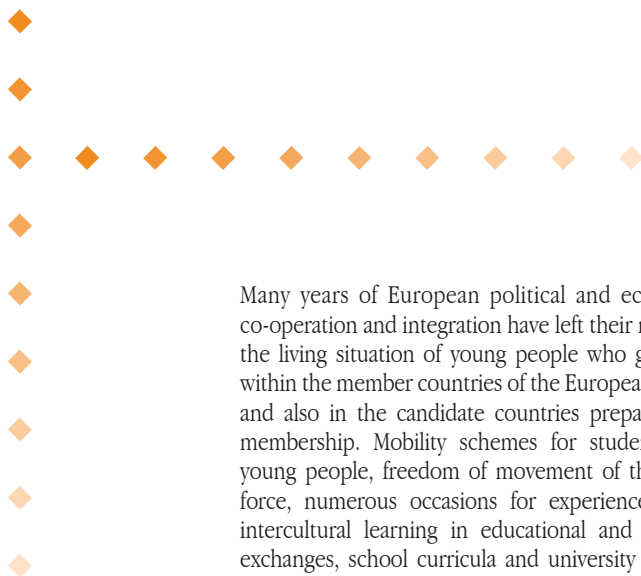


# The White Paper on youth and the open method of co-ordination

– challenges for education, training, research and youth policy construction in Europe



by Peter Lauritzen



Many years of European political and economic co-operation and integration have left their mark on the living situation of young people who grow up within the member countries of the European Union and also in the candidate countries preparing for membership. Mobility schemes for students and young people, freedom of movement of the work force, numerous occasions for experience based intercultural learning in educational and cultural exchanges, school curricula and university courses on Euro-knowledge and a growing media coverage on European matters have prepared a process of overcoming the old divisions of 'foreign' and 'domestic' policy. The European Union in the first place, but also the economic reality of globalisation and the presence of other European and international organisations are at the origin of new shifts in the understanding of citizenship and an enlargement of the concept of community beyond the nation state.

However, all this also means a kind of "banalisation" of the concept of Europe. Most young people, when hearing that this is a rather unique and new historic situation and a model for peace in the world and that this Europe is a 'champion of values' (White paper) will not be too impressed – for them this reality has always been around, so why bother? This form of non-committed acceptance of European realities invites people almost to take a distance to what is felt to be 'European bureaucracy' and to deny, in fact, that citizens may have any influence on developments. The situation is potentially destructive and it is not for nothing that through the creation of the convention and a new approach on governance the European institutions have given a signal that democracy is at the heart of their concerns and that a 'citizens' Europe' badly needs to see the light of the day.

It is probably not wrong to see the White Paper in this context. Of course, European co-operation on youth matters is not a new thing and there is a reality of European youth work in Europe today, which literally stands on the shoulders of many years of successful programme and training activity within the youth programmes of the Commission, the activities of the European Youth Centres and the

European Youth Foundation and the European Youth Forum. As a consequence, there are whole tribes of hundreds of NGO representatives, government experts, youth agency staff, youth researchers and trainers and youth workers around, who are working regularly on trans-national youth and childhood issues. And these are followed closely by quite a few European and UN officials working for the youth field in Brussels, Strasbourg, Budapest, Paris, Geneva and New York. Of course, all of these international youth actors have their own agendas, their own professional profile, speak their own language and pursue their own sets of interests and all this despite an 'official' language, which constantly underlines synergies and an everlasting spirit of co-operation. The reality presents quite a different picture, sometimes: rupture of information flows for the sake of keeping information monopolies and controlling access, tough competition within the 'youth market' and political differences and personal and institutional jealousies of all kind. This is not the rule, of course, but only too real for comfort nevertheless. Tribes behave tribally and territories have to be defended, that is all there is behind it.

So, a new impetus for European youth is quite timely and my thesis in this short contribution is that the White Paper will make the difference; it is a decisive contribution to overcome fragmentation whilst being respectful of differences. In saying this I do not judge the content; I can fully understand that many young people might be disappointed in the outcome after the long rounds of consultation. I read the paper differently, like a register on what commands consensus within the Union and well beyond, and I rely on the very existence of the paper and the working method of open co-ordination which goes with its further development and the implementation of its proposals. Undeniably, the youth page in Europe is very much 'under construction' and it needs a real common effort of youth workers and trainers, researchers and experts, civil servants and agency workers and young people themselves to at least arrive at laying some foundations to the often quoted construction of Europe.

**To do this successfully some answers are needed with regard to:**

- ◆ the enlargement process of the European Union, the emergence of a pan-European dimension in Community policies and the reorganisation of the club – who may join, who has to stay out?
- ◆ the necessary reform of the education system in view of making young people fit for the reality of a global world, communication and co-operation within the information society, life-long learning from a very young age, a new balance of formal, informal and non-formal education and a knowledge-based economy
- ◆ new shifts in the anchorage of loyalty, bonds and a sense of belonging in the local community and the nation state toward multiple bonding and an ever growing dimension of European citizenship
- ◆ Europe's place in a world of global civil wars with her particular place within the anti-terrorism agenda, responsibility in crisis regions also outside the continent, military commitments and humanitarian duties on a global scale
- ◆ the future of the 'employment for all concept' and equity and fairness with regard to access to the labour market, to quality vocational training and to second chance opportunities
- ◆ the promotion of gender equality, minority rights, a culture of Human Rights and the respect of human dignity.

Nobody says, that the White Paper contains the answers to the complex problems outlined, but with its dimensions of participation, values, education, employment and autonomy it opens doors to the 'future-lab' Europe will have to become again, if it wants to live up to its ambitions. The White Paper also recognises the end of the traditional youth trajectories and the reality of a risk society; it is a relatively open document and the best way to respond to its 'participation' chapter would certainly be to participate in its further development.

To do this, 'tribes' will have to leave their territories. One can hear ever so often that trainers and youth workers badly need results of good youth research and would like to strengthen the link to research. Researchers again willingly accept to work within educational projects; within the Council of Europe they run training activities themselves, accompany training the trainers courses (ATTE) and the citizenship course within the partnership agreement on European level youth worker training and long term evaluations of specific training courses like the 'Participation and citizenship' course. There are growing needs of governments to work with comparable data on youth policy development and to get an idea of the effectiveness of European level trainings. To be in a position to give competent advice on youth policy, European organisations rely on the close co-operation of all relevant youth actors. Hence, within the Task Force Education and Youth of the Stability Pact in South East Europe, such forms of co-operation between researchers (PRONI), NGOs (European Youth Forum, Save the Children, Scouts, Care International), governments (Hungary, Romania, Greece, Serbia and Montenegro amongst others) and European and international organisations (European Commission, Council of Europe, UNICEF, World Bank) have been quite successful in the construction of youth policy, national action plans, training policies and youth project development. Similarly, the Curriculum and Quality Development Group on European level youth worker training brought together trainers,

researchers, youth workers, NGO representatives, Youth for Europe National Agencies and was chaired by both the European Commission and the Council of Europe.

These are real, productive synergies and they inspire hope for an improved climate of co-operation. If the open method of coordination on the White Paper becomes a reality, certain requirements will have to be fulfilled: the partners in the process will have to agree on indicators of youth policy development, they will have to agree on areas where they will promote benchmarking and they will need some monitoring mechanism. For the non-formal educational vocation of the youth field they will have to work on setting standards, defining quality, validate success and achieve a greater recognition of the field within the education system. And they will have to define the place of employment in their youth policies, not to speak of 'neighbouring' policies like the promotion of healthy life-styles, housing, sport and leisure and cultural creation.

This is what the White Paper can kick off; its potential is considerable. When arguing for co-operation and underlining the strong need of incorporating the trainers and the researchers community in working on the European youth construction, I am nowhere inviting for something like pro-European propaganda or so, far from it. But education is never apolitical and social research is not neutral. At a time of seemingly very heavy insecurity of citizens in Europe with regard to their future one can witness a surprising success of populist and nationalist attitudes; often also accompanied by hatred and racism. This might be the historically unavoidable backlash to the European reality of today and thus, paradoxically, almost proof for the rationale of European unity. But without some clear commitment of all actors involved to find their own way into making Europe a democratic community, these ghosts of the past could take more space than any of us would like. The White Paper on youth should, therefore, figure in the agenda of European trainings, be used to trigger off discussions and its further process should be closely followed by the research community and civil society at large.

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