

About learning by leaving, and getting it recognised

by Søren Kristensen

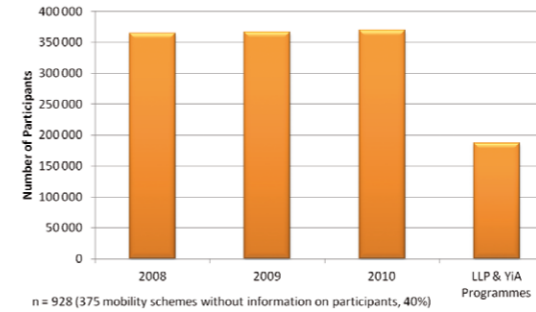
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The recognition of skills and competences acquired in a non-formal or informal context is a complex issue, but an extra layer of complexity is added when the learning experience takes place abroad. Such is the complexity, apparently, that many do not even seem to make an attempt. This is one of the conclusions of a recent study on “learning mobility” in Europe in which I participated as an expert! The study aimed to identify and gather data from mobility schemes, except for the EU action programmes, and to identify important trends, strategies and policies on mobility and mobility-related matters at national and regional levels.

The study contains many interesting findings, but as usual with such exercises, for every answer it provides, it also raises new questions. The following are some reflections on the issue of recognition of transnational, non-formal and informal learning on the basis of both findings and questions from the study.

The recognition of learning acquired in a non-formal or informal context is not in itself an infrequent occurrence. In all European countries, the “accreditation of prior experiential learning” (APEL) is an important issue, and provisions range from institutional practices to legislative measures. Along with recognition, we also find many tools for documenting (“making visible”) knowledge, skills and competences acquired outside of the formal educational system. These tools and practices are developed for use in a national or even a regional context, however, and we have only found a very few examples that are developed specifically for use with transnational activities, or which expressly include transnational activities as one aspect of their use. This is somewhat surprising since learning mobility is a widespread phenomenon both as part of formal education and training and in non-formal and informal contexts: we identified close to 1 000 mobility schemes, and participation rates here more than match the statistics of the EU action programmes (LLP and Youth in Action).



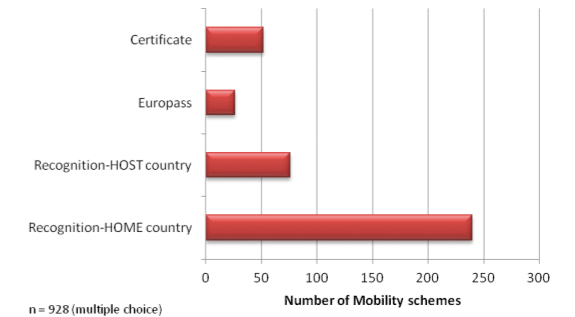
And this is not even the total picture: we did not look into the mobility that is undertaken outside of dedicated mobility schemes or as individual mobility, and we don't know how many people this involves. One national level survey (from Belgium)² indicates that more than half of all young people have participated in some form of learning mobility! Why is it that recognition and documentation are apparently not more of an issue? Offhand, one might think of two obvious explanations, but both of these are inadequate if we examine them just a little bit more in detail.

1. The existing tools developed at national level are appropriate also for transnational experiences

There is no doubt that at least some of the existing tools for recognition and documentation (for example, for volunteering) are also used for cross-border experiences, even though we did not find a lot of evidence for this. However, this raises the question as to why we should organise cross-border activities at all, if the skills and competences we include in the documentation are the same as those that could be obtained in a national context. More specifically, are these methods sensitive enough to capture the potential “added value” in terms of learning outcomes arising from the transnational framework in which they have been implemented?

2. Existing instruments at European level, Youthpass and Europass, are sufficient to cover the needs

The study only covered mobility schemes outside the EU action programmes, and at present the Youthpass is only available for activities (such as youth exchanges or cross-border volunteering) inside the Youth in Action Programme. It therefore cannot cover the needs of learning mobility outside of this framework. The Europass is open to all users and for all types of learning mobility, but it is apparently not very widespread, and only a few programmes indicated that they were using the Europass in any systematic way. Since the launch of the initiative in 2005, some 200 000 Europass mobility certificates have been issued, which is only a fraction of the actual number of people involved in learning mobility activities. We did not investigate the causes for this lack of uptake among practitioners, however.



So far the findings of the study, the main object of which was to find and describe the activities of mobility schemes and to identify important trends, strategies and policies, dealt with many other issues besides recognition. There was not enough time to go systematically into the intriguing questions as to why recognition and documentation do not seem to play a greater role in non-formal and informal learning mobility. So I shall try and make a few stabs at possible explanations. I should underline that this is based on mainly anecdotal evidence.

Notes

1. “Study on mobility developments in school education, vocational education and training, adult education and youth exchanges” EAC 2010-1356.
2. See http://cimo.multiedition.fi/eNewsletter4/euroguidance_eng/2010/april/gostrange.php.

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One important aspect deals with problems in connection with the validity of the mobility experience as a learning environment. Many schemes formulate their learning objectives in grandiose, but rather vague, terms of “intercultural understanding” and “employability”, but have difficulties in connecting these with the actual practices. As a result, that learning seems to become a matter of faith rather than documentation. For example, how does a four-week stay abroad lead to increased intercultural understanding, and what indeed are the competences that make up this concept? Many activities and schemes lack precise formulations of learning objectives coupled with detailed strategies – in the shape of quality management procedures – for how they can be obtained. A clearer understanding of mobility as a pedagogical tool and not least a clearer coupling of objectives and means differentiated according to the many types of learning mobility would facilitate documentation and recognition.

Another issue in connection with validity is the reliability of the learning experience – in other words how we can prove that the experience was an authentic one, and that stipulated learning outcomes (especially when they are difficult to measure) were indeed met? Most methods use some kind of triangulation method, where achievements are documented through statements from organisers both at the sending and the receiving end. There are, however, types of informal learning activities where there is no sending organisation, and therefore (but also for pedagogical reasons) self-assessment from the actual participant is also included in many methodologies. In a transnational context, an additional compli-

cation arises in the language issue, which is not just a matter of simple translation. Learning is arguably one of the most culturally sensitive areas, and terms that on the surface are identical may nevertheless cover quite significant nuances of meaning according to the cultural context in which they are used.

This is not to detract from the skills and competences of the operators that organise learning mobility, but their resources are often limited and they are not recognition professionals. Sometimes learning and learning processes are considered to be by-products in relation to their actual mission. To put recognition and documentation on their agenda, they must have access to user-friendly material available in the languages of both the sending and the hosting organisations and to information and guidance on the implementation of the methodologies. Moreover, these must be differentiated according to the various types of learning mobility. This task is arguably best tackled at European level because of the inherent transnational character of the activity and the need for a common terminology, and here we already have two tools for the documentation of skills and competences: Europass and the Youthpass. Youthpass – developed especially for non-formal and informal learning – is currently the one that best answers the needs as expressed by the practitioners, and it would therefore be logical to make this available also to activities outside of the Youth in Action Programme. In the longer run, however, it is hardly tenable to have two partly overlapping European instruments, and it makes sense to merge them into one common tool, making sure to retain the best of the two approaches. This is the challenge for the new European Skills Passport, which was quite recently proposed by the European Commission.

