

EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS

AN
EVALUATION OF EPHA'S
EXPERIENCE SO FAR

DECEMBER 2019

About EPHA

EPHA is a change agent – Europe’s leading NGO alliance advocating for better health. We are a dynamic member-led organisation, made up of public health civil society, patient groups, health professionals, and disease groups working together to improve health and strengthen the voice of public health in Europe.



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Introduction

In 2018, EPHA formally agreed to take part in the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programme by hosting qualified registered applicants under the programme as paid trainees.

In order to raise awareness of the ESC programme and disseminate some of the results we have recorded so far, this report provides an overview of EPHA's experience with the ESC programme, which has been very positive despite some minor issues difficult to foresee when it comes to recruitment processes, such as finding the right candidate for the right activity at the right time.

Moreover, given that a number of EPHA member and partner organisations have asked us for advice on how to become part of the ESC and kickstart the process, the present paper clarifies how EPHA has approached the programme, in what way the ESC trainees were deployed, and it also identifies some issues that could potentially be improved or communicated more clearly by the European Commission, e.g. having more detailed information available about the candidates and the different steps involved in the selection and recruitment process.

What is the European Solidarity Corps?

Launched in December 2016, the ESC aims to promote solidarity as a value, inter alia by enabling individuals and organisations to engage in suitable work and volunteering activities "(...) as a means to contribute to strengthening cohesion, solidarity democracy and citizenship in Europe, while also responding to societal challenges and strengthening communities, with particular effort to promote social inclusion. It shall also contribute to European cooperation that is relevant to young people".¹

Eligible ESC participants need to be over 18 and under 30 years of age and relevant projects – most of which involve volunteer rather than paid work - may last from two to twelve months, undertaken either in another Member State or in the country of origin / residence of the registered candidate.

All participating organisations and individuals should register on the ESC website² and accept the initiative's Mission Statement and Objectives and Charter.

At its inception, eight different EU funding programmes were mobilised to offer volunteering, traineeship or job opportunities. In 2017, the European Commission put forward a proposal for a special ESC Regulation and funding, as well as a broader set of solidarity activities. The new Regulation came into force on 5 October 2018³ and the Corps has its own budget of €375.6 million until 2020.

Why did EPHA get involved?

As a beneficiary of an Operating Grant under the 3rd Health Programme 2014-2020 managed by the Consumers, Health, Agriculture and Food Executive Agency (CHAFEA), hosting registered ESC volunteers is among expected activities under the 2018-2021 Framework Partnership Agreement. The idea is to play an active role in demonstrating European added value and solidarity by providing young people with an opportunity to develop their professional skills, particularly in the context of persistently high youth unemployment rates across the EU, including for recent university graduates.

¹ EC (2018), European Solidarity Corps Guide 2018, p.6,
<https://ec.europa.eu/youth/sites/youth/files/library/documents/2018-european-solidarity-corps-guide.pdf>

² https://europa.eu/youth/solidarity_en

³ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018R1475&from=EN>

Given EPHA's long-time experience of hosting qualified young people as student interns, public health registrars or as part of other arrangements (e.g., a programme that provides entry level Belgian work experience to recognised asylum seekers), EPHA was more than happy to oblige and take part in the ESC programme.

However, as an *association internationale sans but lucratif* registered in Belgium, with a small office and limited financial resources, EPHA does not meet all of the formal requirements outlined in the dedicated ESC Guide that apply to organisations that do not participate in any EU-funded programmes. For example, as Europe's leading public health advocacy NGO EPHA's work targets primarily EU policymakers (but also national and regional stakeholders) and hence the general ESC objectives – including community strengthening, tackling societal challenges, social inclusion – are achieved indirectly rather than through “hands-on” fieldwork that other, more local NGOs or service providers carry out. Nonetheless, EPHA's broader policy and advocacy work (grouped into different thematic priorities ranging from NCD prevention, access to medicines, tackling antimicrobial resistance to trade and digitalisation) clearly contributes to the specific objectives of the ESC programme by providing distinct opportunities, via the implementation of EPHA's annual Work Programme and related projects, to engage in a variety of solidarity activities with the aim of fostering better health for all, tackling health inequalities and improving social inclusion.

Moreover, Belgian government rules on employing volunteers make it legally impossible to recruit any volunteers without providing them with a minimum wage salary. Thus, the only way for EPHA to participate in the ESC programme was by offering the applicants paid traineeships. The latter needs to be formally approved by the Brussels employment agency, *Bruxelles Formation* (see below).

It goes without saying that EPHA respects the principles of equal treatment, equal opportunity and non-discrimination that are stressed in the ESC Guide, and that EPHA also adheres to the other applicable principles (e.g., avoidance of job substitution, safe and decent environment and conditions) in order to offer a rewarding learning and professional development opportunity for its ESC trainees. Clearly, this also includes providing ESC trainees with a safe, healthy and agreeable work environment.

How does the selection and recruitment process work?

As Operating Grant recipients, the process was easier for EPHA than it would be for local organisations not involved in any European programmes which we understand have experienced great difficulties in meeting all the accreditation requirements listed in the ESC Guide, such as acquiring a quality label for certain types of volunteering placements, etc. Given EPHA's special status under the Framework Partnership Agreement, EPHA does not need to apply for additional project funding but reserves a part of its annual Specific Grant Agreement (SGA) budget to hosting ESC candidates.

In EPHA's case, following formal acceptance into the pool of hosting organisations by the CHAFEA agency / European Commission, an administrator log-in and password to access the PASS system was obtained, which is the central repository for ESC applicants and their potential employers. It is through PASS that hosting organisations can view and also directly contact the applicants.

Once selected and chosen, paid ESC trainees are registered with and processed via *Bruxelles Formation* as they will receive a CIP contract under Belgian law. The national requirements differ from country to country but in Belgium this involves filling in several documents, including a traineeship plan that outlines specific pedagogical learning outcomes, information about the hosting organisation, and copies of the trainee's CV, national ID card or passport. The approval process takes up to 10 days, with no guarantee as to whether the proposed plan will be accepted by Bruxelles Formation.

EPHA has not experienced any problems in this regard to date, but given the very high youth unemployment rate in the “Capital of Europe”, it could become a problem should the Brussels employment agency decide that local candidates have to be prioritised over trainees based in another EU Member State at time of application.

In addition, the knowledge of the ESC among staff of the Brussels employment agency appears to be low, which means they required some explanation of the purpose of the traineeships prior to processing the required paperwork in French or Dutch language. As the ESC is linked to the Belgian social system, it is still an unusual novelty.

Once at EPHA, throughout their traineeships the ESC incumbents benefit from close supervision and mentorship provided by their assigned supervisor/mentor, with a focus on developing both professional and informal skills that could boost their employment potential and future labour market integration.

Following the ESC traineeship, a formal certificate must be issued via the PASS system, which lists the key dates and functions of the traineeship. In addition, EPHA offers formal reference letters as an add-on to the certificates.

EPHA’s ESC experience 2018-19

EPHA recruited its first two ESC trainees at the end of 2018, and they remained at the EPHA office until spring 2019. Both candidates were based abroad at time of recruitment (one in Portugal, the other in France via Bulgaria) and they came to Brussels exclusively to take up their traineeships at EPHA. The Bulgarian incumbent initially commuted across the border from France to Belgium, which had been agreed prior to taking up their placement and did not pose any problems.

Both ESC trainees were extremely motivated and had previous experience working with migrant communities, which had partially sparked their interest of further developing their professional skills at a public health advocacy umbrella NGO like EPHA, which also works on migrant and Roma health.

They already had experience of studying, working and living abroad, which meant they brought valuable language and administrative skills to EPHA. This proved to be particularly useful as they assisted the Policy Lead and Deputy Director in the implementation of two projects related to migrant and refugee health, which involved conducting desk research and e-mail communication in several languages. Both trainees already spoke English well enough to take up their functions without requiring any additional language training, and they were able to draft short articles and text for the report. However, it was evident that participation in the ESC programme greatly contributed to improving their written and spoken communication as a result of their time spent at EPHA.

Crucially, the ESC trainees were able to learn quickly and they picked up the necessary policy and advocacy skills EPHA expects its staff to develop. They performed many important “policy assistant” tasks, including researching migrant initiatives, identifying and analysing relevant policy documents, contacting organisations working with the target groups to request information, attending policy events in Brussels to gather intelligence, etc. They were also trained to write short contributions for inclusion in the project reports. As part of their learning objectives, the trainees also drafted articles for EPHA’s monthly newsletter and they were involved in producing a “news feed” focusing on tackling

health inequalities, the broader topic to which both trainees were assigned. One of the trainees also supported the policy lead on Roma inclusion given the overlaps and similarities between the social, economic and other determinants which shape the health of Roma, migrants and other underserved / excluded groups.

When a full-time EPHA staff member unexpectedly left the organisation, EPHA was so pleased with the work of one of the ESC trainees that they were offered a short-term staff contract, which enabled him to earn more than the minimum wage that applies under the CIP contract.

EPHA would have been happy to keep this trainee in the longer term, but due to uncertainties related to the longer-term funding of one of EPHA's projects, we were unable to make an offer on time. However, the trainee was able to obtain a promising, potentially more secure employment opportunity in his home country, which not only demonstrated his improved employability in a cross-border context but also allowed him to apply the new skills gained at EPHA.

EPHA's paid ESC trainees work alongside unpaid student-interns sent to us by leading universities offering public health and related degree programmes, who are performing more or less the same tasks (albeit bearing in mind that ESC trainees may not have a specialist public health background). The main difference is that the students concentrate on writing their theses (commonly related to their chosen policy field) whereas the ESC trainees receive more horizontal guidance and practical professional know-how from their assigned policy managers / mentors, with a view to enabling them to find stable employment following their traineeship at EPHA. They also benefited from this additional opportunity to share knowledge and experience with other young Europeans.

Suggestions / ideas for improvement or clarification

As mentioned above, the PASS system is the central place for hosting organisations to search for, identify and contact suitable candidates. Formal employment offers are also drawn up, sent and accepted through the system. In theory this is very straightforward and user-friendly, but in practice there are a few small issues which EPHA feels could be improved or better explained by the European Commission to make the process even smoother for both candidates and employers.

One of the key issues EPHA has experienced in recruiting ESC candidates is that, although it is possible to search for candidates who are already Brussels-based and looking for a professional experience here in Belgium (i.e. they are originally from another country but might be short-term unemployed in Brussels), this is often not their first choice given that the ESC programme promises jobs all over Europe. Remaining in their country of residence is comparatively less attractive to them, especially if candidates have the means to spend short periods abroad (e.g. if their partners are in stable employment, they have savings, etc.). Hence more detailed information could be provided by the candidates registered in the PASS system to explain what type of placement they are looking for and in which countries; it currently seems that many candidates tick most of the country boxes without reflecting on their choices.

Another issue is related to the fact that none of the candidates EPHA has contacted so far are truly affected by “social exclusion” or suffering from a lack of opportunities, which in the ESC Guide is highlighted as a special feature of the programme. On the contrary, the vast majority of candidates interviewed or screened by EPHA possess one or several academic degrees and many have already benefitted from other EU programmes – such as Erasmus+ – that allowed them to either work or study abroad. This somewhat defeats the purpose as it means that, in practice, the ESC becomes an avenue for already highly qualified young professionals to secure yet another foreign work experience that can be added to their CVs. This is unfortunate given that EPHA would rather offer paid ESC traineeships to individuals who truly need a professional experience in order to find future work, be it because their educational achievements are low or because the nature of their studies or work experience is “untraditional”. This would render the ESC traineeship more valuable as it could become a concrete pathway to obtaining future paid employment in their home countries. It is however EPHA’s impression that many of the ESC candidates are overqualified and that they would not encounter any specific issues in securing employment without the ESC, other than the fact that many Member States produce too many graduates whose academic qualifications simply do not match the needs of national employment markets.

A corollary of this is that, when recruiting a suitable ESC candidate who is based abroad, they are entering the Belgian employment market via the CIP described above. In a city with an unemployment rate of over 18% (one of the highest in Europe, with youth unemployment well over 30% in some areas, especially among minority groups) this effectively means they are replacing local young people in need of a professional experience who might offer similar skills, but may not be able to prove them on paper. Moreover, following the ESC traineeship, should the incumbent decide to stay in Brussels to seek out other professional opportunities, they are potentially even increasing the pool of unemployed young people in Brussels and creating further pressure for less qualified local youth. Given the specific structural problems faced by young people in Brussels, it could thus be interesting to tailor the ESC more specifically to their needs, especially since many are as multilingual, international and skilled (whether formally or informally) as an ESC trainee moving to Brussels from abroad and who may struggle with fundamental work languages including English and French.

Another issue related to hiring ESC trainees from abroad is related to the fact that some have a very specific scenario in mind – a certain length of placement, a certain type of job, etc. – which either does not correspond to the reality of what can be offered by an NGO or means that they are waiting for the “right” opportunity to come their way to fill temporary gaps in between studies and employment. Compared to other spontaneous job applications EPHA receives, this means additional effort to interview, select and cater to the needs of ESC trainees in the hope that they will accept an offer and be willing to relocate to Brussels for relatively short periods of time. As the city’s housing market is getting tighter (with rents having increased significantly in many central parts of Brussels over the last 5 years) and since many young people are applying for opportunities across Europe in parallel, an ESC placement may not be their preferred choice and they are prone to changing their minds should something deemed to be “better” by them come their way. For example, during EPHA’s last ESC recruitment drive in September 2019, none of the identified suitable candidates were able or willing to move to Brussels for a period of up to three months, and there were few Brussels-based candidates that matched the profile posted online for an assistant position in the area of food and nutrition policy.

Some of the Brussels-based candidates EPHA was able to identify had already accepted other, more attractive (e.g. in terms of pay or future prospects) employment opportunities unrelated to the ESC, which was not evident from their ESC profile and thus created extra work for us in terms of contacting and screening them, making follow-up calls, etc.

Regarding the specific competencies, learning outcomes and training elements, the ESC candidates EPHA has recruited so far do not seem to make much of a distinction between ESC and other types of temporary placements they might have had. For example, they have only vague ideas of what kinds of professional skills they would like to gain from an ESC traineeship at EPHA, and their own ideas of professional development do not automatically match that of an organisation which, over the years, has hosted hundreds of trainees from all over Europe and beyond.

However, one-on-one mentorship has helped to identify suitable learning objectives involving a mix of formal, non-formal and informal skills, public health advocacy being a good area in which to enhance both policy skills (e.g., administrative, organisational and communication), but also personal qualities such as teamwork, tact, diplomacy and respect for diversity and the views of others. In addition, the European added value is clear as EPHA's work aims to advance population health across Europe, with a mission to reduce health inequalities and build capacity.

Conclusion and recommendations

In spite of some issues mentioned above, and the fact that EPHA was unable to recruit ESC candidates during the second half of 2019 as had been foreseen, the experience so far has been very positive. In fact, EPHA was so happy with one of the ESC trainees that they were offered an additional three-month paid contract, which allowed the trainee to prolong their time at EPHA and gain further professional skills. The contract extension enabled the trainee to gain additional time to consider decisions related to their professional and personal future direction, which ultimately resulted in relocation to their home country and led to an attractive job offer working for an NGO we hope will become an EPHA partner in the coming months. EPHA remains in contact with the former trainee whose performance clearly exceeded that of our "regular" interns or trainees.

That high-quality ESC candidates can indeed be found through the PASS system has once again been proven at the end of 2019 when we recruited a new ESC trainee. Although the process was quite difficult and lengthy due to the high number of qualified applicants (EPHA decided to post a job offer), we are confident that the incumbent possesses the right skills, ambition and attitude to learn and develop vital new professional skills, supported by the policy team.

Overall, the ESC programme provides a win-win situation for participating individuals and organisations, but it would be even more desirable if the programme targeted more specifically those young people who are truly in need of support to improve their social inclusion and who might otherwise not be able to enter the job market. Perhaps the nature of EPHA's policy work means that we naturally attract highly qualified candidates, but EPHA is open to different types of candidates with various skills sets including non-traditional and informal skills. What counts the most is to have the motivation to develop in an international, dynamic environment.

In the future, it would be advisable to expand the PASS portal to enable candidates and employers to enter more precise information pertaining to the opportunities sought and offered, and to oblige candidates to update their profiles more frequently to avoid fruitless recruitment processes, which can be frustrating for both parties.

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