

# **Impact of Erasmus+ Partnership Projects in the Fields of School Education, Vocational Education and Training, Higher Education, Youth, and European Solidarity Corps at Systemic Level in Austria**

Policy report on the results of the  
interview study commissioned by the OeAD,  
National Agency for Erasmus+ and  
European Solidarity Corps in Austria

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## 1 Background, questions, and study design

The OeAD, Agency for Education and Internationalisation, Vienna, implements the Erasmus+ (E+) and European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programmes as the National Agency in Austria.

With the support of Erasmus+, over 350,000 people have taken part in the programme since the start of Austria’s participation (1992) by studying, teaching, working, or completing a traineeship abroad or initiating a project. In 2022, 489 projects were funded in Austria through Erasmus+. According to projections, some 331,000 people from Austria will gain experience abroad as part of the six Erasmus+ fields of school education, vocational education and training, higher education, adult education, youth, and sport in the current programme generation from 2021 to 2027. Austria is expected to receive EUR 666 million from the EU’s funding budget. With over EUR 28.4 billion available across Europe from 2021 to 2027, the funding budget is nearly twice as high as in the previous programme period, with 83 per cent earmarked for education, 10.3 per cent for youth, 1.9 per cent for sport, and 4.8 per cent for management and funding.<sup>1</sup>

The partnership projects under Key Action 2, “Cooperation among organisations and institutions”, represent a major component of Erasmus+, also in terms of the funding amounts, with EUR 120,000, 250,000, or 400,000 available for each Cooperation Partnership and EUR 30,000 or 60,000 for each Small-scale Partnership. Within the five E+ fields<sup>2</sup> that were examined, a total of 39 Cooperation Partnerships and 50 Small-scale Partnerships were funded in 2022

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<sup>1</sup> The EU Erasmus programme was established in 1987 as an exchange programme for higher education students. Austria has been a participant since 1992 and funded 893 students at the beginning of the programme. Participation is open to all EU Member States and third countries associated with the programme, so also Iceland, Liechtenstein, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, and Türkiye. However, Erasmus+ also extends beyond Europe’s borders. See also: <https://oead.at/en/the-oead/60-years-oead/meilensteine>

<sup>2</sup> The present study focused on five of the six E+ fields because the OeAD has only been responsible for the coordination of the E+ field of sport in Austria since the beginning of 2023.

(school education: 7/10<sup>3</sup>; vocational education and training: 7/5; higher education<sup>4</sup>: 6; adult education: 7/20; youth: 12/15).

At least three organisations from three EU Member States or associated third countries can form a Cooperation Partnership<sup>5</sup>. Project management, dissemination, and implementation activities can take place under these projects, which each last between 12 and 36 months. Small-scale Partnerships, which have a shorter project duration than Cooperation Partnerships of six to 24 months, a lower financing volume (as described in the second paragraph), and lower administration requirements, are primarily aimed at attracting new organisations that have little experience with E+ as well as small-scale organisations to participate in partnership projects. At least two organisations from two different EU Member States or associated third countries must be involved in a Small-scale Partnership.<sup>6</sup>

One of the overarching goals of Cooperation Partnerships at systemic level is to equip education systems, training systems, and youth policy for the future, including with respect to major sociopolitical developments such as “environmental sustainability, digital transformation, employment, economic stability and growth”<sup>7</sup>. In addition, they are intended to promote “social, civic, and intercultural competences, intercultural dialogue, democratic values and fundamental rights, social inclusion, mental health and well-being, non-discrimination and active citizenship, critical thinking and media literacy”<sup>8</sup>.

The impacts that are targeted for the people involved in the activities at individual level include an increased sense of initiative and entrepreneurship as well as greater understanding and responsiveness to all kinds of diversity.<sup>9</sup> At institutional level, the goal is to achieve the development of innovative approaches for reaching out to the organisation’s target group or “a more modern, dynamic, committed and professional environment inside the organisation”.<sup>10</sup>

These potentially far-reaching impacts, particularly at systemic level, were the focus of the present study commissioned by the OeAD to be conducted by the Department of Education at the University of Innsbruck<sup>11</sup>. The primary questions of the study for each of the examined fields were as follows<sup>12</sup>:

- Are systemic impacts achieved by the Erasmus+ partnership projects that are funded by the OeAD and how do these impacts manifest themselves? Which factors contribute to the achievement of systemic impacts?
- Are impacts at individual and institutional level achieved by Erasmus+ partnership projects and, if so, which impacts?

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<sup>3</sup> 7 Cooperation Partnerships and 10 Small-scale Partnerships

<sup>4</sup> There are no Small-scale Partnerships in the E+ field of higher education

<sup>5</sup> See European Commission (2022a), p. 231

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 240ff; see also <https://erasmusplus.at/de/erwachsenenbildung/kleinere-partnerschaften>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 220

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 220

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 219

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.uibk.ac.at/iez/lehre-und-forschungsbereiche/generationenverhaeltnisse-und-bildungsforschung/forschung.html>

<sup>12</sup> No partnership projects are funded under the ESC. Therefore, the volunteering and solidarity projects central to the ESC were incorporated into the study. “Volunteering projects offer opportunities for young people to take part in solidarity activities contributing to the daily work of participating organisations, to the ultimate benefit of the communities within which the activities are carried out.” European Commission (2022b), p. 23. “A Solidarity Project is a non-profit solidarity activity initiated, developed and implemented by young people themselves for a period from 2 to 12 months.” Ibid., p. 52.

The study was designed as a qualitative interview study. The qualitative design makes it possible to paint a differentiated picture of the broad research field of the impacts of Erasmus+ from the perspective of various participants. However, it does not generate representative, generalisable results. To this end, a quantitative survey that builds on the qualitative study would have to be conducted with a larger, representative sample.

In order to achieve as detailed a picture as possible, participants were interviewed in the qualitative interview study who are involved in partnership projects in different functions and are thus familiar with and view the subject of the investigation from different perspectives. The respondents included project organisers, who offer important experience with the practical implementation of projects, as well as stakeholders, who are distinguished by very solid knowledge of the field and are particularly focused on the systemic level. The sample was rounded out by the heads of the various E+ Education departments and E+ Youth/ESC at OeAD, who have specialist expertise and, in some cases, many years of experience with E+. Two project organisers, one stakeholder, and the relevant department head were interviewed from each of the examined fields. In addition, interviews were conducted with one stakeholder each for volunteering activities and solidarity projects under the ESC. Separate interview guides were developed for these various respondent groups. In total, 37 partnership project organisers, stakeholders, and department heads and employees of the Erasmus+ departments at the OeAD were surveyed in 22 interviews.

Only Cooperation Partnerships were selected for the study because Small-scale Partnerships are not specifically aimed at achieving systemic impact, but instead are intended to facilitate the first step into partnership projects for newcomers. The project organisers were selected in cooperation with the National Agency. Ongoing projects that have a high level of ambition to achieve systemic impact and concluded projects that generated verifiably significant effects at systemic level were examined. In addition, efforts were made in the selection of the projects to ensure a certain amount of diversity with regard to the topics addressed, different structures and sizes of the project organisers, and an even distribution between urban and rural areas of Austria.

The qualitative content analysis method oriented towards Mayring (2022) was selected for the analysis of the interviews. The analysis was initially performed separately for each of the examined fields, and then a domain-general analysis was conducted. The main results of this domain-general analysis are presented below.

## **2 Results**

### **2.1 Impact at systemic level**

According to the respondents from all Erasmus+ education fields and the Erasmus+ youth field, Erasmus+ partnership projects lead to impacts at individual, institutional, and systemic level, largely elicited by the innovation-boosting Europe-wide cooperation. This results in reciprocal effects between the interconnected impact levels. The level at which the impact is strongest in each case depends on factors such as the project topic, the project objectives, the project size, the size and professionalism of the project organiser, the organisation implementing the project, and the project partners. The systemic impact is also influenced by the degree of formalisation of the education fields, whereas impacts at individual and institutional level are less dependent on this and are achieved in all areas.

It is easier to quickly react to social developments in the non-school-based youth sector and in adult education because they are generally not subject to drawn-out decision-making processes. Accordingly, systemic impact is often observed from partnership projects in the youth sector. Indeed, in the absence of other financing options, partnership projects are considered an indispensable instrument for achieving systemic impact in this field. However, high staff turnover and a high percentage of volunteers partially impede the achievement of systemic impact.

In the field of adult education, project organisers see partnership projects as a much stronger tool for influencing the system than in previous programme generations, in part due to the professionalisation of the project organisers, who now think strategically to a higher degree and aim to boost the profile of their organisation, for example when other institutions use the products they develop.

In the field of school education, partnership projects are considered to be very suitable for exerting influence on the development of the school system, even if this takes longer due to a less flexible school administration apparatus in many cases. The teacher shortage affecting many schools also frequently skews the significance of Erasmus+. One area in which a systemic impact caused by partnership projects is evident in the field of school education is the much higher regard for European project work, for example.

According to the study results, all partnership projects in the field of vocational education and training achieve impacts at individual and institutional level, and the overwhelming majority also do so at systemic level. This systemic impact primarily manifests itself – and in some cases to a high degree – in continuing vocational education and training and thus in one of a total of three fields – along with school-based education and apprentice training – that are included under the term vocational education and training but do not constitute a system that can be uniformly controlled. Examples include the integration of women and disadvantaged people into the labour market as well as digitalisation.

According to the respondents, impacts at systemic level are less likely than individual and institutional impacts in the field of higher education, although all three impact levels can be influenced by partnership projects to an equal degree at times. This is due to the fact that the higher education sector does not allow for rapid changes because it is difficult to modify curricula or influence stakeholders and because research is a clear priority over Erasmus+ partnership projects. Systemic impact can be seen, for example, in the introduction of new approaches, individual modules or entire curricula, and their adaptation by other institutions of higher learning.

Systemic impact often starts small, for example through the steady use of innovative products by many other people or by enhancing the visibility of a marginalised group of people. It only rarely manifests in comprehensive changes such as the introduction of a new curriculum. Small changes can lead to the institutionalisation of the change and ultimately to a paradigm shift and to long-term transformation in systems.

The study confirms the function of Small-scale Partnerships described in the programme guide to widen access for newcomers and small-scale organisations to the programme and attract European project partners. Achieving systemic impact is less of a focus for this activity format.

Because systemic impacts are difficult to measure, the interview study can only approximate the effects of partnership projects. Nevertheless, several concrete and highly systemic impacts of partnership projects were revealed in the statements of the respondents, for example with regard to women's advancement in vocational education and training. Compared to Erasmus+ actions that have much higher funding volumes and are aimed at achieving direct systemic impacts, however, the impacts of partnership projects are smaller.

## **2.2 Impact at individual level**

At individual level, a (significant) increase in competence, knowledge, and interest with regard to the project topics is cited as an impact of the partnership projects in all Erasmus+ fields; project management competence is also boosted. Due to the exchange with project partners from other countries, the projects also have a significant impact on the participants in terms of intercultural learning and promoting a sense of European unity. In addition, respondents stated that Cooperation Partnerships have a motivating, inspiring, and “empowering” impact and help to increase self-confidence and build awareness.

## **2.3 Impact at institutional level**

Partnership projects frequently help to advance the further development and boost the profile of the involved institutions through the development and modernisation of methods, educational content, structures, and standards. In turn, institutions that are strengthened in this way can support changes at systemic level. The exchange with European partner institutions is a source of inspiration, a more cosmopolitan outlook, and a bigger focus on international activities for many institutions/organisations, including for regional players. According to the respondents, one decisive factor is that all employees of an institution ensure that what they have learned benefits their colleagues, for example by way of institutionalised exchange sessions or knowledge libraries. In some cases, partnership projects also help to secure and create jobs via their institutional impact.

## **2.4 Conducive factors for achieving systemic impact**

The following factors that facilitate systemic impacts were identified in the study:

The respondents in all of the examined fields believe that **having staying power and plenty of time** are important for achieving systemic impacts because such impacts can only be accomplished over the long term. Preparatory activities such as establishing contact with decision-makers and project partners are also time-intensive. The long duration harbours several risks: Project organisers that work precariously may not be able to finance themselves for as long as it takes for the systemic impacts to take effect. More current topics may supersede existing topics before the systemic impact is achieved. In addition, systemic impacts cannot be communicated in the project report because it has to be submitted 60 days after the conclusion of the project.

The **conscious intention to achieve systemic impacts and the definition of clear, realistic project goals during the project planning** are seen as helpful, ideally with the inclusion of everyone involved in the project. One supportive aid for determining goals, particularly for smaller organisations, is the Impact+ Tool developed by the UK National Agency. Increased guidance for project organisers on the topic of impact from the National Agency (e.g. through the introduction of “impact officers”) could contribute to increasing the systemic impact. Along

with defining the project goal, determining the target group before the start of the project is important.

In addition, respondents from all fields mentioned that in order to achieve systemic impact, it helps to have a project topic that involves a **concrete or even urgent need for action** due to current developments, such as addressing crises or a gap in the curriculum. In the case of projects that involve topics with a significant need for action, care must be taken to prevent overlaps.

If the project organisers have high **subject matter expertise** and a strong reputation in the topic area, this naturally increases the chances that a partnership project will have a systemic impact. A combination of project partners whose areas of subject matter expertise complement one another is considered ideal.

Another component for ensuring projects have systemic impact are innovative, idealistic, **visionary, and dedicated project participants** who pursue and represent their projects with a great deal of passion and motivation; respondents from all fields agree on this point. An excessive spirit of innovation can also impede the implementation of the project results if the developed products deviate too much from known and accepted practices.

According to respondents from all Erasmus+ fields, the **identification and integration into the project of decision-makers** who have influence over changes in the system should take place at an early stage – if not as operational project partners, then at least as associated project partners. Other factors that are conducive to the project impact are attracting major education and training providers and umbrella organisations that exude stability and have direct access to the system as project participants as well as membership in interest groups or national working groups by the project organisers.

The **strategic selection of the European partners** is highly significant for ensuring successful collaboration and increasing the chances for projects to achieve systemic impact according to respondents from all Erasmus+ fields. One should already be familiar with the partners and their perspectives, because experience shows that the development of common concepts, for example, can be an involved process even with familiar partners. Collaborating entirely in online meetings makes the process more difficult, while planning the inclusion of informal settings makes it easier.

Respondents from all fields feel that it is crucial to include **experts for marketing, social entrepreneurship, and project management** in the project partners because marketing the products is also one of the project tasks and requires expert knowledge. For example, it requires intensive marketing even within one's own department for the integration of a new module into an apprenticeship to succeed.

One factor that is no less relevant in terms of systemic impact is the **communication of the project results**, in which the specific EU project terminology has to be translated into language that is understandable for the given target group. Depending on the field and the product developed in the project, various communication ideas conducive to dissemination were mentioned, for example, publishing in English in the field of higher education, as this helps to increase awareness among academics.

Dissemination is increased by the **practicability** of the developed products, and the testing of the products by the target group, for example, contributes to this. In this context, user friendliness and an attractive design are additional aspects that should be kept in mind.

Designing the product in a **flexible format** can help to overcome hurdles in the implementation or prevent long, drawn-out processes. One example here is the development of a university curriculum consisting of modules that can also be implemented individually or in succession.

## 2.5 OeAD measures to support systemic impact

The **OeAD's advisory work on Erasmus+ and partnership projects** is rated as highly positive by respondents from all Erasmus+ fields. The contacts at OeAD are seen as being very competent, helpful, open, active, collaborative, and patient. Not least, they can always be reached and give feedback immediately. Project organisers and stakeholders value the exchange with the advisors, who contribute valuable outside perspectives to the projects, and the final checks before the end of the submission period. They also praise the broad range of online offerings during the coronavirus pandemic and the fact that these offerings have been retained.

The feedback from project organisers and stakeholders on **OeAD events** is also positive: The field of non-school-based youth services benefits from events organised by OeAD particularly at systemic level, but also at institutional and individual level, for example in the course of training activities and collaborative activities<sup>13</sup>. Awareness is also raised significantly for projects, products, and publications in the other Erasmus+ fields via their presentation at conferences and symposiums organised by the OeAD. Study visits, country contact seminars aimed at connecting potential project partners, workshops and forums for providing information about current developments, the yearly Erasmus+ and ESC symposium (formerly the annual conference), and the OeAD higher education conference as a platform for personal exchange and inspiration are highlighted as being very valuable and helpful. OeAD events always bring together important players such as educational institutions and representatives of the business, political, and administrative communities.

## 2.6 Importance of specifications and tools from E+ for systemic impact

The project application and execution processes as well as various EU dissemination platforms were also examined with regard to how they support or possibly limit the systemic impact of partnership projects.

According to respondents from all Erasmus+ fields, **submitting an application for an Erasmus+ project** involves a significant amount of effort and, due to the specific EU terminology, can often only be accomplished with the support of people with experience. A simplification of the language and application structure that has been widely requested for the 2021–2027 programme period has not yet been put into execution by the EU.

When it comes to **project execution**, bureaucracy and the requirement for constant reporting on the project progress reduce the time available to work on the content and impact. Instead of requiring less data to be collected as has widely been called for, more data has to be provided now. In addition, the EU's online tools still do not function flawlessly two years after the start of the new programme period.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://erasmusplus.at/de/wirkung-initiativen/thematische-initiativen/trainings-und-kooperationsaktivitaeten>



With regard to the **financial management of projects**, the introduction of work packages at the start of the 2021–2027 programme period is appreciated because they have simplified the process significantly and offer the necessary flexibility for developments that may arise in the course of the project. The self-financing of the dissemination of the project results/products after the end of the official project duration is often unaffordable for small-scale organisations and contradicts the goal of achieving systemic impact. Experience shows that it takes some time for systemic impacts to become evident. Therefore, respondents suggested, among other things, that a fixed dissemination allowance be introduced for training activities, information events, and exchange meetings in order to support the sustainability of the projects. One positive aspect about the co-financing of partnership projects by the organisers is the associated requirement to think strategically and only submit projects with a concrete benefit.

The Erasmus+ websites of the EU contain all of the necessary information, but it often takes even project organisers with many years of experience with Erasmus+ a long time to find what they are looking for.

Along with the dissemination of project results on the **dissemination platforms** of the EU, Erasmus+ is intensively and successfully communicated via the Erasmus+ social media channels of the OeAD.

According to the respondents, the **Project Results Platform** supports the impact of partnership projects at individual and institutional level; project organisers frequently use it to find information about other projects and to search for partners. However, this platform is of limited benefit with regard to systemic impact. In order to constructively market project results, stakeholders have to be addressed directly and more specific channels are needed.

**eTwinning**, the E+ platform in the (pre-)school sector, was widely used by schools according to the respondents, but was not user-friendly enough for newcomers and thus was not very relevant from a systemic standpoint; it did prove to be very valuable at individual and institutional level, however. Due to the distance learning introduced during the coronavirus pandemic, the platform experienced high demand. After the pandemic and upon the merger with the School Education Gateway<sup>14</sup> in 2022 to form the European School Education Platform, the significance of the platform has temporarily waned, in part because the new version is still prone to errors.

**EPALE**, the information and networking platform in the field of adult education, has a very large network that can be used to reach a vast number of field-specific actors and stakeholders. With blog posts and community stories, the platform offers two easy-to-handle but effective dissemination tools. Overall, the user-friendliness of the platform received mixed reviews.

For clientele that is familiar with Erasmus+, the European **Euroguidance website** is a good source of input for topic identification that is used by numerous vocational education and training institutions. It supports the impact of Erasmus+ at individual and institutional level. The education and career counsellor community in Austria is served with European topics very well by Euroguidance.

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<sup>14</sup> “The School Education Gateway is a hub for resources, current perspectives, and expertise for school and pre-school education. It enables teachers, educators, and education experts to engage in exchange about education policy issues in 23 European languages.” <https://erasmusplus.at/de/schulbildung/school-education-gateway>

### 3 Recommendations

The following recommendations for practical application have been derived from the results. Aspects are also touched on that cannot be changed by the OeAD directly because they are specifications or tools of the Erasmus+ programme.

#### ***Work towards reducing bureaucracy***

A complex application process, specific EU terminology that is only familiar to experienced applicants, and numerous bureaucratic requirements represent barriers in the execution of partnership projects and limit systemic impact.

*Based on this, it is recommended that (continued) efforts be made to convince those responsible for the Erasmus+ programme in Brussels to reduce these barriers. The expansion of supportive measures by the OeAD, such as an augmentation of the very well received advisory and support offerings, would also be a possible approach to enable project implementers to deal more with the content-related work and the achievement of systemic impact.*

#### ***Consciously pursue systemic impact through partnership projects***

Erasmus+ partnership projects can achieve systemic impact, for example the professionalisation of youth workers. This goal is supported when the project implementers have the intention to achieve systemic impact from the very start of the project.

*Based on this, it is recommended that partnership projects be explicitly promoted as an instrument for achieving systemic impact among potential applicants. The achievement of systemic impact would have to be considered from the very beginning and defined in the project application. In this context, the suggestion made in the interviews to introduce “impact officers” is worth considering; they could support project implementers in the achievement of systemic impact.*

#### ***Develop models and strategies for achieving systemic impact***

While partnership projects are regularly able to achieve individual and institutional impact, this is not always the case when it comes to impact at systemic level. In addition, it is apparent that there are different understandings of systemic impact and that it is sometimes difficult for the respondents to assess systemic impact. In the study, it was determined that the various impact levels are interconnected with one another and reciprocal effects occur.

*Based on this, it is recommended that efforts be made to raise the awareness of applicants and project implementers for the various impact levels and that models and guidelines for the achievement of systemic impact through partnership projects be developed. These can be combined with or illustrated by best practice examples. The factors that were identified in the study as being conducive to the achievement of systemic impact, such as having project team members with complementary areas of expertise, should also be highlighted in such models.*

#### ***Make the knowledge of experienced project organisers useable for others***

The interview results show that organisers of partnership projects possess valuable knowledge on how to achieve systemic impact.

*Based on this, it is recommended that an event format be established in which these experienced project organisers share their knowledge with interested people or organisations, possibly also including people implementing Small-scale Partnerships who already have experience in*

partnership projects. It would also be possible to implement this sharing of information as part of a mentor programme.

***Gear partnership projects towards the specific characteristics of the given educational field***

The Erasmus+ programmes pertain to various educational fields, and the different levels of formalisation within these fields influence the achievement of systemic impact.

*Based on this, it is recommended that these specific characteristics of the various fields be analysed in detail and taken into account in the design of partnership projects in order to increase the probability of achieving systemic impact.*

***Communicate and market project results in a professional manner***

The communication and marketing of the project results is a decisive step on the path to systemic impact, but at the same time it poses the challenges for funding recipients that it can only take place after the end of the project duration and must be self-financed. In some cases, there is a lack of awareness among project implementers that specialised support is required for this task.

*Based on this, it is recommended that efforts be made to convince the Erasmus+ programme administrators in Brussels to provide financing for the communication and marketing of project results, possibly in the form of a fixed dissemination allowance that enables project organisers – and particularly smaller organisations – to reach as big an audience as possible and in turn to achieve systemic impact. In addition, it seems important to raise awareness of the fact that specialised support is needed for the professional marketing of the project results, and project organisers could also be supported through appropriate continuing education offers from the OeAD.*

***Disseminate project results in a highly field-specific manner***

With regard to the marketing of the project results mentioned in the previous item, the study results on the European Union's dissemination platforms must also be considered. They have proven to be very valuable for supporting individual and institutional project impact. At the same time, they are seen as offering only limited support in terms of systemic impact and their user-friendliness received mixed reviews.

*Based on this, it is recommended that, in addition to the mandatory platforms, the dissemination of the project results of partnership projects be particularly conducted via channels that can be used to reach the specific stakeholders and decision-makers in the educational fields and the youth field at national, regional, and community level who can actually exert influence on the system. Because respondents mentioned in the study that Erasmus+ is intensively and successfully promoted via the social media channels of the OeAD, this option should also be utilised by project implementers. Furthermore, it is worth considering an intensification of the event formats of the OeAD, which significantly boost the awareness of projects, products, and publications according to the study results and thus potentially increase the systemic impact (training and collaborative activities, conferences, symposiums). Another consideration is the publication of project results in – again – media that are specifically aimed at the youth field and educational fields.*

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