

Second annual report – Network meetings EUROCULTURA – Italy

Reporting period: January 2024 - December 2024

Overview

The second annual report describes the activities undertaken by the regional network in Italy in the period between January and December 2024. In this timeframe, the regional network held meetings in plenary as well as bilateral ones, took part in the final conference event, and, even more importantly, finalised and implemented three Reality Check activities with young people, what we usually refer to as “RealityChecks”.

More in detail and schematically, the network organised its 2024 activities as reported below:

1. January 18th, fourth meeting of the network to recap on RealityChecks responsibilities, set a strategic plan for each subgroup, and draft an idea for the third RealityCheck.
2. Between February and March, we held bilateral meetings with the different subgroups responsible for the implementation of the three RealityChecks.
3. In April and May, the first two RealityChecks are implemented in schools.
4. June 20th, fifth network meeting to collect feedback and impressions on the first two RealityChecks, provide last details on the third one, and discuss further ideas.
5. November 28th, the “Regional Conference Reality Check” was held.

The regional conference or “symposium” represented a conclusive event of the activities of the network in 2024, as well as the occasion to discuss possibilities and ideas on how to continue the work of the network in the future.

At the end of the second year of activity of the network, it is possible to affirm that the year 2024 was considerably positive and successful in terms of cooperation in and realisation of Reality Check initiatives. The network respected timelines and commitments for the implementation of activities and also actively participated in the subsequent feedback and follow-up phases. The RealityChecks realised were highly appreciated by the participants involved.

Fourth network meeting

Date & Time: January 18th 2024 – 14:30-16:30

N. of participants: 12

Description/Minutes

On the 18th of January 2024, the fourth meeting of the Reality Check network in Italy was held. The meeting started with a summary by Eurocultura of the previous steps and decisions taken by the network, to realign all the members after the Christmas period.

After the recap, the partners divided in three subgroups with the task to design a strategic implementation plan for the RealityCheck assigned to them. Two groups were asked to think about steps to take in chronological order, people to contact, possible security and administrative challenges, suitable venue and time, and so on. The third group, in which Eurocultura belonged, had the task to draft an idea for the third RealityCheck to be developed.

To the group work phase followed a short restitution in plenary, simply aimed at highlighting the main results reached by the groups. The groups dealing with the draft of the third RealityCheck presented the results of its work, and the idea was then discussed with the whole network. Through the discussion, the network reached an agreement on a third RealityCheck targeted at young European trainees preparing to face their first work experience abroad, in which Eurocultura was directly and actively involved. The meeting ended with the agreement on the third RealityCheck and on continuing the work of the network in operational subgroups, conducting smaller bilateral meetings just between the partners involved in each RealityCheck. The network finally decided that the next meeting in plenary should be a feedback meeting after the first RealityChecks implementation.

Key decisions & future milestones

- Operational plan for each subgroup is defined
- Timeframe for RealityChecks implementation is set (April-July 2024)
- Definition of third RealityCheck and related tasks.

Fifth network meeting

Date & Time: June 20th 2024 – 14:30-16:30

N. of participants: 10

Description/Minutes

The fifth meeting of the network took place on the 20th of June 2024. The network members reunited in plenary after the first two RealityChecks had been implemented, respectively on the 11th of April and 29th of May.

One representative from each subgroup managing the RealityCheck was invited to speak. The two representatives took turns to present their RealityCheck experience with insight on various aspect related to it. Indeed, they were asked to provide an overview not only on the RealityCheck implementation (organisation, management, challenges, benefits), but also on personal impressions and feelings about it. Then, a part of each presentation was dedicated to the feedback received by the participants.

After the two presentations, the network held a group discussion on the topic of sustainability, analysing the potential of replicability of each initiative over time and in a similar or different context. The confrontation turned out to be very stimulating and various opinions on how to guarantee the sustainability of these kinds of initiatives emerged.

In the last part of the meeting, Eurocultura took the lead and updated the network regarding the implementation of the last RealityCheck, planned in the subsequent weeks (more precisely, on July 8th). In conclusion, the partners were invited to participate in the final conference event scheduled in autumn and agreed to take part.

Key decisions & future milestones

- Date and details of the third RealityCheck are set
- Agreement on participation in final regional conference in autumn.

Regional symposium

Date & Time: November 28th 2024 – 9:30-12:00

N. of participants: 23

Description/Minutes

The Regional Conference of the Italian RealityCheck network represented the conclusive event of the work done by members between 2023 and 2024. The symposium took place on November 28th, in the conference room of a VET school, Istituto A. Scotton, located in the province of Vicenza. The event was managed by Eurocultura, the hosting school, and representatives of the RealityCheck network, and the participants were both members of the network and individuals coming from the school, training, and company contexts.

The conference followed a structured programme, pursuing three principal aims: first, to recall all the work done and results produced throughout the Reality Check project; second, to actively discuss with the audience, collecting their impressions, comments, and suggestions on RealityCheck-related topics; last, to do a joint reflection on the themes of youth engagement and networks' sustainability.

In accordance with the objectives, also the structure of the programme was composed of three main phases: after the initial welcoming and introductory words, the first part of the conference was dedicated to a frontal presentation of Reality Check, the Italian network, and the project outcomes (approx. 45 minutes). Afterwards, a more interactive part of the symposium was held, with both speakers and participants engaging in a group discussion about RealityChecks and difficulties/possibilities of school-work cooperation (approx. 20/25 minutes). Then, after a short break, the participants were divided in four subgroups and asked to reflect upon one of the two topics proposed, namely youth engagement and sustainability of partnerships (approx. 30 minutes). Finally, a moment of restitution in plenary of group reflections took place (approx. 20 minutes) and officially concluded the event.

During the discussion and reflection time, the symposium's participants came up with some enriching feedback and comments for Reality Check. The most significant ones are reported below:

- ✓ RealityChecks were said to be a pivotal first step to prove the effectiveness of practice-oriented activities on young students, in which they become protagonists of the action and learn to approach job tasks or a professional field.
- ✓ It is commonly observed that young people are often not prepared to face their first work experience. They sometimes happen to have no idea what to expect from a workplace, or to have expectations that are very far from reality. Therefore, they can suffer and misbehave during their first experience in a company.

- ✓ Key elements to ensure the sustainability of cooperation networks are: choosing the most appropriate communication tools (quick and accessible to everyone), consistency in updates between members, a clear and recognisable identity of network/initiatives, creating a space dedicated to the collection of inputs and ideas, structure and shared responsibilities, assigning to each member a specific and non-generic role, clear and common objectives, openness to new members.
- ✓ Adopting a non-judgemental approach when working with young people is fundamental to create a sense of trust and an open exchange.
- ✓ Surprising and impressing young people through an activity, in other words making them experience a strong emotion, is crucial to have an impact lasting over time.
- ✓ Lastly, the participants showed interest for Erasmus+ cooperations and European funding opportunities, asking information about how to get involved and to set up a partnership.

Conclusions and recommendations

In a two-year timeframe (2023-2024) after its creation, through meetings and teamwork activities the Reality Check Italian network has been successful in achieving the main short-term objectives that were set. Here below a list of the main outcomes of its work:

- The establishment of the regional network of Reality Check in the first half of 2023.
- The agreement on common rules and scope.
- The design of three RealityChecks, mixing different points of view and competences.
- The piloting of three RealityChecks in schools and organisations involved.
- The organisation of a Regional Symposium involving the network and additional stakeholders.
- The creation of a list of common challenges to be addressed and objectives to be pursued.

As previously mentioned in reporting documents, the network showed a positive atmosphere of cooperation between the members, and active participation in the discussions on how to improve and innovate school-work cooperation. The participation to meetings was quite constant and the members took actively part into activities design and organisation. The moderation did not encounter significant obstacles and the few internal disagreements that were faced did not compromise the overall cooperation and the completion of results.

From the network experience, both positives and challenges can be highlighted. In the first place, the network members and all the people contacted along the two years recognised and agreed on the importance of focusing on how to improve the school-work cooperation. The topic proved to be highly interesting, captivating, and up to date for all different actors.

At the beginning of network discussions, what was said to be missing was an assembly, a point of contact between individuals, schools and companies to discuss their respective views, needs, or ideas on how to improve school-to-work transition. In this regard, the participation into the network was key and responded to an actually existing necessity, and the meeting between the network members would otherwise have been unlikely. Therefore, the actual “networking” between parts was probably the most precious part of the whole regional network experience.

Second, another positive from the Reality Check network experience is the students’ and teachers’ feedback on the activities. Proposals that were different from the usual school activities, being designed through a creative and discursive process, turned out to be captivating and engaging for all stakeholders involved (students, teachers, companies, etc).

One notable aspect, that is also somehow a challenge, that emerged from the network’s discussions was the replicability of proposals. The totality of members agreed on the need for initiatives that are easily replicable also by people who were not involved in their design in the first place. A characteristic that implies that the resources needed to develop them are at disposal of (or easily obtainable by) the actors who should implement these activities. Creating need- and resource-based proposals, at the same time easily replicable, was described as the main strategy to achieve sustainability and actual participation of the targets.

Lastly, in the most recent discussions the challenge concerning how to guarantee the sustainability of a network emerged. As already mentioned in this report, this represents a key issue of any networking initiative, but there are some practical strategies to try to face the challenge. Some examples are choosing immediate and accessible communication tools, to guarantee constant and transparent updating between members; building a clear and recognisable network identity (both visual and of content); creating spaces for the collection of inputs and ideas; being open to the network’s widening; and a clear structure and shared responsibilities between members.

In conclusion, the two-year-experience of the regional network can be described as overall positive and substantial, and at the same time posing relevant and useful questions (and some answers, too) on the challenges for its sustainability and replicability.