reinforcement.

Additionally, according to the quote, Youth Exchanges foster interest in the project's subject, which further fosters educational engagement. Relatedly, Organizational Representative six also expressed that Youth Exchanges may encourage youth to become more active in their own learning environment and education. This may reflect an expansion in both embodied and institutionalised cultural capital, where youth feel inspired to actively learn about program topics or pursue other education opportunities as a result of Youth Exchanges.

This was echoed in the insights from Facilitator two, who gave an example of youth with fewer opportunities seeking more international chances and pursuing programs where they can learn languages:

*“They are allowed for free to learn the language of the country they are in. And this is like a huge thing that really helped them out. I had participants with few opportunities who found out about Discovery EU. They applied, they passed, and they actually came to another project I had. And they're actually going to go like this month, I think, all together. These are participants who have never been abroad. And now they're probably going to do five, six countries all together with trains.”* (Appendix 4, F2, p. 12)

This example illustrates how Youth Exchanges can be a catalyst for youth to develop cultural and social capital, which then results in them seeking further opportunities that improve these capitals even more. (Bourdieu, 1986) The young people develop embodied cultural capital through language skill attainment and the ability to navigate new cultural settings. Furthermore, this example shows how participating in Youth Exchanges might inspire youth to seek more internationally recognized programs such as Discover EU, which heightens their institutionalized cultural capital. Seeking more international opportunities also might result in



heightened social capital as they gain access to communities outside of their communities. According to Bourdieu, heightened cultural and social capital may positively impact youths' access to economic capital. (Bourdieu, 1986) For example, heightened initialized cultural capital might be more attractive to employers. In conclusion, this case exemplifies how Youth Exchanges might help youth with lower socio-economic status accumulate all three capitals, by allowing them to convert the experience into both tangible and intangible resources.

## Awareness and Reach

This theme explores barriers that are associated with awareness and information about Youth Exchanges that youth from lower socio-economic statuses face. Moreover, it describes what strategies and channels organizations and facilitators employ to raise awareness and reach this youth.

### Awareness and Reach Barriers

Almost all respondents mentioned awareness and reach as barriers for youth with a lower socio-economic background. One of the core issues that was recognized by organizational representatives and facilitators is that young people with lower socio-economic status do not know about Erasmus+ opportunities such as Youth Exchanges. Only Organizational Representative five did not think that it is hard to reach young people as they are aware of opportunities: *“And I think now a lot of people already know about opportunities; parents are aware of it.”* (Appendix 3, O5, p. 45) Contrary, the other respondents stressed that young people and especially the ones with fewer opportunities lack information about Erasmus+ and the opportunities it offers. As Facilitator one explained: *“Also to have to make those opportunities more accessible for people who are not aware because those low opportunity youth they usually don't even know about those opportunities.”* (Appendix 4, F1, p. 6) Moreover, the Organizational Representative three noted that Erasmus+ is usually only known for one program:

*“When you say Erasmus Plus, they think about the Erasmus, the exchange academic program, etc. But they are not well aware of the other components like youth exchange projects.”* (Appendix 3, O3, p. 30)

Furthermore, Facilitators two and three mention not only a lack of awareness of programs such as Youth Exchanges but also a lack of understanding that the program covers the majority of the costs. This especially affects youth who have lower economic capital, as they may assume participation is unaffordable for them.

When looking at the awareness barriers through capital theory, youth with a lower socio-economic background might lack access to information because of their lower social and cultural capital. (Bourdieu, 1986) As they often lack social capital, they might be less exposed to a network through which information about these opportunities flows. Furthermore, as previously discussed that youth with lower socio-economic status often have either negative or lack of experience with education, they may have insufficient knowledge, skills and familiarity to access and understand the process of these programs. This explains how youths' lower social and cultural capital impacts their ability to acquire the necessary information, which stops them from opportunities that could help them acquire these capitals.

Beyond socio-economic status, other intersecting barriers emerged. Organization seven that it is hard to reach not only youth with lower socio-economic background but also other youth with fewer opportunities: *“Actually, I think this is the hardest part for us to reach not only people with economic experience, but also, for example, people with disabilities and so on”* (Appendix 3, O7, p. 68)

In the national context of Greece, geographical challenges intensify the challenge to reach youth with fewer opportunities: *“So, we cannot reach people from, for example, from Greek islands because they don't get this information.”* (Appendix 3, O4, p. 33)

These perspectives underscore the intersectionality of disadvantage in accessing information, as barriers faced by youth with disabilities or geographical obstacles intensify the barriers that youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds face. Therefore, the mention of intersecting barriers highlights the need for organizations and facilitators to understand the barriers to Youth Exchanges as multidimensional and overlapping, as capitals are not distributed equally between youth with lower socio-economic statuses.

### Outreach gaps and needs

Several respondents mentioned structural gaps in how outreach is currently conducted. These gaps reveal that organizations and national agencies are not using outreach strategies well enough and that there could be improvements. For example, one of the facilitators expressed the necessity for targeted strategies that reach youth with fewer opportunities: *“So have some informational campaigns so these things will reach to them as well.”* (Appendix 4, F1, p. 6)

Facilitator two questioned whether national agencies are doing enough to raise awareness about the full range of Erasmus+ youth opportunities:

*“I think it's an issue with formal education more than Erasmus itself, because most of this stuff you should probably introduce in schools, which means most like the national agencies perhaps are not doing a good job doing seminars or something where youngsters can find out about this.”* (Appendix 4, F2, p. 12)

Moreover, Facilitator two continued by putting emphasis on the need for local-level outreach activities by organizations themselves, especially schools:

*“They have to do a lot of activities locally involving schools, because the age and also easier place to find a group of youngsters, basically, and they don't do this stuff enough. A lot of them just do international work and nothing locally, basically.”* (Appendix 4, F2, p. 14)

By stressing the importance of using schools as a channel, it is recognized that schools play a crucial role in informing youth about Youth Exchanges. For many young people, especially youth with a lower socio-economic background, school may be the initial or only place where they encounter this information. This can help youth with lower socio-economic background gain information and access to Youth Exchanges if they have weak social capital and do not have a network of active peers or youth workers. Furthermore, this highlights how crucial local community activities are in reaching young people who might otherwise be unaware of these opportunities.

Furthermore, Facilitator three also pointed out that organizations have to use more effort to reach youth with a lower socio-economic background. They criticized:

*“Some organizations in my experience have their own groups already formed. You know, normally these are not so big organizations, and it is that the opportunities are spread more by word of mouth. I think that as a consequence they don't make such a serious effort to reach for disadvantaged kids. And when we don't make specific efforts, we don't have so many concrete results.”* (Appendix 4, F3, p. 19)

The lack of proactive strategies to expand access to opportunities beyond youth who already have experience in this program highlights another structural gap. When organizations only involve the immediate familiar circle, access to Youth Exchanges depends on the existing social network, which means youth with lower social capital do not have access to information and participation. Combining this with the general lack of awareness about Youth Exchanges and the financial support, Youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds may be excluded from opportunities that could benefit them.

## Awareness and Outreach Strategies

Organizations employ a range of strategies to raise awareness and reach youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds, although barriers remain in reaching youth with fewer opportunities.

Organization two actively approaches associations that work with different youth communities, depending on who might benefit from the specific project. They emphasize the continued need to promote these opportunities to youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds:

*“So, we constantly have to work on the promotion and of raising awareness that they can also be a part of something. We always communicate this. Your participation will be fully covered by us. You will not have to spend one single euro to be a part of this experience.”* (Appendix 3, O2, p. 10)

This focus on informing youth on financial support is critical for the inclusion of youth with low economic capital. By continuously emphasizing that no costs are involved, the organization might raise awareness and reduce the perceived financial barrier.

Facilitator two revealed that they lead a mandatory session in their projects about all the opportunities that the European Union provides: *“They're forced to, they have to attend the session and they learn.”* (Appendix 4, F2, p. 14)

The mandatory nature of the information session mitigates passive exclusion, which comes from a lack of awareness. This strategy makes sure that youth acquire important forms of cultural capital, which is the knowledge about available opportunities and the process of participating.

However, Organizational Representative six believes that informational sessions can be overwhelming and prefers low-threshold activities as an initial introduction in Youth Exchanges:

*“... I think having two, three activities like that before, where we make something, when we cook food together, for example, I think this works much better than just doing something like, oh, this is that info session about this, this exchange are coming up. It's too much information”* (Appendix 3, O6, p. 61)

Through the capital theory perspective, these social spaces provide an initial contact point with information about Youth Exchanges in a social setting. Therefore, this approach might build

trust and a feeling of belonging, fostering both cultural and social capital. (Bourdieu, 1986) Moreover, Organizational Representative six also noted that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to reaching youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds, as it is highly context dependent. As previously discussed, intersectional factors shape access to opportunities, as not all youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds face the same challenges. Different communities may require tailored strategies: “... *it will really depend from target group to target group and, and their needs, their experience within the formal education system as well.*” (Appendix 3, O6, p. 57) Capitals are not distributed equally across groups, which affects the ability to participate and benefit from Youth Exchanges unequally.

Facilitator three and Organizational Representative seven directly reach out to marginalized communities through troubled youth centres, foster care centres and schools. However, Organizational representative seven expressed that they struggle to gain interest from youth in schools. Moreover, they point out the complexity of involving youth from foster centres, as the youth face extreme circumstances:

*“They are caring about where they will live next month, what they will eat and so on. So even though we offered them this opportunity, they have much more problems than going abroad for one week.”* (Appendix 3, O7, p. 86)

This reflects how basic immediate needs overshadow participation in these types of opportunities for youth who have extremely low capital. Without the necessary economic capital, this youth faces inequalities that create barriers that go beyond a lack of awareness or interest. This means that such low levels of all capitals make it extremely difficult to access opportunities that could potentially benefit youth. In this way, social inequalities are reproduced, positioning those with higher capitals to benefit from opportunities and advance their social standing, strengthening the gap in social mobility. (Bourdieu, 1986)

## Channels

Organizations use a variety of channels to share information and reach youth from lower socio-economic statuses. Five of the organizations mentioned social media as channels to reach youth. Organizational representatives three and four mentioned having large communities online. *“We have around 2,000 followers on Instagram. And the people, young people, our target group, they are aware of the educational opportunities we provide.”* (Appendix 3, O3, p. 19)

While Organization three also uses social media, they admit that it does not have a large reach. Similarly, Organizational Representative seven mentions that while social media is used as a channel, it does not reach all groups of youth with fewer opportunities.

This reflects the limitations of social media as a channel to reach youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds, as youth who follow this media most likely are already aware of these opportunities. And while organizational Representative three mentioned *“So, some of them may be in social economic situations and they can share the open call within their network.”* (Appendix 3, O4, p. 37), there is reliance on having social capital and digital cultural capital. This also provides insight into how digital skills have become a significant form of contemporary cultural capital. The youth who do not know how to find and navigate these opportunities online may be excluded from Youth Exchanges. Lack of digital proficiency may result in youth with lower socio-economic status missing opportunities that could help them acquire other forms of capital.

The importance of digital literacy in acquiring cultural capital is further seen by multiple organizations, mentioning open online calls and Google Forms. Organization one posts open calls on their social media, while Organization Four also sends them to unemployment agencies. Organizational Representative three highlights open calls as an approach to give everyone equal opportunity: *“And when we make a call, we always make an open call, so that everyone interested can join the Youth Exchange project.”* (Appendix 3, O3, p. 19) However, Facilitator three critiques using open calls as the main way to reach youth:

*“...if you just publish a call, the youngsters that will answer the call, unless there is previous work done, are youngsters that from a starting point already have more, already feel more empowered to do so. So if you don't take specific measures to go and to meet the disadvantaged youngsters where they are, it's not likely that they will come to you...”* (Appendix 4, F3, p. 20)

This highlights how using digital media and open calls may attract youth with pre-existing forms of cultural and social capital, as they are the ones who are part of the online community. Access is also not just about availability, it requires being aware of the media, the ability to interpret the shared information and then taking the correct steps to use it efficiently. Furthermore, in connection with this, lack of digital cultural capital was also seen as a possible barrier for the inclusion of youth from lower socio-economic status by the Organization Representative six:

*“...I know that most people just would design a Google form and would expect the youngsters to kind of fill it in. But obviously, sometimes this is not the way forward. Sometimes this can be quite off-putting or can feel very unfamiliar.”* (Appendix.3, O6, p. 56)

This showcases how a lack of contemporary embodied and objectified cultural capital can prevent youth from being aware of and applying to Youth Exchanges. Strict usage of these digital tools may exclude youth who possess less cultural and social capital.

It is important to acknowledge that channel choice for targeting youth with lower socio-economic status is context dependent, as mentioned by Organizational Representative six. Organizations that work primarily with youth who face fewer opportunities might have built an online community that represents youth with socio-economic backgrounds and therefore effectively involves them in opportunities. However, digital literacy is still an important prerequisite for accessing Youth Exchanges that are posted online, so those who possess lower digital cultural capital might still be excluded. Moreover, there is still emphasis on accumulated social capital, as youth need to first be aware of the opportunities and how to access them.

The significance of social capital was further demonstrated by five organizations that mentioned word-of-mouth and network as channels to reach youth with a lower socio-economic background. As Organizations one and three explained:

*“And we also try to ask our participants to share with their friends. So, if there are people who haven't had the experience but want to try, it's easier if they have somebody who has already been on a project to recommend that.”* (Appendix 3, O1, p. 4)

*“...but when people come and they have a specific experience with our organization and they share this experience, it is more trustworthy for their friends and people around them.”* (Appendix 3 O3, p. 26)

This shows how social capital was perceived as a crucial role in spreading awareness and building trust with youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Youth finding out about these opportunities through peers who have been part of Youth Exchanges can reduce the perceived barriers, such as limited financial means or language proficiency.

However, it also reveals a limitation as social capital requires youth to have connections with other young people who have experience with Youth Exchanges. When combined with the general lack of awareness associated with youth with fewer opportunities, this suggests that youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds are the ones who might lack the necessary

network to find out about these opportunities. Therefore, social capital can be a reason for exclusion or a bridge to opportunities. (Bourdieu, 1986) This indicates that a variety of strategies have to be employed to raise awareness and reach youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

## Trust, Beliefs and Attitude

The theme explores social and psychological factors that shape how youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds engage with Youth Exchanges. Furthermore, it reflects on beliefs and attitudes that affect how young people perceive themselves and others both before and after the program.

### Trust

Trust was mentioned as a factor that influences youth with a lower socio-economic background participation in Youth Exchanges. For example, trust was recognized as a significant barrier by the Organizational Representative one in the national context:

*“Because in Bulgaria, people say that there's nothing free. I guess it's just a lifestyle in Bulgaria that's not very friendly. So, people are more stressed and on the lookout for dangers. That all comes from being one of the poorest countries in the European Union. So, it's always when people are poor, they're less open to anything new.”* (Appendix.3, O1, p. 2)

This represents a perceived lack of trust in economic transparency and the legitimacy of fully funded opportunities such as Youth Exchanges. According to this quote lack of economic capital contributes to mistrust. The limited economic capital may foster caution towards initiatives that relate to financial resources, as youth lack economic security to absorb potential risks.

Trust as a barrier for participation was also recognized by Organizational Representative four relating to remote regions: *“But they have a different mentality. So, they fear that this is a scam.”* (Appendix 3, O4, p. 33) Furthermore, another representative gave an example of their experience with youth expressing misbelief in “too good to be true” financial support of the programs:

*“...when they were reading the information about the project, that the project is covered, 100% travel will be reimbursed, you don't need to pay for the hotel, etc. All of them, they were thinking that it's some kind of a scam.”* (Appendix.3, O3, p. 27)



This mistrust can also be connected to the lack of awareness and lower social capital, as this youth may lack the necessary network to verify the legitimacy of the program. As previously mentioned in section “Channels”, some organizations use word of mouth as a way to mitigate trust barriers, which can be a tool for fostering trust, but also as social capital is not distributed equally, it might reach youth with fewer opportunities less effectively. This is mitigated by the use of a combination of strategies. For example, local involvement as the first point of interaction: *“Strategy also be like including them first on the local level and something that interests them like a language cafe or a picnic group or something where they get the information straight”*. (Appendix 3, O5, p. 49) This links to another strategy of Organization five which shares WhatsApp group in local school or youth events: *“So as a gateway we use the WhatsApp group and then they see in the what's up group, okay, there are opportunities, there are people and then at some point they register for the form”* (Appendix 3, O5, p. 51)

By providing youth and parents with local spaces where they have direct human interaction helps youth accumulate social capital before Youth Exchanges. This network can reduce uncertainties and legitimize the program. Moreover, using local events to encourage youth and parents to join an online group creates a continuously available environment for community building and information sharing.

The importance of building trust in Youth Exchanges was also emphasized as a way to foster a feeling of equality and belonging in Youth Exchanges. Facilitator two shared how connecting to youth through their culture is used as a strategy:

*“And there's a very specific Hungarian artist who happens to be Roma, and all of them know this. And whenever I have to play music, any type of activity, like a secret friend thing or some kind of energizer, I specifically, especially in the first days, put this music. So, they feel included that, oh, the trainers actually understand us more.”* (Appendix 4, F2, p. 10)

Moreover, Organizational Representatives five recognized that building trust through cultural connection can be crucial to involve youth with immigrant or religious minority backgrounds: *“For those people who have amplified issues like migration and Culture and religion sometimes it needs trust. It needs someone close to the family who can be trusted...”* (Appendix... O5, p. 49) They highlighted using representation in the team as approach to foster trust with this group: *“So, far a personal connection through culture. So, having people in the team who speaks a language or come from a culture who can be seen as a role model themselves...”* (Appendix 3, O5, p.49)

Looking at these examples through the Capital theory perspective, cultural and social capitals are important factors when building trust. (Bourdieu, 1986) Connecting through cultural symbols such as music or languages with team members fosters feelings of inclusion for youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds.

## Beliefs and Attitudes

Facilitator one noted that youth with lower socio-economic status perceive Youth Exchanges as opportunities for more privileged young people: *“They don't want to participate because they feel like this is for some people who have some privileges, and some people who have already experiences and they are more closed because of this.”* (Appendix 4, F1, p.3)

This showcases how the perception of one's capital compared to peers can affect in which spaces they feel included and belonging to. When Youth Exchanges are seen as a space for young people who have social and economic advantages, youth with fewer resources might internalize the idea that these opportunities are not for people like them. Furthermore, Organizational Representative four noted that youth who face socio-economic barriers refrain from disclosing that they face these challenges in their application out of fear that this might disadvantage them in the recruitment process. This reflects that institutional systems are often not trusted by these youth, as they might associate their low capital with exclusion.

Furthermore, Organizational Representative three noted that in their experience, youths' perception of their social status compared to peers with more resources makes them value the opportunity to take part in Youth Exchanges more:

*“Even I would say that people with fewer economic and social opportunities, they really value this possibility that is given to them, that they can take part and they are not going to risk their future possibility of being engaged with this organization and other projects with bad behavior.”* (Appendix 3, O3, p.27)

This suggests that youth with lower socio-economic background may be aware of the scarcity of opportunities in their life and therefore use these spaces to acquire social and cultural capital. This highlights how unequal distribution of capitals intensifies the significance and consequences of these type of opportunities to youth with lower social status.

Moreover, Youth Exchanges are space where youth confront different types of beliefs and realities: *“... they bring people, young people together, and it's a great chance to talk, to*

*confront each other with the realities, with the notions, the things that we believe in”* (Appendix 3, O6, p.54)

The importance of beliefs was also recognized by Organizational Representative three and Facilitator one. While the representative mention times where different beliefs can negatively affect youths participation and in some cases even result in leaving the exchange early, Facilitator gave positive examples of belief change: *“Or Armenian and Azerbaijani participants, we are in a conflict but then when we got the chance to be in a project together, because that's the only place where we can meet, people started to be more towards peace.”* (Appendix4, F1, p.5) This positive attitude change was also seen towards other minority groups, such as the LGBTQ community.

The change in attitudes illustrates how Youth Exchanges are a social space where youth from diverse backgrounds can expand their social and cultural capital. The interactions and connections might foster shared understanding and alternative belief systems. This is especially significant to marginalized youth as they enable reconsideration of their own and other identities and belonging, which might enhance their social and cultural capital.

## Actors and Responsibilities

This section explores the key actors that influence the inclusion of youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds in Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges.

### Partners

The interview revealed that partners play a crucial role in promoting the inclusion of youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The majority of organizations choose to work with partners that specialize in a variety of fewer opportunities. The strategic selection of partners is seen as a factor that ensures project quality: *“...ensuring that you have different partners is the key to success in any project in any international ability....”* (Appendix 3, O6, p.56) Furthermore, Organizational Representative five noted that creating partnerships with stakeholders that have experience in working with youth with fewer opportunities allows for flexibility in dealing with challenges: *“So when partners themselves have worked or have people with such backgrounds, so they're more understanding when issues happen...”*(Appendix 3, O5, p.48)

Organizational Representatives one and three put emphasis on the importance of long-term partnerships. Familiarity and shared work ethics were seen as factors that enhance. It was also

reflected that new partnerships can create risks, as a lack of familiarity can negatively affect inclusion efforts. Organization three explained that working with new partners can damage the sometimes lead to project participants who do not match the objectives of Youth Exchanges: *“And they appear in the project. Who are not very interested in the topic. Who are there as a tourist just with the main motivation to travel.”* (Appendix 3, O3, p.22) This has been especially relevant with changes in the new Erasmus+ rules, which restrict how many projects organizations can be partners in a year. This results in the need to work with partners with whom the organization does not have previous experience. This shift in rules regarding Erasmus+ projects may be weakening the quality of inclusion in Youth Exchanges, which contradicts their inclusivity mission. This indicates tension between organizational attempts for inclusivity and structural constraints of the European Commission's enforced policies.

Beyond partner selection, respondents introduced multiple procedures that organizations use to promote inclusivity and transparency with their partners. There was only one organizational representative who stated that the inclusion of youth with fewer opportunities is common but not required among partners. Organization three creates inclusion priorities when creating the concept for Youth Exchanges and it is expected that all partners follow these. There is a quota of how many participants with fewer opportunities each partner must bring. While Organization three requires all partners to complete inclusion forms with information about youth with fewer opportunities, Organization seven points out that information gathering is dependent on the host organizations initiative: *“But then it's up to the hosting organization if they decide to, for example, get more information from the participants”* (Appendix 3, O7, p.71) This showcases that inclusivity efforts vary across stakeholders as there is no formal procedure. Consequently, the consistency of inclusion of youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds across different Youth Exchanges is not even.

As previously discussed in sections “Channels” and “Trust”, the inclusion of youth with lower socio-economic status requires organizational efforts and strategies to raise awareness and encourage equal participation. As inclusion efforts are often dependent on each organization's initiatives, there is a risk that youth with fewer opportunities are excluded from participation. This was reflected in the challenges and negative experiences with partners that were revealed by some of the Organizational Representatives. For example, Organizational Representative four criticised how some organizations chose participants: *“But they have a very small network and they always choose the same people again and again and again because they use them also as volunteers in their organization.”* (Appendix 3, O4, p.35) Moreover, they also noted

that there are Greek organizations that exclude youth who have immigrant background: *“But partners usually ask for many papers or they do not accept someone who doesn't even have a Greek name, but they were born here or they grew up here, they speak Greek.”* (Appendix 3, O4, p.37) This highlights how inconsistent inclusion efforts are persisting in organizations that work with Youth exchanges despite the programs' focus on inclusivity. As a result, youth who have fewer opportunities might face exclusion by some organizations, limiting opportunities where they could develop all forms of capital and reinforcing social inequalities.

Furthermore, the respondents revealed inconsistencies in how financial resources are managed when it comes to inclusion efforts. Organizational Representative two explained that partners can agree to use organizational fund to financially support inclusion, while Organization three distributes the inclusion fund to their partners: *“...we also give a small amount, now it is 125 Euros per participant with fewer opportunities, we give it to the partner organization.”* (Appendix 3, O4, p.29) However, Organizational Representative four mentioned that many organizations do not distribute the inclusion fund to their partners. The inconsistent management of funding might lead to unequal access, especially when connecting this to the chapter “Budget”, where it was expressed that the funding for inclusion is too small and inflexible.

## Facilitators

Across almost all interviews, facilitators emerged as central actors in promoting the inclusion of youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Organizational representative three is the only one who explicitly stated that they chose facilitators from the internal staff. Three of the Organizational Representatives emphasized the need to have skilled and flexible facilitators to work with a diverse group of youth. As the Organizational Representative five emphasized the wide set of skills a facilitator must have:

*“...so their role is actually creating a safe and welcoming space, and for this you need to have proper training, proper tools, proper experience, be aware of gender issues, intercultural aspects, cultural concerns, language, be aware how to facilitate and run different dynamics, how to respond to different needs of young people, how to activate young people.”* (Appendix 3, O5, p.48)

Safe space creation was also mentioned by representatives three, five and Facilitator one. Furthermore, the Organizational Representative emphasized the facilitator's role in creating trust and addressing the needs of youth with fewer opportunities.

From the Capital theories perspective, this indicates that facilitators help youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds navigate social settings even if they might have limited economic, cultural and social capital. They are in charge of ensuring everyone's involvement and mitigating any challenges that arise during a Youth Exchange. By building trust and addressing specific needs, such as language barriers, facilitators foster an environment where youth can acquire higher social and cultural capital and therefore encourage more equal benefits from the opportunity. Another example was mentioned by Organization representative seven, who noted that facilitators are in charge of communicating any challenges that youth face to partner organizations, which can improve youth access to social support.

Despite these efforts, Organizational Representative seven expressed: *"But when it comes to economics barrier, I'm not sure how facilitators can contribute."* (Appendix 3, O7, p.66) This highlights that while facilitators may employ strategies and find flexible solutions, economic capital inequality may present as a persistent barrier, which was also described in the "Financial and Travel Barriers" section, emphasizing that these disparities are hard to mitigate through only facilitation.

### Group Leader

Organizational Representative one and three especially emphasized the role of group leaders in managing challenges that youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds might face during Youth Exchanges. As one of them noted: *"... the other group leaders who have to usually take care of the participants and be careful not to have inappropriate behaviors."* (Appendix 3, O1, p.3) Because of their important role in managing the youth theme, Organizational representative one and three chose group leaders who are part of their team, while Facilitator one emphasized that organizations choose experienced facilitators with language skills. By cultivating a safe environment and effectively mitigating challenges that youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds might face, team leaders enable youth to access new forms of capital. The importance of the team leader closely connects to the role of facilitator: *"So there has to be a team, a good team between the facilitators and the group leaders so that everybody is included."* (Appendix 3, O1, p.4)

Moreover, the Organizational Representative three mentioned having negative experience with inexperienced and inactive group leaders, which sometimes resulted in conflicts. As previously mentioned, group leaders have a crucial part in mitigating language barriers and sometimes, they are the only point of access for young people who are facing these challenges. In these cases, the group leader is the primary link between social interactions and a young person's ability to learn in Youth Exchanges. For these youth, their inactivity directly contributes to exclusion from participating in or accumulating social and cultural capital.

To prevent these types of negative experiences, Facilitator two explained that they have a pre-exchange meeting with all group leaders, where they gather information on Youth who have fewer opportunities. Moreover, in the meetings, they make sure the Group leader knows their role: *"Should we bring someone or the leader is good enough to be able to translate and they know their responsibility to translate?"* (Appendix 4, F2, p.13) This strategy can help organizations ensure that youth with lower socio-economic background have the right support structure, aiding more equal access to the learning environment.

### European Commission and National Agencies

One of the most important actors in shaping inclusion practices in Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges are national agencies and the European Commission. It was recognized by multiple respondents that the institutional design of the Erasmus+ program has a strong focus on inclusion. As mentioned by Organizational Representative three: *"...this is a criteria that you will engage young people with your opportunities. And even in the application stage, you have to describe how you are targeting those young people..."* (Appendix 3, O3, p.19)

Organizational Representatives two and three emphasized the value of inclusion support funding. However, two of the representatives expressed how the inclusion commitment does not always translate into clear actionable practices: *"Erasmus program guide, see inclusion is important topic, okay, we have to include this amount of participants. But they don't know actually how and maybe they haven't realized all of the ways that it's possible."* (Appendix 3, O2, p.16) Both representatives emphasized the need to improve inclusion policies with clearer and concrete guidelines. Organizational Representative two proposed that Erasmus+ could create workshops and knowledge sharing platforms to inform organizations about inclusion. This reflects tension between policies and practices, which places responsibility on individual organizations to interpret and apply inclusion strategies without consistent institutional guidance.

Moreover, three of the respondents criticized national agencies: *“...we don't have a clear understanding with the national agency which costs are eligible for the national agency and which are not. So, there are general descriptions but no very concrete specific answer.”* (Appendix 3, O3, p.29) Respondents also mentioned that agencies can be too strict and lack flexibility. For example, in cases where participants drop out, even when the situation is out of the organization's control, they may lose funding. This can be connected to the risk that organizations face if purchasing travel tickets for youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds, which was explored in the section “Travel barriers”. The strict policies that some national agencies follow may cause hesitation to include strategies that foster the inclusion of youth who have lower economic capital. This indicates that there is a gap between programs stated goals and the practical realities of implementation.

Lastly, Representatives three and four talked about recent policy changes at the European Union level which have affected inclusion measures. New rules about regional funding are affecting from which regional areas the organization can afford to include youth, which is influencing the socio-geographical diversity inclusion of participants. Moreover, as previously mentioned, restrictions in how many Youth Exchanges an organization can participate, push them to work with more unfamiliar partners, which in some cases negatively affect inclusion practices.

## Strategies and structure

### Target and Selection

All organizational representatives said they work with youth with fewer opportunities, although most of them do not have only one target group of fewer opportunities. As of the respondents explained: *“...the stance of our organization is working with young people with fewer opportunities, social, cultural, economic and that's also different ones.”* (Appendix 3, O5, p.50) This broad understanding of fewer opportunities aligns with the intersectional nature of disadvantage. For example, Organization four mentioned how there is an overlap of mental health struggles and low socio-economic status. Moreover, some of the groups that were mentioned as a focus target include youth with lower socio-economic background, disabilities, immigrants, non-traditional education backgrounds and youth from rural areas.

Selection criteria for the majority of the organizations prioritize youth with fewer opportunities. For example, Organization four requires at least 50% of participants to match these criteria. Furthermore, Organisations one, four and seven prioritize youth who have no previous



experience of Youth Exchanges. Organization four employs the strategy of balancing experienced youth with newcomers to ensure more equal distribution of opportunities while providing guidance:

*“...we try to not pick people who have participated in more than three youth exchanges already. We always try to, you know, create a team with people. For example, if the team has 7 participants, two of them will have experience so they can guide the rest of them. But the rest, especially in the youth exchanges, we want to be the first time to know this work.”* (Appendix 3, O4, p.38)

This strategy broadens the accessibility to youth who might be otherwise excluded because of their lack of previous experience, while also providing informal mentoring that supports social capital development through group dynamic support.

While the selection process varies, organizations commonly look at motivation and project fit to ensure that youth fully benefit from these opportunities. For example, the Organization uses shortlisting, where they do video chats with potential participants to learn more about their motivation and character. Whereas Organization five tries to give opportunities to all youth who show interest, by having an archive of all youth who have signed up and their interests. Once they have projects available, they match relevant youth to the Youth Exchange. Moreover, Organizational Representative explained that they want to offer opportunities to as much youth as possible, so when they are hosting youth exchange in their country, they invite more youth than the official number: *“...I remember one of the youth exchanges where 12 people participating, so basically, we had seven more people participating.”* (Appendix 3, O5, p.50)

This approach might help young people who have lower economic and cultural capital gain access to opportunities where they can develop their social and cultural capital through interaction with peers from other countries. Moreover, allowing more young people to take part than officially required, more youth are exposed to these types of opportunities, raising awareness and fostering trust.

## Design and Planning

The design and planning phase of projects reveals that while there are different opinions on involving youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds in the design phase, similar strategies are employed to ensure that their needs are recognized and supported. It is explained that the inclusion of youth with fewer opportunities is preplanned in the project writing phase.

Organization two has a young team that can share their needs and youth in general are consulted through calls and Google Forms in the design phase of a Youth Exchanges. Moreover, that organizations should be involving youth with lower socio-economic background: *“Maybe they could be the ones planning change for others and really being a part of the process. Maybe they can help with evaluation, maybe they can do whatever, be responsible for the food, just to give them some responsibility, so that they know that they're accepted, that they're important, and that we value their contribution.”* (Appendix 3, O2, p.16)

This statement recognizes how giving youth with lower socio-economic status a chance to be actively involved in the process might help them accumulate higher social and cultural capital. Through giving voice and responsibility, organizations could showcase how these young people are valued while fostering a feeling of belonging in Youth Exchanges. Furthermore, according to capital theory, by gaining new experiences and skills, youth can develop their cultural capital, which may result in improvements in other forms of capital. This approach shifts the role of youths with lower socio-economic background from being a participant to an active contributor, which may help them develop the social relationships and resources that are needed to access more opportunities.

Contrary, Organizational representatives four and five expressed scepticism towards involving youth with fewer opportunities in the design phase. Organizational representative five explained that this is because youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds lack the skills and experience to plan a Successful Youth exchange:

*“So, if now I ask them what do you think could be the solution, for them the solution is going for a trip to some park and spending time together drawing. But we see, for example, that the solution would be making an interactive simulation game, where they do some role-playing of policy makers. And then we invite actual policy makers, and we make it a bit more complex, because we do have the experience and the tools.”* (Appendix 3, O5, p.46)

This reflects an assumption that youth lack the necessary cultural capital that is needed to be able to efficiently take part in the design and planning phases of Youth Exchange. From this perspective, the youth-generated ideas are not as institutionally valuable as those of experienced staff. This contrast between opinions on dominant norms around valuable input represents how institutional power structures prefer certain experiences and knowledge over others. Where one organization sees this as an opportunity to develop youths' skills and knowledge, others see the lack of existing cultural capital as a barrier.

Although the direct involvement of youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds in the initial design phase varies, Organization seven incorporates an inclusion workshop into project design. In these workshops, inclusion is explained to participants, who are then consulted on ways to improve inclusion in Youth Exchanges. These planned sessions reflect a broader understanding of inclusive design that exceeds the initial planning phase.

The planning phase is not only about the direct involvement of youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds in the design of Youth Exchanges, but also about ongoing engagement through meetings. Pre-Youth Exchange meetings were mentioned as a significant approach to ensure inclusion by seven of the respondents. The preparation meetings play a crucial part in gaining information about the needs of youth with fewer opportunities and setting clear expectations. For example, Facilitator one emphasized significance of having these meeting to make sure youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds are aware of any costs that might not be included in the reimbursement: “...*transportation from airport to the venue when it's like late hours and it's a taxi, national agencies don't cover this and they should always know about all of these extra costs that can potentially happen...*”(Appendix 4, F1, p.2) The facilitator also mentioned having negative experiences with youth not being informed about possible expenses. By enforcing these meetings prior to Youth Exchanges, they enable youth with lower economic capital to plan their participation accordingly, as they may not have enough resources for unexpected expenses. This shows how unequally youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds are affected by missing information.

Moreover, Organizational Representative two explained that youth with lower socio-economic background might have different needs than their peers, so they host small meetings to ensure that they are comfortable. This approach recognizes that these individuals may not possess high levels of capital, which might create discomfort in large group settings. By offering small pre-exchange meetings, they can enable this youth to develop a relationship with the staff, thus increasing trust and encouraging social capital accumulation.

Organizational Representative three also noted that staff helps youth throughout the preparation stage with aspects such as visa, further highlighting the crucial role of inclusion efforts in the planning stage to reduce structural barriers.

## Measure of Success

When discussing methods to measure success for the inclusion of youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds, both formal and informal approaches were mentioned.

Organizational Representatives one, two and five measure success of inclusion by repeated participation in projects and engagement with organizations. As the Organizational representative explained: *“Them participating in additional activities rather than just going on a youth exchange and then they don't contact us anymore.”* (Appendix 3, O2, p.15) This approach highlights the accumulation of social capital through continuous relationships with the organization. Repeated participation indicates to organizations that the Youth Exchange has been a successful space where youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds can develop their capitals and access more opportunities. However, the measurement of success through return has a potential limitation of not taking into account that some youth might face barriers to reengagement. Looking at this through the Capital theory viewpoint, unequal distribution of economic and social capital may restrict long-term involvement, even if the experience was positive. Similarly, Organizations two and six prioritize the benefits youth receive over statistical targets. This reflects the notion that inclusion is about the quality of experience rather than just how many youths with fewer opportunities were involved in the Youth Exchange.

Moreover, multiple respondents mentioned that success is also measured through daily interactions, such as team leader check-in meetings or direct interactions with facilitators. Facilitator three also noted that the level of engagement is a measurement of success. These evaluations not only provide feedback on the success of the Youth Exchange but also allow the organizations and facilitators to respond quickly to employ mitigation strategies for any challenges that might have occurred.

Six of the respondents mentioned formal and structured evaluation tools. For example, Organization three collects data on participants with fewer opportunities and Facilitators two and three use a detailed evaluation at the end of a Youth Exchanges. The current measurement strategies suggest a nuanced understanding of the inclusion of youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds that balances formal and informal methods. However, there were no mentions of formal long-term measurement, as the organizational representative mentioned: *“We don't really follow up a lot with the participants after the dissemination.”* (Appendix 3, O1, p.5) Relying mainly on short-term feedback and returning participants might neglect both long-term success and challenges.

## Long-term impact

This theme focuses on the long-term impact of Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges on youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds, as identified by Organizational Representative and

Facilitators. While several long-term outcomes have been identified, this theme focuses on ones that have not been mentioned in the previous sections of this analysis chapter. This section explores development of social connections, increased confidence and empowerment, enhanced professional opportunities and integration in community and civic life. This section reveals how taking part in Youth Exchanges might create positive impact in the lives of youth with a lower socio-economic background.

## Social Connections

Social connections were recognized as a significant benefit of Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges by Organizational Representatives four and five.

Organizational Representative five considers this the most crucial outcome of Youth Exchanges: *“...they become part of a bigger family, they create connections with people in other countries, and they make new friendships. And we believe that those friendships are lasting relationships and connections that they keep after the project...”* (Appendix 3, O5, p.43)

This was further supported by examples of ongoing interactions that they have observed in multiple groups of past projects and shared WhatsApp group: *“...people sharing pictures and reuniting together and hosting each other when someone is visiting the country of the other person.”* (Appendix 3, O5, p.43)

These examples showcase how Youth Exchanges provide an important opportunity for young people to build long-lasting social connections and networks, therefore enabling youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds to accumulate higher social capital. The resource sharing that is highlighted in the quote connects to the Social Capital theory, which states that strong social networks can provide access to various resources and help individuals accumulate other forms of capital. (Bourdieu, 1986) In this case, hosting each other may reduce financial barriers to mobility and expand access to international experiences for youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds. As it was mentioned under the section “Travel”, many youths with lower socio-economic backgrounds who participate in Youth Exchanges have never traveled abroad before the exchange. This shows how Youth Exchanges can provide an opportunity for initial international experience, which may foster future mobility through the accumulation of stronger social capital.

## Confidence

Confidence was recognized as a long-term impact by five of the respondents. One of the representatives noted that participants “*come back with a lot more confidence in their own personal projects.*” (Appendix 3, O6, p.62) They highlight how participation in Youth Exchanges empowers youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds in pursuing their interests outside of the program. Similarly, Facilitator three emphasized: “Empowerment in terms of their own abilities, their own potential...” (Appendix 4, F3, p.18) These examples illustrate how experiences in Youth Exchanges can develop participants' sense of self-efficacy.

This confidence can be viewed as a form of embodied cultural capital, as it is an internal resource that helps individuals access opportunities and fosters other forms of capital. (Bourdieu, 1986) This notion is supported by Organization Representative six, who observed that youths' increase in confidence fosters their involvement in education, thus enabling them to access other forms of capital, such as institutionalized cultural capital.

## Civic Engagement and Social Integration

Three of the respondents recognized Youth Exchanges as a tool for fostering civic engagement and integration in local and European communities for youth with a lower socio-economic background. Facilitator three noted: “... *it is really a transforming experience in terms of engagement with local society, in terms of engagement with the European society as well.*” (Appendix 4, F3, p.18).

This reflects how youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds might develop a sense of belonging on multiple layers of society. Youth exchanges encourage youth to see themselves as part of democratic societies and therefore foster active participation in the civic world.

Furthermore, Organizational Representative six emphasized that Youth Exchanges provide youth with actionable tools to create a change: “...*really understanding that with these tools, they can use them in different ways, in different situations. And yeah, they can use them to make change in their communities.*” (Appendix 3, O6, p.54). For youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds, Youth Exchanges are an opportunity to accumulate cultural and social capital, enabling them to feel belonging and empowerment on both a local and broader scale.

## Opportunities and Professional Development

The data revealed that Youth Exchanges have a significant role in fostering awareness about other opportunities and encouraging youth to take more opportunities. Several respondents

mentioned that many participants get involved in other local and international opportunities after taking part in Youth Exchanges. For example, Organizational representatives two and Facilitator two mentioned that youth become more interested in participating in more Youth Exchanges and other European Union opportunities. Moreover, the representative noted that young people return to other projects and get involved in the association itself: *“So they always come back and eventually they even become our volunteers, and they want to contribute to the work of the association.”* (Appendix 3, O2, p.14) Organization Representative three also claimed that the majority of participants continue to participate in opportunities or get involved locally. This motivation to take part in more opportunities is also recognized in first-time or initially shy participants by Representative four.

This continued engagement reflects the accumulation of social capital as participants build relationships and networks that increase possibilities for more opportunities. Moreover, it showcases how Youth Exchanges increase cultural capital, as they gain essential knowledge, skills and familiarity to navigate other opportunities. This cultural capital empowers youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds to access more resources that help professional and personal development.

This was one of the most often recognized long-term impacts. Multiple respondents mentioned youth looking for internships and other professional developments after taking part in Youth Exchanges. As an organizational representative three pointed out, during Youth Exchanges participants develop soft skills that increase their employability. Moreover, Representatives three and five had observed youth finding a job after taking part in the program.

As one of them explained: *“...they get two certificates and we then support them in incorporating those in their CV...”* (Appendix 3, O5, p.44). The same respondent added: *“We have seen from the questions from HR and people from companies, they are actually interested in those opportunities, and they ask them, what is this actually...”* (Appendix 3, O5, p.44)

For youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds who might struggle with finding employment, this represents a significant increase in cultural capital. Certificates from Youth Exchanges represent institutionalized cultural capital as it is a recognized credential that can be added to a CV. (Bourdieu, 1986) This formal recognition helps legitimize the embodied cultural capital that youth have gained during exchange and therefore increases their potential in the eyes of employers. Moreover, as it was observed that some youth find jobs after Youth Exchanges, it can be seen how the accumulation of higher cultural capital can lead to an

increase in economic capital. (Bourdieu, 1986) Thus, Youth Exchanges can serve as a mechanism through which youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds can improve their social and cultural capital and convert them into economic resources.



## Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore how youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds are included in Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges, with a focus on the strategies employed by organizations and facilitators aimed at mitigating barriers these youth face. The research examined all phases of Youth Exchanger and identified both the challenges and the organizational practices related to inclusion. All organizational representative and facilitators emphasized the need to include youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds in Youth Exchanges. Moreover, all of the respondents actively work with and try to involve youth with fewer opportunities in their projects, demonstrating a strong commitment to inclusion.

The findings show that while the Erasmus+ Program emphasises inclusion, youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds have a variety of barriers to inclusion in Youth Exchanges because of uniquely distributed economic, social and cultural capitals. (Bourdieu, 1986) As the analysis of interview transcripts shows, these forms of capital are deeply interconnected, and they continuously reinforce social hierarchies that benefit individuals with higher levels of capital. Therefore, youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds face disproportional challenges accessing opportunities such as Youth Exchanges, which could potentially improve their social standing.

### Financial Barriers and Economic Capital

The results highlight that economic capital remains as a significant factor, which determines access to Youth Exchanges. Economic barriers operate on multiple layers, by influencing both the ability of youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds to participate and the organizational capacity to offer sufficient financial support. One of the most prominent barriers that were identified by organizational representatives and facilitators is the cost of travel. Requirements such as upfront travel payments, costs for visa or transport and expenses associated with free time activities disproportionately exclude youth with low economic capital.

While the program is designed to cover these types of expenses, in practice, it does not always do so in a way that ensures accessibility to youth with low economic capital. Although some organizations can purchase tickets for participants in advance, others expressed not being able

to because of budget restrictions, which poses financial risks. When youth have to purchase their own tickets, even if they are reimbursed after the Youth Exchanges, those with low economic capital might not have the initial financial resources needed to take part in Youth Exchanges.

These findings align with the European Youth Forum report, which pointed out that more than 30% of organizations that work with youth did not feel adequately supported to efficiently include youth with fewer opportunities. (Moxon et al., 2025) The results of this research show a similar pattern as several respondents expressed that current funding mechanisms do not sufficiently cover costs associated with the inclusion of youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds. This indicates a gap between inclusion policy intentions and practical implementations. Moreover, this showcases how the institution's structures may reproduce the inequalities that they try to solve. This emphasises the need for systematic change at the structural level. Furthermore, as noted in the literature, strict, rigid Erasmus+ funding mechanisms, such as 80% attendance requirements for reimbursements, can negatively affect inclusion. (Moxon et al., 2025) This was also reflected in the interviews, where organizational representatives criticized the program for lacking flexibility in their funding policies.

While travel expenses were recognized as a significant barrier, everyday costs were also noted as a challenge that affected youths' ability to fully benefit from Youth Exchanges. Organizations attempt to mitigate these financial inequalities through strategies such as fostering small group inclusion, offering resources for cultural nights, offering common free time activities and providing all basic necessities.

When these inequalities in economic capital are not effectively addressed, they negatively impact youths' ability to accumulate cultural and social capital. For example, by not having financial resources to do the same activities as peers, youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds might not have the chance to build social bonds and expand their network during Youth Exchanges.

## Intersecting Capitals and Cultural Exclusion

The interviews demonstrated how low economic capital is not an isolated disadvantage but continuously intersects with other forms of capital. Youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds often lack exposure to non-formal education, digital tools, international mobility and have lower quality education. All these resources are essential for developing cultural

capital. The results show that youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds face language barriers, which can result in insecurities that either discourage initial participation or restrict the ability to actively engage during the program. This barrier restricts the ability to form social bonds and limit's ability to learn during activities. These barriers are intensified for youth with migrant backgrounds and youth who have non-traditional educational backgrounds, illustrating the intersectional nature of inequalities.

Moreover, language barriers further reduce their ability to fully engage with Youth Exchanges, affecting not only their ability to participate but also negatively impacting their sense of belonging and confidence. This may lead to self-exclusion, where youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds do not feel like these programs are meant for them. This highlights how exclusion goes beyond initial access to the program, affecting youths' ability to equally take part and benefit from the experience.

### Access to Information and Social Capital

Youth with limited networks often lack the awareness and information bout Erasmus+ opportunities. As they may have limited social capital, they might not have a network that has experience with Youth Exchanges. This reinforces the argument that a lack of social capital further limits youths' opportunities that could accumulate it. On the other hand, individuals who have high social capital benefit from greater access to information and support, which increases the chances of them participating and gaining a stronger network. This showcases the cyclical nature of capital, where existing capital multiplies advantages, which makes it harder for marginalized youth to access Youth Exchanges. While some of the organizations had diverse and strong outreach strategies, many recognized the difficulty of raising awareness and reaching youth with fewer opportunities. The lack of social connections that can inform youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds was connected with low trust in the legitimacy of the program.

Furthermore, youth with higher economic capital tend to have digital advantages and are more likely to possess the necessary embodied capital to access opportunities online. This is important as many of the organizations use online platforms to share and recruit for Youth Exchanges. This further shows inequality in access to information. Some of the organizations employ multiple outreach methods such as contacting associations that work with youth with fewer opportunities, going to schools, hosting local events and providing space to build community, such as WhatsApp groups. Furthermore, word of mouth was recognized as a

crucial channel to reach youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds, as it provides trust and legitimizes the program. Although one of the strategies all organizations employed was choosing partners, who actively work with youth with fewer opportunities, which can be seen as approach to extend reach and awareness.

## Trust, Facilitation and Inclusion

Trust-building efforts proved to be crucial also during the exchange. Facilitators and group leaders are central actors in creating a safe space and recognizing the needs of youth with fewer opportunities. Strategies such as connecting through shared culture, organizing non-cost activities and facilitating icebreakers that form social bonds, allow youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds to feel included and belonging. These gestures also enable youth to accumulate forms of capital that may otherwise be inaccessible. Facilitators and group leaders also have a crucial role in mitigating language barriers. Multiple of the respondents chose experienced facilitators and group leaders who serve as translators for youth with language barriers. While this provides the opportunity for youth who face this barrier to take part in Youth Exchanges, it has risk factors such as high dependency on one individual in the exchange. This means that these youth are very limited in their ability to build a social network, and they have limited capacity to take part in activities. One of the facilitators try to mitigate these challenges by flexible method design, where they switch speaking-heavy activities to theatrical or visually engaging activities.

## Long-term Benefits of Inclusion

The results of the research show that when youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds are included meaningfully in Youth Exchanges, there are potential long-term benefits that may positively affect all capitals. Organizational representatives and facilitators had observed improved social network, higher self-confidence, heightened language proficiency and motivation to pursue more mobility opportunities and education. Moreover, youth develop skills, gain certificates and improve their CVs, which in some cases helped them find employment and therefore improve their economic capital. The findings show that Youth Exchanges can help youth develop a belief in upward mobility, which was a key factor linked to long-term motivation and resilience in existing literature (Browman et al., 2019).

However, the study acknowledges that the youth who might benefit the most from Youth Exchanges are most often the ones who face the most barriers. As a result, the impact Erasmus

+ Youth Exchanges could have in supporting personal and professional development for youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds remains unequal. Targeted strategies and policy changes are needed to mitigate the overlapping barriers. Otherwise, the program risks reinforcing existing inequalities rather than reducing them.

## Planning and Preparation Phase

The researched revealed that youth with lower socio-economic factors are in most cases not actively involved in planning and deign phases of the project. Only few organizations consult and directly involve them in this part of the project. However, pre-departure meetings play a crucial part in inclusion in the planning stage, as they ensure that organizations are aware of needs of youth with fewer opportunities. Moreover, this also mitigates misinformation about financial support that could harm youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds. These meeting serve as a strategy to set expectations on all relevant actors, including group leaders who have an important role in mitigating exclusion during Youth Exchanges.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

The results of the research carry several implications for practices and policies. Firstly, inclusion has to go beyond access, as being accepted into the program does not equal participation. Organizations have to consider how youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds are included in all phases of Youth Exchanges. Furthermore, they have to recognize that economic limitations are not isolated. There is a need for strategies that support confidence-building, social bonding, digital skill development and language inclusion. This also means that organizations have to use a combination of strategies, such as using multiple channels to raise awareness and legitimize the program in the eyes of youth with fewer opportunities. For Example, this could be done through a combination of local partnerships and word of mouth. Organizations could work with local community centres that have a trusted relationship with youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds and encourage word of mouth through these actors and former participants.

A critical factor in fostering inclusion is flexible funding. There is a need to adjust the funding structure to close the gap between current policies and practices. The overly strict attendance rules do not reflect the complex reality of the inclusion of youth with fewer opportunities. The literature and empirical findings suggested that inclusion should be contextualized and flexible. It has to adapt to national differences and youth experiences. A standardized approach to

inclusion leads to performative inclusion rather than meaningful participation. Effective inclusion requires understanding that context should have a crucial role in inclusion strategies. Contextual awareness should be integrated into the funding structure to ensure more equal access to Youth Exchanges.

## Conclusion

This research investigated how organizations and facilitators who work with Erasmus+ Youth Exchange projects include youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds. Moreover, the results revealed the barriers that youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds face and how these challenges are addressed by various relevant actors. The research reveals tension between Erasmus+ inclusion efforts and the experiences of youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds, highlighting gaps between policy goals and practical implementations.

Through interviews with organizational representatives and facilitators, this research has gained insights in what strategies are used during project design, planning and implementation phases to support their participation. The findings indicate that youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds face intersecting and persistent barriers to both access and meaningful participation. These barriers include financial, educational, language, social, cultural and psychological challenges.

By applying Economic, Cultural and Social Capital theories, the analysis has shown that youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds face inequalities that impact their ability to participate in Youth Exchanges. (Bourdieu, 1986) One of the most persistent challenges these youth faces are financial constraints, which include up-front travel expenses and resources associated with participating, such as pocket money and digital finances.

However, economic barriers are interconnected with social and cultural capitals, and they often reinforce each other, creating a cycle that fosters inequalities and enforces existing social hierarchies. In this research, the cultural capitals that impacted youths' inclusion in Youth Exchanges included language proficiency, past exclusion from education, familiarity with non-formal education, and confidence. Language skills were especially commonly mentioned barrier, with some youth struggling to take an active part in activities or needing to overly depend on a group leader.

The lack of cultural and economic capital also impacted youths' ability to accumulate social capital during Youth Exchanges. Furthermore, it was recognized as a barrier for participation as youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds often lacked access to a network through which they could gain awareness, information, and support to apply for this program. This not only cultivated a lack of awareness but also, in some cases, mistrust about the legitimacy of the project.

The research reveals that organizations and facilitators are actively adapting strategies to foster the inclusion of youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds. Organizations that have the financial means cover travel tickets in advance, provide necessities and help youth with costs associated with cultural nights. Moreover, they design accessible activities, simplify communication, and foster a safe and trusting environment through a variety of activities, such as connecting through cultural music. In planning stages, organizations have meetings with participants to learn about their needs and create accurate expectations.

Organizations also choose experienced facilitators and group leaders who help mitigate language barriers and any possible exclusion. Furthermore, partnerships significantly contribute to inclusion efforts. By working with organizations that target different groups of youth with fewer opportunities, they are able to better address the needs of these youth. In contrast, when organizations are experiencing financial constraints, unsuccessful partnerships or confusion about funding access, their capacity to include youth with lower socioeconomic backgrounds is reduced. The results also show dissatisfaction regarding the structure and administration of Erasmus+ funding. Moreover, the respondent mentioned a lack of clarity on inclusion-related practices and changing rules affecting inclusion negatively.

It is also important to acknowledge that the results highlight that Youth Exchanges can be transformative experiences for youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds. If youth are fully included in the Youth Exchange, they can gain new skills, develop an international network, build confidence, access other opportunities, find employment and become active members of civic life.

This research concludes that the inclusion of youth with lower socio-economic backgrounds in Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges is possible through proactive and context-sensitive approaches. Inclusion has to go beyond just providing access to Youth Exchanges, it must be integrated throughout the different phases of the program. Furthermore, there is a need for more flexible budgeting mechanisms and clearer guidance within the Erasmus+ framework to address the diverse needs of youth with fewer opportunities.

Lastly, this study emphasizes that structural inequality, such as lower socio-economic backgrounds, cannot be addressed by only policy intentions. There is a need to close the gap between intentions and implementation through a responsive and flexible initiative and policy changes.



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