

Intellectual Output #7- Enhancing the Employability of Young People in Active Leisure

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	2
Introduction – Active Leisure in 21 st century Europe	3
Defining the Sport and Active Leisure sector	4
Defining Active Leisure	5
General employment policies in the European Union.....	7
Youth employment initiatives in the European Union	9
The Active Leisure employment picture	10
Employment versus Employability	12
Employment	12
Employability	12
The Contribution of Active Leisure to employability	13
Active Leisure education and training to promote employability	13
Participation in Active Leisure to promote Employability	13
Maximising the benefits of Active Leisure participation for young people	14
Recommendations to foster the employability of young people through Active Leisure.....	15
Conclusions.....	16
References.....	18

List of Tables

Table 1 – Definition of the sport sub-sectors.....	4
Table 2 – Denominators of Active Leisure sub-sector.....	5



Introduction – Active Leisure in 21st century Europe

Europe faces one of its most critical periods in recent history. The economic crash of 2008 led to a devastating loss of jobs across all Member States. The impact of this crisis was felt even more amongst young people. In this climate, youth unemployment raised to unprecedented levels peaking at nearly 25% in 2013 across the Union. Despite a significant recovery, youth unemployment is still worryingly high. Framed within broader initiatives such as the Europe2020 Strategy (European Commission, 2010) several initiatives such as the Youth Guarantee (European Commission, 2013b) and Youth Employment Initiative (European Commission, 2013c) have specifically targeted this area and provided a platform for job growth.

<<I cannot and will not accept that Europe is, and remains, the continent of youth unemployment. I cannot, and will not accept that the millennials, Generation Y, might be the first generation in 70 years to be poorer than their parents.>>

*European Commission President
Jean-Claude Juncker (2016)*

One of the most important factors identified as key to economic progress is the development of a highly skilled, flexible, responsive and mobile workforce. However, this has also been signalled as one of the biggest challenges in the EU where a significant shortage and mismatch of skills exists. Recognising this, the European Commission created the New Skills Agenda (European Commission, 2016a) and the European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations classification (EC-ESCO; European Commission, 2018a) to lead the way in the upskilling of the workforce in all member states so all EU citizens “are equipped for good quality jobs and can fulfil their potential” (European Commission, 2016a, p. 2).

Against this background, Active Leisure (AL) has been highlighted as a powerful tool for economic recovery and workforce development (European Commission, 2013a, 2016b). Moreover, Active Leisure has been recognised as having the potential to impact skill development and employment prospects in young people not in employment, education or training – the so called “NEETs”. This catalytic effect has been proposed to act in two ways. On the one hand, young people’s participation in Active Leisure has been proposed to organically lead to the development of workplace skills such as teamwork or responsibility which make young people more employable. On the other, Active Leisure has been heralded as an attractive and realistic opportunity for NEETs to undertake vocational education and training leading to enhanced workplace skills as well as future job offers.

This document therefore explores the possibilities for Active Leisure to directly enhance the employability of young people within the context of existing EU economic and educational development strategies. In doing so, this paper will:

- Define Active Leisure as a sector
- Review significant sectoral policy developments
- Highlight Active Leisure’s employability characteristics, and
- Provide policy and practice recommendations to enhance the skills of young people

Defining the Sport and Active Leisure sector

The Sport and Active Leisure sector has been increasingly recognised as a substantial contributor to the EU’s economy. The latest figures indicate that 2.12% of the Gross Domestic Product (c. €280bn) and 2.72% of EU employment (c. 5.6M people) is related to sport (European Commission, 2018). The sector, as it is conceived today, comprises of well differentiated sub-sectors. These include:

- Sport which includes:
1. Professional Sport
 2. Voluntary Sport
 3. Social Sport

- Active Leisure including:
1. Fitness
 2. Outdoors

Establishing the differences between these sub-sectors is central to recognising the distinct contributions they all make to the economic and social fabric of the EU. It is also important because it provides clear boundaries that increase each sector’s capacity to plan for their future development as well as their accountability to the overall sport, social and economic system.

Table 1 below offers the definition of the five sub-sectors.

Professional sport	Main focus is to create mass national and global spectator events (i.e., professional leagues, Olympic Games, World Championships, etc)
Voluntary sport	Made up of associations, which in turn come together in sports federations, and provide its members with training and competitive sporting activities
Social Sport	Often run by not-for-profit organizations aiming to use sport to create positive outcomes for underserved groups (i.e., people with a disability, minorities, refugees, unemployed, etc).
Active Leisure (Outdoor + Fitness)	A combination of fitness and outdoor-based activities that are generally unstructured and non-competitive. They promote active, healthy lifestyles through activities, events and exercise. They are commonly provided under the direction of qualified animators or instructors so that the activities are tailored to participant needs. It’s organized either or by businesses, often very small businesses (SME’s).

Table 1 – Definition of the sport sub-sectors (Vocasport, 2004 and EC-OE, 2016)

Defining Active Leisure

The Active Leisure sector is further subdivided into Fitness and Outdoor Leisure (as determined through the ESCO¹ referencing of the main sector occupations):

- The Fitness sector uses qualified instructors and trainers to deliver diverse, structured exercise programmes that help people of all ages and abilities to improve their health, muscle and cardiovascular endurance, coordination, balance, agility and flexibility. Fitness programmes also build a feeling of individual wellbeing that establishes and helps to maintain a healthy balance of mind, body and spirit.
- The Outdoor sector uses outdoor related activities (canoe, rafting, horse riding, ... etc.) as the basis of delivery of a recreational or personal development service. Outdoor providers do not generally offer competitions. The outdoor sector uses qualified animators or instructors to deliver these outdoor activities in a context of fun, recreation, tourism, outdoor learning or engagement with the natural environment.

Within this context, some key denominators are used to differentiate Active Leisure from the other sub-sectors. These include a) workers; b) economic sector; c) governance; d) counterparts; e) characteristics; f) job description; g) target group; h) revenue streams; i) fiscal responsibility; j) insurance; k) safety; l) liability; and m) workplace. Table 2 summarises these denominators in the Active Leisure sub-sector.

Workers	c. 800,000
Economic Sector	Fitness 93.1 / Outdoors 93.29
Governance	Ministry of Work/Economy/Tourism
Counterparts	Employees unions
Characteristics	Typically run by micro and SME's and a small number of larger companies; servicing individual's leisure pursuits/fitness goals; paid employees; led by animators/instructors; in the case of the outdoors, may be sold in packages, often of multiple activities; in relation to fitness, typically sold as memberships or personal services
Job Description/Access	Typically accessed via Vocational Education & Training or On-The-Job training.
Target Group	Private clients
Revenue Streams	Service purchase
Fiscal Responsibility	Liable for VAT/Tax
Insurance	Company and personal liability

Safety	Consumer safety
Liability	Civil courts
Workplace	Nature/Urban Outdoors/Gyms

Table 2 – Denominators of Active Leisure sub-sector (adapted from EC-OE, 2016)

It is therefore clear that Active Leisure is a well differentiated and defined sub-sector of the broader Sport and Active Leisure sector that warrants personalised and individualised attention. To this effect, the European Confederation of Outdoor Employers (EC-OE) and EuropeActive (the representative body for the Fitness industry) came together in 2012 to form the Active Leisure Alliance (ALA). The objectives of the ALA are to:

- Declare their respectful entire autonomy of representation as far as social dialogue issues in the Sport and Active Leisure sector are concerned at the European level;
- Recognise each other as particularly significant and largely unchallenged in their respective position as the EU-wide representatives of the Active Leisure Sector;
- Actively cooperate in the representation of the employers of the Active Leisure Sector, particularly for Social Dialogue issues;
- Jointly declare their immediate availability for their participation to the construction of social dialogue within the ‘Sport and Active Leisure’ Social Dialogue Committee;
- Jointly decide to bring the present statement to the sector’s partners’ knowledge and that of the European Commission. (EC-OE 2016, p.19)

In sum, the Active Leisure sub-sector has emerged over the last 20 years as a significant player in the Sport and Active Leisure sector and demonstrated a strong capacity to self-organise and regulate. The current capacity and untapped future potential for Active Leisure to increase its share of employability in the EU and to become a powerful tool for skill development specifically amongst young people will be the focus of the next section.

General employment policies in the European Union

The economic downturn brought about by the crash of 2008 led to a rapid increase in unemployment across Europe which peaked in 2013. A marked recovery trend has, however, been established over the last six years. This upward trajectory has been partially supported by a series of pan-European policies with complementary objectives.

In 2010, the European Commission launched its Europe 2020 Strategy. Conceived as a continental agenda for development *“it emphasises smart, sustainable and inclusive growth as a way to strengthen the EU economy and prepare its structure for the challenges of the next decade. As its main objectives, the strategy strives to deliver high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion in the Member States, while reducing the impact on the natural environment”* (Eurostat, 2018, p. 8). The Europe 2020 Strategy centres around the areas of employment, research and development, climate change and energy, education and poverty reduction.

The 2020 strategy has made significant progress in the areas of energy and climate change and education. Data in relation to research and development and poverty alleviation is less promising. Importantly for this report, the observed trend in the area of employment is positive. The strategy set up a target of 75% of the EU population between 20 and 64 to be employed by 2020. In 2017, the share was 72.2%, 1.1% higher than in the year prior and 2.8% off the original target with two years to go. This figure places the EU as one of the highest employment rates in the world only behind Japan and Australia (Eurostat, 2018).

In addition to the Europe 2020 strategy, the European Commission realised that one of the biggest challenges for 21st century economies is the development of a suitably skilled workforce capable of servicing the ever-changing needs of the labour market in this rapid era of technological development. To this effect, the New Skills Agenda for Europe initiative (NSAE) was launched in 2016 to *“strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness”* (European Commission, 2016a, p. 2).

The NSAE highlights the current gaps and mismatches in the EU’s workforce. On the one hand, many people work in jobs that do not match nor maximise their talents. On the other, it estimates that 40% of European employers find it difficult to access people with the required skills to allow their businesses and companies to innovate and grow. For these reasons, the NSAE sees skills as:

“a pathway to employability and prosperity. With the right skills, people are equipped for good-quality jobs and can fulfil their potential as confident, active citizens. In a fast-changing global economy, skills will to a great extent determine competitiveness and the capacity to drive innovation. They are a pull factor for investment and a catalyst in the virtuous circle of job creation and growth. They are key to social cohesion” (European Commission, 2016a, p2).

The NSAE proposes three work strands to close the skills shortage:

- Improving the quality and relevance of skills formation
- Making skills and qualifications more visible and comparable
- Improving skills intelligence and information for better career choices



Notwithstanding these policies and the general trend of employment growth, youth unemployment was hit particularly hard in the years following the 2008 crisis. The youth unemployment rate rose to 24% in 2013 and the rate of young people not in employment, education or training reached 13.2% in 2012. This led to a progressive shrinking and aging of EU workforce. As a result of these alarming figures, the European Commission put in place additional policies and measures to tackle this important issue.

Youth employment initiatives in the European Union

In 2013, all Member States made a political commitment “to give every young person a good-quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education” (European Commission, 2016a, p2). This commitment is known as the Youth Guarantee (YG). Since the advent of the YG significant progress has been made:

- 2.3M less young people are unemployed in the EU
- 1.4M less young people are not in employment, education or training
- More than 5M young people have registered each year since 2014 and more than 3.5M took up an offer of employment, education, traineeship or apprenticeship every year.

To facilitate the roll-out of the YG, the European Commission launched the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) in 2013. The YEI targets specifically regions where youth unemployment is higher than 25% and focuses on young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs). In total, Member States have committed nearly €9bn to the YEI until 2020 and over 1.7M young people have already benefited from the initiative. Five years on from the YG and YEI, youth unemployment has outperformed the general job creation trend dropping to 15.1% and the share of 15-24 year olds NEETs has fallen to 10.9% (European Commission, 2018c).

The Active Leisure employment picture

The Sport and Active Leisure sector in general, and the Active Leisure sub-sector in particular, have shown a high degree of resilience to the slowdown in the economic cycle (European Commission, 2018c). The Workplan for Sport 2017-2020 (European Commission, 2016b) has again recognised the power of sport as driver of economic growth and skills development. Circa 800,000 people are employed in the Active Leisure sector and it accounts for 0.33% of Europe's GDP.

Notwithstanding this promising picture, there still exist barriers to employment in the Active Leisure sub-sector (EASE & UniEuropa, 2016; EuropeActive, 2018):

- A complex arrangement of full-time, part-time, seasonal/casual and second jobbers and significant numbers of self-employed workers
- Skills shortages and mismatches, particularly around the adoption and maximisation of digital technologies and the promotion of health enhancing physical activity.
- Lack of attractiveness of VET qualifications.
- Lack of labour market integration and thus limited transnational mobility of workers due to the uneven recognition of skills and qualifications across Member States.

Apart from highlighting some existing barriers to employment the above EASE & UniEurope document unintentionally also adds some confusion. Whereas the first bullet point relates to 'employment', the remaining bullet points in fact refer to 'employability'.

In order to tackle some off these issues, the Active Leisure Alliance developed a project called [SIQAF](#) (The Relevance of the Active Leisure Sector & International Qualification Framework to the EQF, 2016-2018). The main focus of SIQAF was to explore and share the experience of the Active Leisure sector in "*referencing sectoral and international qualifications to National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)*" (EuropeActive, 2018, p.6). The principal outcome of SIQAF was the development of a '[pathway](#)'² for the referencing of international and sector qualifications with national and European frameworks.

The Active Leisure Alliance has long recognised that skills are central to employability and prosperity. As described in the NSAE:

"With the right skills, people are equipped for good-quality jobs and can fulfil their potential as confident, active citizens. In a fast-changing global economy, skills will to a great extent determine competitiveness and the capacity to drive innovation. They are a pull factor for investment and a catalyst in the virtuous circle of job creation and growth" (p. 3).

For this reason, one of the fundamental conclusions of SIQAF was the need for each sector to develop a Sector Skills Alliance (SSA). An SSA addresses the skills agenda by aligning VET systems with labour market needs. A pre-condition for this, however, is to appropriately define the sector, including:

² https://www.ehfa-membership.com/sites/europeactive-euaffairs.eu/files/projects/SIQAF/SIQAF_Flyer_EN.pdf



- Sector indicators;
- Functional map;
- Occupational map;
- Occupational descriptors; and
- Occupational standards and competencies.

As a result of this process, a Sector Skills Alliance may be able to tackle some of the biggest challenges to employability in the sector like:

- Modernising VET by adapting skills needs and integrating work-based learning
- Strengthening the exchange of knowledge and best practices
- Improving labour market mobility
- Increasing the recognition of qualifications

Given the above landscape, it is important to provide a basic account of the difference between employment and employability.

Employment versus Employability

Employment

Active Leisure is first and foremost an economic sector. Active Leisure companies and professionals, in the main, provide a service for a set remuneration and are regulated by employment and civil laws. Those working in Active Leisure are thus employed, remunerated and regulated. Employment is therefore inextricably linked to remuneration and regulation. Regulation is concerned mainly with two areas: a) access to the profession and b) service quality assurance. This emphasis on remuneration and regulation is perhaps the major difference between Active Leisure and other areas of the Sport and Active Leisure sector such as sport and community clubs or The Scouts.

Employability

As described in the various EU youth initiatives presented in this paper, employability is concerned with the skills, competences and attitudes that render young people more employable and thus may lead to gaining employment. Employability is all about providing the right skills to the right person at the right time for the right job. The Active Leisure sector has worked tirelessly over the last decade to ensure that the sub-sector's workforce is adequately trained and fit for purpose. Project like SIQAF (2016-2018) and the current Blueprint (2018-2020) have produced significant resources and application tools in this regard.

In the context of youth employment, employability, understood as the gaining of relevant skills, competences and attitudes, is therefore seen as the pathway to employment and prosperity. However, that is not all. Participation and/or employment in Active Leisure activities have also been proposed as a tool to develop 'transferable employability' across sectors. In other words, the skills, competences and attitudes developed through involvement in the Active Leisure sector at various levels may lead to enhanced employability in other sectors.

The remaining sections of this document reflect on how the Active Leisure sector may contribute to both the employability of young people within and beyond the sector.

The Contribution of Active Leisure to employability

Active Leisure education and training to promote employability

The Active Leisure sector has made considerable progress in the last decade to ensure that all those working in the industry can gain the relevant skills and competences required to fulfil the needs of the job (EC-OE, 2015, EuropeActive programmes of EREPS and accreditation of VET providers). In this respect, the contribution of Active Leisure to the employability of young people is straight forward. Young people may enrol in Active Leisure qualifications and apprenticeship schemes wherein they will develop the relevant skills to render themselves employable in the sector and obtain the relevant qualifications required to work in the industry under current regulations.

However, beyond engaging in formal vocational education and training, participation in Active Leisure activities has also been posited as making a contribution to employability in indirect ways. The section below explores this notion.

Participation in Active Leisure to promote Employability

Research shows that participation in active leisure, sport and/or physical activity during adolescence leads to, not only physical and mental health and wellbeing, but to a higher likelihood of progressing on to further education, stronger employability and increased earning capacity (Kosteas, 2012; Lechner, 2009). Some of the causes for this impact proposed by the literature include:

- Increased life-chances and opportunities via enhanced social capital, especially for “at risk” youth (O’Brien-Olinger & Bamber, 2013)
- Employer desirability for active employees (Rooth, 2010)
- Interview skills (DofE, 2009)
- Employer perceived responsibility (WOMS, 2019)
- Enhanced cultural sensitivity (WOMS, 2019)
- Development of general transferable skills (DofE, 2009)

Moreover, research shows that youth involved in active leisure activities not only lead healthier lifestyles than their non-participating peers but score significantly higher in other important measures of personal and social development such as self-esteem, hope, resistance and resilience. In addition, youth engaged in active leisure gain important so-called ‘soft-skills’ such as teamwork, responsibility and forward planning which, as stated above, are highly valued by employers (Hunter Holland et al., 2018; Starbuck & Bell, 2017).

Similar developmental outcomes have been found in studies of outdoor-based leadership awards and activities such as the Scouts (WOSM, 2019), the Duke of Edinburgh Award in the UK (2009) and the President’s Award in Ireland (2018). Interestingly, what this type of activities seems to have brought to the fore is the potential for Active Leisure pursuits to support the development of leadership skills in young people. Their recent research confirms that adolescents participating in outdoor-based leadership programmes become more autonomous, supportive, responsible, committed and community oriented than their non-participating counterparts (WOMS, 2019). Notwithstanding the

above, more research is needed to pinpoint more causal and clearer links between adolescent participation in Active Leisure and enhanced employment.

Maximising the benefits of Active Leisure participation for young people

Notwithstanding the value of Active Leisure participation for personal development and subsequently employability, recent research in the field of sport (Theeboom et al., 2017) shows that these positive effects do not happen by chance and that providers need to ensure that certain elements are present in the delivery of programmes to maximise success:

1. The use of activities as a means to attract targeted participants and establish meaningful relationships between providers and participants
2. Social Climate: a safe and secure environment for development
3. Individual needs assessment
4. Individual learning plans
5. Developmental workshops
6. Access to validated qualifications
7. Systematic and explicit reinforcement of desired skills, behaviours and attitudes through sport practice
8. Access to relevant work experience
9. Inclusion of explicit outcomes which strengthen employability skills
10. Explicit preparation for employment
11. Provision of ongoing support (in employment or education)

The study conducted by Theeboom (et al) may be suitable for some sectors of sport provision (i.e., sport for development funded programmes), but at the same time it highlights a significant difference between this area and most Active Leisure provision. (Smulders, 2016). Specifically, in its current guise and under the current constraints, Active Leisure providers (i.e., Fitness & Outdoors) simply do not have the time nor the financial capacity in most cases to support all the 'elements' listed by Theeboom, for example: Developing and organising 'individual needs assessment' (3), 'individual learning plans' (4), 'developmental workshops' (5). These are expensive endeavours that can only be delivered when appropriate funding is in place from the relevant agencies, as the cost of doing all of this cannot be passed on to the developing youngsters and their families.

Additionally, it must also be highlighted that in a commercial setting such as in the Active Leisure sector, it is even unlawful and consequently forbidden to 'employ' youngsters under the age of 16 / 18 years (according to the social legislation in the given EU Member States).

Based on scattered field observations and the limited literature available on employability in Active Leisure, the following section outlines a series of recommendations to this effect. But, precisely because of this lack of appropriate data, in order to formulate recommendations to 'maximise the benefits of Active Leisure participation for young people', there is no other choice than to rely on an empirical and holistic approach which offers an overarching view of the problem.

Recommendations to foster the employability of young people through Active Leisure

As pointed out in the above presented analysis, it can be said that the contribution of Active Leisure to the employability (of young people) is not easy to capture and further studies should be considered in this area. However, the findings of this report suggest that, in order to contribute to the employability of young people, the Active Leisure sector may wish to consider the following areas:

1. Recruitment

- a. Clear promotion of the benefits of outdoor and fitness participation and education amongst young people, their parents and carers. *
- b. Developing attractive campaigns aimed specifically at young people and using youth-specific media outlets (i.e., Instagram, Snap-chat, etc). *
- c. Creating a sense of belonging and being welcome to the wider Active Leisure community for young people.

2. Development

- a. Emphasise the development of leadership skills
- b. Develop VET learning programmes to fit the needs of the sector *
- c. Provide explicit, current and relevant learning opportunities (i.e., work placements or apprenticeships) related specifically to certain employment prospects and linked to validated qualifications.
- d. Recognise prior learning experiences

3. Employability

- a. Assist when possible in developing participants' CV writing and interviewing skills
- b. Provide internships and apprenticeships to facilitate the transition from training to the workplace
- c. Establish a system of ongoing support and a supply of continuous professional development opportunities
- d. Guarantee mobility between providers and amongst countries *
- e. Develop professional registers (i.e., such as EREPS) *

4. Appropriate Delivery

- a. Act as a devoted 'sub-contractor' when collaborating with actors in the field of education (experiential learning, outdoor learning, VET providers, etc. ...)
- b. Provide for safe and well organised services

*Primarily a responsibility for the governing bodies (i.e., EuropeActive and EC-OE)

Table 3 – Recommendations to foster the employability of young people through Active Leisure

Taking a closer look at *Table 3* it becomes clear that the listed recommendations are not achievable by any single provider or awarding body. Fostering employability in the Active Leisure sector therefore must be a joint endeavour of activity providers alongside their national and/or European governing bodies EuropeActive and EC-OE.

Conclusions

Active Leisure has been highlighted as a powerful tool for economic recovery and workforce development. Specifically, within the context of the Youth Guarantee and the Youth Employment Initiative, Active Leisure has been recognised as having significant potential to impact skill development and employment prospects in NEETs, especially those from disadvantaged groups. Therefore, Active Leisure appears to hold substantial promise to drive economic growth and development amongst European youths. However, this will not happen by chance. This paper outlines the potential developmental outcomes of participation in Active Leisure for young people and the conditions that lead to their development as well as their transfer to other environments, notably the workplace. Moreover, it provides recommendations to maximise the recruitment, development and employability potential of young people through their participation in Active Leisure.

In 2018 the High Level Group on Grassroots Sport (HLG) underlined that sport clubs, associations and fitness facilities used as educational settings, as well as participation in grassroots sports, can make a strong contribution to informal learning and development of transversal skills, such as discipline, teamwork, leadership, problem solving, etc. As such, therefore, the Active Leisure sector could have a positive impact on helping NEETs to develop skills, overcome skills gaps and to give them some “life or transversal skills”. However, there are very few examples of how this has been put into practice. There are also policies (as outlined in this paper), that describe and promote the educational and societal potential of the Active Leisure sector. The question therefore is: Why is there such a lack of direct intervention?

The most likely reason is simply because the problem of providing opportunities to NEETs requires cooperation and some strong partners who are properly resourced in this area of expertise. At present the landscape across Europe is so varied and the responsibilities of agencies so diverse that it is difficult to really define and organise what could be considered as the crucial partners which need to be included to adequately deal with such a complex area. There is no space for well-intentioned amateurs to venture into this area which requires systematic planning, resourcing, delivery and evaluation to ensure its sustainability.

We need to be clear on what we are trying to achieve. Perhaps we need to step back and have a bit of a reality check on what we expect the sector to be able to deliver?

Three main conclusions can be drawn from this research:

1. It is essential to clearly distinguish between employment and employability. The Active Leisure sector can certainly contribute to help improve employability (of young people) but the individual activity providers simply do not have the necessary time nor the financial capacity to develop employability enhancing programs.
2. Within the context of (youth) educational development schemes, activity providers can be involved as sub-contractors in providing for safe and well organised activities.
3. Any program to foster employability (of young people) inevitably must be jointly taken care off by the activity providers and their respective employer organisations.

Finally, the Active Leisure sector needs to build structural links with the employment sector, and to be convinced that this type of programme of cooperation will be beneficial to them as well as to the



participants themselves. For instance, promoting dual learning and the development of transversal skills could be an incentive for both the Active Leisure sector and the employment sector to join forces.

To make this happen, an important condition would be the creation of a joint forum to stimulate this collaborative work and to ensure a programme can be properly resourced. The evidence points at this mechanism requiring a centralised and EU-led approach to galvanise the rest of the stakeholders.

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