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# Problem Statement Report UCLL

## EducAction - WP1

### Executive summary

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In September we started working at Het Atheneum Hasselt with a motivated class of 20 students. The active school lab sessions were developed and implemented by UCLL researchers Nele Kelchtermans and Chloe Mentens. The content was closely monitored by Ine Kemerlinckx, teacher of the class group. In the active school lab sessions we started by introducing concepts such as participation, children's rights, the levels in participation, the decision making bodies and their authority and so on. After this, the students themselves went to work in smaller groups to carry out a research at their own school to see what could be improved and if they have a say in it. After a brainstorm, the students in their groups went into action and applied different research methods to find out what could be improved at school. For each group they focused on a particular theme. First, they conducted a literature review around this theme to gather background information, and to inform and inspire themselves. Then they conducted a large-scale survey to get the opinion of their peers at school and finally they organized several in-depth interviews with relevant stakeholders to assess the current situation and to propose their potential solutions in terms of feasibility.

### 1. Introduction

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For the school labs, we are working together with 'Het Atheneum' in Hasselt. In consultation with the principal, we have been assigned a class that will work on both the school and the community labs during this project. The classgroup is in their second last year of secondary school and their main subject is human sciences. This is a theoretical orientation with a curriculum that focuses on subjects such as psychology, behavioral sciences, cultural sciences and so on. The class group is a close-knit group who are generally very motivated in school. The sessions take place during behavioral science classes.

#### 1.1 The structure of the sessions

The structure of the sessions was formatted as follows; As the first activity, we engaged the class group by immediately introducing the concept of participation. The pupils used an app to vote to decide in which way they could introduce themselves to us. This immediately ensured active participation in the sessions.



Afterwards we proceeded to a general introduction about the rights of the child. Which rights exist, which ones did they already know and which ones didn't they know yet? It is important that young people realize that they not only have duties but also rights. The most important concept is that you always have a say in a situation in which you are involved.

Through exercises and games it became clear that they, as youngsters and as pupils, always have the right to have an opinion and that you can share this opinion with others.

On the other hand, you can only form an opinion if you are sufficiently informed about the subject. Informing is also the first step of this research project.

With the help of the participation ladder, we discovered the different levels of participation.

At school level, we also examined which decisions were taken at which level.

This way it became clear to them at which level they could effectively participate in the decision-making process. This included all the decision-making bodies and their authority such as the student parliament, the school council, the school board, the government and so on.

After these rather theoretical sessions, they were actively put to work.

Everyone was allowed to brainstorm individually. What would they change if they had a say in the school. What would they keep, what would they improve and what would they change immediately.

The class group was divided into smaller groups of 3 to 4 people. For each group they could compare whether they had the same vision referring to their brainstorm outcomes. Based on overlap, they chose their theme around which they would base their research. In these groups they were further guided in their research where they worked independently. Step-by-step support and feedback were provided during the sessions.

## 1.2 Methodology

- The research began by outlining the general structure and objectives of the project. terms were clarified such as public participation, decision-making bodies at school, children's rights,...
- The pupils themselves chose their theme with the help of a brainstorm activity. In groups of 3 to 4 students they proceeded with their theme. The themes they chose were named in a hashtag. These hashtags are the following: #motivation, #stressatschool, #motivationatschool, #psychological well-being, #makeschoolfunagain, #togetherwecanbeatstress, #everyoneIsUnique.
- As a first assignment, they were guided to do a literature research around their research topic. they searched for background information, existing initiatives, inspiration,....
  - o They were guided in setting up a scientific study using a tips and tricks booklet that was prepared by UCLL. In this booklet, they found tips on how to search for scientific sources online and how to analyze them.



- Per group they determined a main research question and 3 subquestions. At the end of this research, they should obtain an answer to their main research question
- For each sub-question, we drew up a research method they could use for this purpose. The following methods were recommended: an interview with relevant stakeholders, a large-scale survey, a literature review. Each group planned each recommended method to obtain an answer to their sub-question.
- They received the necessary support and feedback each time during the sessions. Time is also provided here to reflect, discuss obstacles and so on.
- The input gathered from the surveys, interviews, and literature review is be mapped by group and presented as a research paper. The literature review is mainly for information and inspiration, the interview and survey are mainly to check their ideas about actions with other actors in the school.
- To obtain a relevant data analysis, the students received a guest lesson from an expert data processing.
- The research ends with a concrete proposal where they can substantiate the relevance based on their research.
- They keep their school and stakeholders informed by taking over the EducAction\_hasselt instagram account.

## 2. Problems

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Using brainstorming activities, students listed what they thought could be improved at school or what they would like to get involved in. Themes that are picked here are mainly based on the wellbeing of their fellow students. This content also leans most closely to their own expertise and interests and is in line with their field of study. Each group focused on an own chosen specific theme which they converted into a hashtag: #motivation, #stressatschool, #motivationatschool, #psychological well-being, #makeschoolfunagain, #togetherwecanbeatstress, #everyoneIsUnique.

Research questions or problems that students are working on, seperated per group:

- 'Explore how to strengthen students' motivation to come to school.'
  - o At this school, students are given the several hours per week of free space. These hours are filled in according to the student's own interest such as: art subjects, drama, sign language and so on. However, according to the pupils, the choice is limited. They have done research on intrinsic motivation and are convinced that students will be more motivated to come to school if there is more attention for their own interests and talents.
- 'We want to help or make sure that all students enjoy going to school.'



- Based on their literature review, the students state that, as time goes on, school becomes less and less loved. They would like to know why and what the opinion of their fellow students is about that.
- 'We want to prevent or reduce stress at school.'
  - The students of this group have the impression that many students experience stress at school. They want to find out what this stress is based on and in time prevent or reduce this stress at school.'
- 'Not all students are motivated. We want to know why and how we can change this by taking a critical look at the current system..'
  - The students state, based on their literature review, that not everyone is motivated in school. They want to find out if this motivation can be improved by making small or large changes in the education system. Such as certain content adjustments in different lessons so that they are more attuned to the lifestyles of the students or major adjustments such as a complete educational reform.
- 'We want to improve the psychological well-being of our fellow students.'
  - Partly because of corona, these students are concerned about the psychological and mental well-being of their fellow students. They want to investigate where students can go to with their problems and whether this is sufficient.
- 'We believe it is important for each student to have a positive self-image.'
  - Students want to gain a view of the factors that currently influence their fellow students' self-esteem. Based on this, they want to initiate initiatives to improve the self-esteem of their peers.

### 3. Actors involved

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#### Students

The school sessions take place in real life each time with a group of **20 students. They are very actively involved.** In consultation with the principal, we have been assigned this class that will work on both the school and the community labs during this project. The classgroup is in their second last year of secondary school and their main subject is human sciences. This is a theoretical orientation with a curriculum that focuses on subjects such as psychology, behavioral sciences, cultural sciences and so on. The class group is a close-knit group who are generally very motivated in school. The sessions take place during behavioral science classes.

They form smaller groups of 3 to 4 students in which they initiate their own research. In this research, they will look for, among other things, the current situation of their school. In most groups a **large scale survey** was done to find out the opinion of their fellow students. Each group chose its own relevant target group for the survey. This could be specifically one grade but it could



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also relate to all students in the school. **The surveys were successful and involved more than 300 students in total.**

Some research groups also chose to include the opinions of students from other schools in order to make a comparison. This makes that **dozens of students from other schools were also involved** in this study.

## Teachers and school manager

UCLL set the foundation for a cooperation with the Atheneum Hasselt and took the initiative for a possible collaboration. The principal of this school, Vanessa Oeyen, was very receptive and promoted the project within the school. She is also kept informed about the content of the project.

The sessions take place during behavioral science classes. Therefore, the content of the sessions was discussed in detail with Ine Kemerlinckx, the teacher responsible for this subject. The lessons themselves were largely taught by Nele Kelchtermans and Chloe Mentens, both researchers at UCLL but Ine Kemerlinckx provided feedback for the content of the lessons. She also monitored the quality and that the content was in line with the learning objectives.

Ine is present each time during the sessions. Between sessions, she also ensures that she can support the students in the research as needed.

To ensure the research has the intended quality, this research project is also discussed during other classes. For example, for the subject Dutch they learned how to make a comprehensive summary and in the subject mathematics, insights were given to deal with data processing. So these subject teachers were also involved.

In the research project, each group also applied the method of conducting an in-depth interview with relevant stakeholders. These stakeholders varied by group according to the purpose of the interview and the research topic. Relevant actors who were involved are; teachers, student supervisors, the school management, coordinators and parents. In the interviews, they want to look at the current state of affairs based mainly on these actors, what the existing initiatives are and how they can improve them. The students also already propose some solutions to map out their opinions.

## Other experts

In the data analysis phase, we also engaged an internal expert from UCLL, Sebastiaan Jans, who is experienced in visualizing research results. In an active workshop, the students worked together with Sebastiaan to analyze and visualize their results from their surveys.



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## 4. Conclusion

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It was mainly important to give the students insight into the current structure of the school and to show that they themselves can play an active role in their own school. Because the students have worked with themes from their own field of interest, they are very motivated to bring the research to a successful conclusion. Because of the covid19 crisis it is somewhat less obvious to involve more stakeholders but the students manage quite well to form a nuanced picture about their themes. For example, during the large-scale survey, they noticed that the results were not always in line with their expectations; this indicates the importance of student representation. In addition, they also get to know their school better through the interviews with different actors within their school. This makes them more involved and gives them a better sense of responsibility.