

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of youth



Analytical Paper: Learning Mobility and Social Inclusion

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Introduction

This aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between **Learning Mobility** and **Social Inclusion** with the European context, assessing the present state of the art of research and identifying priorities for future developments. Through this discussion, we can move towards an understanding of how social inclusion can be addressed through learning mobility. The two main terms of reference of this paper, 'Learning Mobility' and 'Social Inclusion', are long-standing concerns of the **European Platform on Learning Mobility (EPLM)**. Learning mobility is defined as 'transnational mobility undertaken for a period of time, consciously organised **for educational purposes or to acquire new competences** [...] and can be implemented in **formal or non-formal** settings' (EPLM, 2013, p 1). In the context of this paper, social inclusion refers to 'the process of [an] individual's self-realisation within a society, acceptance and recognition of one's potential by social institutions, integration (through study, employment, volunteer work or other forms of participation) in the web of social relations in a community (Kovacheva, 2014, p. 2).

Putting these two issues together provides transnational mobility with a purpose, with time spent in another country associated with engaging in activities that foster **personal and professional development**. Learning mobility in this framework also aims to address key issues such as increasing **participation, active citizenship, intercultural learning and dialogue, individual competency development and employability** among young people, recognising the role of the youth work and the need for **effective policies and guidelines for mobility practice**. The objective is therefore to make a connection with the need to improve the social situation of young people across Europe, including the addressing of inequality and exclusion issues (EYWC, 2015). And through the creation of active and inclusive institutional platforms, mobility has the potential to be an integral part of learning experiences that **encourage diversity and identity building**.

Social inclusion among young people has been a long-standing concern for both the European Union and the Council of Europe, reflected in the flagship initiative ‘**Youth on the Move**’, **Erasmus+** and the **Youth Employment Package** in respect to the former and the **Agenda 2020** and the work of institutions such as the **European Youth Centres** and the **European Youth Foundation** in regard to the latter. These initiatives all serve to help realise social inclusion objectives: to make education and mobility more accessible and better suited to young people’s needs. Despite these policy developments, ‘Learning Mobility’ and ‘Social Inclusion’ still tend to be defined separately, suggesting a lingering disconnection in policy, and research, in this field. This means that there may be untapped potential for using mobility as a means of encouraging social inclusion and fostering solidarity among young people, including those at risk of poverty or exclusion. The suggested course is therefore that further commitment to **building mobility capacities can help address social inclusion**. This may include greater involvement of young people with fewer opportunities in established mobility platforms or participation in non-formal movement outside institutional structures, typically of a circulatory character between European states.

Evidence and Analysis

The youth mobility research field and social inclusion

Research on learning mobility and social inclusion appears somewhat under-developed, at least judging from evidence published in peer reviewed journals and monographs. This suggests an under-utilization of knowledge generated outside academia, as well as confirming that youth mobility researchers have tended to focus upon elite groups of student movers and migrants rather than mobility among a more educationally inclusive range of young people. Those with fewer opportunities or from disadvantaged backgrounds are hence under-represented in theoretical accounts of young people’s geographical circulation, which tend to illustrate how **social inequalities are replicated rather than eliminated** through free movement or under-regulated institutional platforms rather than addressing social inclusion (e.g. Brooks and Waters, 2011), and while studies have, often quite astutely, highlighted the significance of European identity creation and the cultural value of international conviviality via programmes such as Erasmus (e.g. Feyen and Krzaklewska, 2013), there is less consideration of these areas in relation to youth outside higher education.

Establishing that a transnational mobility experience can be a space for overcoming disadvantage and an effective pedagogical tool for those with fewer opportunities is a useful reflection (Kristensen, 2013). That there is already in existence expertise generated from the construction of the current transnational educational space, encompassing the European continent and many of its neighbours, and comprised of various elements of initiatives including Erasmus+, is also significant. In this sense, we already have in existence **a potential institutional habitus for addressing social inclusion via transnational learning initiatives**. This includes established programmes such as Youth Exchanges, the European Voluntary Service (EVS) and Transnational Youth Exchanges (European Commission, 2014, p.9). Furthermore, while social inclusion is multi-faceted, there does seem to be general consensus among researchers and policymakers that **the socio-economic position of young people has markedly declined since the onset of the economic crisis** in 2007/08, particularly in respect to labour market position (e.g. European Commission, 2015).

Recent trends in youth unemployment remind us that across Europe young people are facing serious difficulties in completing their studies and finding work, with attendant problems in related areas such as transitions to independent adulthood (Aassve et al., 2013;

Dietrich, 2013). And for those in work, there is also the problem of coping with precarious employment conditions and loss of family income due to austerity cuts (Cairns et al., 2016). This development, and the prospect that youth disadvantage has become more general, makes meaningful mobility more imperative (Cairns, 2014). It may also be the case that subgroups **of already socially excluded young people have undergone further disadvantage** at this time. Additionally, Europe faces new challenges such as the current refugee crisis which may introduce new forms of social disadvantage to be addressed; in this case related to the consequences of another form of mobility: involuntary migration. In this sense, the need for a nuanced policy response is growing, leaving us with a much greater challenge than might have been the case in the past in respect to social inclusion among young people.

European policy priorities and learning mobility

European policy discourse makes clear that mobility is to be regarded as an integral part of youth development (e.g. European Commission, 2009, 2011). The recent report, ***Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy – in the field of Youth***, also points towards the need to address inclusion via initiatives such as Erasmus+, taking into account the encouragement of diversity, building on the work of the prior Youth in Action programme. This report suggests focusing on incorporating youth from disadvantaged backgrounds in learning mobility initiatives (European Commission, 2014, p. 7), targeting the following priority groups, specifically those with:

- Disabilities.
- Health problems.
- Educational difficulties.
- Cultural differences.
- Economic obstacles.
- Social obstacles.
- Geographical obstacles.

Policy interventions should therefore be designed with a view to addressing the needs of these specific groups, meaning projects that actively involve young people in one or more of the above categories, a commitment which is also recognised by the Council of Europe; for example, in regard to including young people with disabilities (Council of Europe, 2013).

The *Green Paper on the Learning Mobility of Young People* (European Commission, 2010) provides some practical suggestions in regard to activities. This includes promoting the benefits of mobility for young people by providing evidence of added value in terms of future **employability and professional and intercultural skills**, and language learning, as well as **removing practical and bureaucratic obstacles**, particularly for disadvantaged young people, with a prominent role for international youth work envisaged (Freishenhaln, 2013). Added to this approach is the validation and recognition of both formal and non-formal learning, public/private partnerships and support for trainers, educators and youth workers in the mobility field, thus suggesting a **convergence between practice and social inclusion**.

A learning mobility and social inclusion case study

As detailed in its position paper, the main aim of the European Platform on Learning Mobility is to bring together researchers, policymakers and practitioners with a view to **advancing the learning of mobility in the youth field** (EPLM, 2013). This platform provides a structure, and a source of knowledge and expertise, in regard to mobility in formal and non-formal settings, with particular emphasis upon the latter. This experience therefore provides a basis for addressing social inclusion through learning mobility, a link that has been

explored in a recent empirical study conducted by **Research-based Analysis of 'Youth in Action'** (RAY), which explored the impact of participation in international youth projects on competences, behaviour and values (see Geudins, 2015).

This analysis emphasises **positive outcomes emerging from young people and youth workers engaging in non-formal learning** in programmes forming part of the 2007-2013 EU Youth in Action programme, covering research partners and national agencies from 20 different countries. That approximately one in four of participants in these programmes were classified as young people with fewer opportunities, facing one or more of the exclusion factors previously outlined, provides an opportunity to examine differences between those from different social backgrounds. It was found that the most beneficial influence of an international youth project for young people with fewer opportunities was increased **support for disadvantaged people and the fight against discrimination, intolerance and racism**, due perhaps to the social 'outsider' status of those at risk of exclusion. In regard to other significant advantages gained, statistical analysis showed that after participating in a project:

- 56% of those with fewer opportunities had an interest in European issues compared to 53% of those with more opportunities.
- 41% of those with fewer opportunities participate in societal and/or political life compared to 36% of those with more opportunities.
- 47% of those with fewer opportunities are more committed to work against discrimination compared to 36% of those with more opportunities.
- 47% of those with fewer opportunities support disadvantaged people compared to 36% of those with more opportunities.

Among the other findings of the analysis of data, collected from over 15,000 young people participating in Youth in Action, are that international mobility can:

- At a general level, contribute to personal and professional development, including **key competences** relating to labour market integration, social cohesion and active citizenship, as defined by the EC.
- Not only stimulate interest in European issues and participation in political life but also the desire to **develop foreign language skills**.
- Provide support **respect, tolerance and solidarity** with others, as well as a better appreciation of the European project.
- Help participants in exchanges **appreciate cultural diversity** and **boost self-confidence**.
- Have a **more profound impact among young people with fewer opportunities** (three or more exclusion indicators) in respect to higher gains in competences, due perhaps to the lower starting point of the former group.
- Be of equal value to building social capital for those with fewer and more opportunities in regard to **making social connections** with people living in other countries.

The suggestion is that those who benefit most from international youth projects are those with fewer opportunities, implying a need to ensure that the needs of such young people are addressed in policies and included in programmes. This also implies that there can be a **higher return on investing in learning mobility when young people with fewer opportunities are included in programmes**.

Looking towards the future, social inclusion is not a static issue. Addressing exclusion through learning mobility already faces challenges relating to issues such as the social and economic instability generated by the financial crisis, particularly in the more geographically peripheral European nations, and the more recent arrival of substantial numbers of involuntary migrants from outside Europe. These groups contain young people who may be experiencing **different or more intense forms of social exclusion** compared to the current

priority areas as identified by European Policy, implying a need to be proactive though targeted new as well as existing inclusion needs.

Summary of main findings

This paper has argued that social inclusion is an issue that needs to be recognised as a major risk factor in the lives of many young people across Europe, encompassing not only difficulties resulting from a lack of labour market integration but also issues relating to personal well-being and lack of integration into European society (Markovic et al., 2015). This is a significant challenge, and with a youth unemployment rate currently standing at 20.1% (Eurostat, 2015), we cannot afford to be complacent about strengthening young people's social competencies, given the need to connect them with the labour market. Furthermore, that **social inclusion may be multiplying and diversifying** due to factors such as the on-going economic crisis and new developments such as the sudden influx of large numbers of involuntary migrants, creates a heightened imperative to help youth become better equipped and more employable citizens.

In looking for a viable means of creating and sustaining youth social inclusion, involvement in transnational mobility initiatives of a non-formal nature provides a means of enhancing skills and capabilities. The case study cited in this paper demonstrates the value of programmes that constituted part of the Youth in Action initiative, showing that **the personal and professional profiles of participants can be enhanced through learning mobility**, with the **greatest gains in competencies among those with fewer opportunities**. These are valuable insights and if we wish to avoid a situation where large numbers of young people are potentially cut off from social integration in society at a considerable cost to themselves and their communities, we should seriously consider the potential of engaging such groups and individuals via non-formal learning platforms with proven impact, thus making use of existing resources and expertise to address new challenges.

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