



## Key Messages for practitioners and policy makers: A summary

### What is it?

The Innovation Capacity project (iCAP) was funded by the European Union's Erasmus+ programme and has been working in five countries (Greece, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and UK). The project has piloted student-led '*missions*', i.e. projects to bring about positive change within their own communities.

In this way students learn not only to focus on what they like, but on combining what they like with what is useful for the community.

This learner-centred approach to community engagement is characteristic of '*open schooling*'. The capacities that this approach develops in young people has also been termed '*action competence*'.

### Why do this?

Students at this age (14 to 16) are capable of much more than that which is visible in traditional teaching. Unlike strictly timetabled lessons, these innovation missions are long and deep enough to have a lasting impact on students' mental structure, behaviour and self-image. This in turn will play out in a young person's future education and working life, particularly in their role as an active citizen.

The engagement criteria for these projects respond to the familiar student question: "Why should I take an interest in this"?

Open schooling and innovation learning methods are of particular benefit to students who, for whatever reason, do not respond well to school; it is therefore a highly inclusive approach that can contribute to closing the attainment gap.

People and organisations within the community also appreciate and value initiatives taken by young students. This helps to build stronger links between school and community as well as building students' self-esteem.

This project has witnessed the highly motivating nature of such projects, as one student explained:

“If we could only manage these missions ourselves, and the teachers stop controlling them, we would work in the missions for long periods, such as 2 or 3 years, and do it in school after school, in the week-ends and even during our long boring summer holidays.”

### **What barriers need to be overcome?**

The first thing to note is that students do not automatically appreciate innovation missions. They have been formed and disciplined through many years of traditional schooling so effort is required to overcome the reluctance of the students themselves.

Many community players are not prepared for collaborating with young students and need time to discover the benefits for the institution, for the community and for the students.

Schools themselves are driven by tight schedules, packed curricula and examination pressures. Even the minds of keen teachers have been trained in this environment.

### **How do we overcome this?**

Innovation missions need the full support of the school leadership. School management should help negotiate flexible integration of the missions into weekly schedules. In this way schools and teachers should support the creation of a new learning culture.

Teachers need to start slowly and work out for themselves, step by step, how to develop the approach in their context. Realistically, this requires a shift in mentality that should involve a three to four-year perspective.

Normally students start to appreciate the new learning culture after some time, and when they do, most students become very excited.

Teachers should increasingly hand over the management and driving of the missions to the students; teachers are guides and facilitators, not team leads.

Small teams of three or four teachers could join forces across one or more secondary schools to experiment with open schooling and innovation missions, offering each other support and guidance.

### **In future:**

Dedicated students should be co-driving new learning cultures and serve as guides for new students.

An Erasmus+ project should lead to the establishment of a local/virtual ecosystem of innovation capacity-building to make project results sustainable and available for new students to access.

The organisation of the Erasmus+ programme into vertical educational sectors should be accompanied by an equally important horizontally organised Erasmus+ platform for cross-sector and community based projects.

Current levels of funding for student mobility underestimate the support required for genuine student engagement in such projects.

Young students are still used in most European projects as tokens, victims or photo opportunities. One way to overcome this underestimation of young people would be to create new Erasmus+ initiatives from 2020 that are:

- based on students' experience and expectations
- planned and designed by students themselves
- implemented through role-model students as co-drivers of project progression and activities

We feel that such Erasmus+ projects have yet to be created.

For the full paper visit: <http://icap-action.com> and click on the Policy Recommendations tab.



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