



## EUROPEAN PLATFORM ON LEARNING MOBILITY in the youth field

### "Researcher-practitioner-politician dialogue would be a great opportunity"

12.05.2013, Youth for Europe at <https://www.jugendfuereuropa.de/news/9621/>.

*The promotion and appreciation of "learning mobility" has long been guaranteeing a sustainable youth policy for the European Commission. However, what is missing Europe-wide is the close interaction between research, practice and policy.*

*An interview with Prof. Dr. Günter Friesenhahn of the University of Koblenz.*

In late March the first meeting of the European Platform on Mobility in the youth field was held in Berlin. The title: "Mobility Spaces, Learning Spaces - Linking Policy, Research and Practice." Present was Prof. Günter Friesenhahn, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences and long time member of the researcher-practitioner dialogue at the University of Koblenz.



**Prof. Friesenhahn, a compendium entitled "Learning mobility and non-formal learning in European contexts" will be released soon. A book which you worked for with scientists from 20 countries. Is there a central message?**

It is particularly important to take a comparative European perspective in this context. Particularly for education-minded young people in some European countries, "learning mobility" can be considered and used as an "add-on" to an otherwise relatively quiet and stress-free education and career training. In other countries, "mobility" quasi serves to realize opportunities on and for a European training and labour market at all. These developments are subject of interest to me as well as of my courses and publications.

**In your professional biography intercultural learning and youth exchanges are an ongoing issue. How has your personal attitude to learning mobility developed so far?**

I was already involved in multilateral steamer training for international youth exchange in 1987 - that is, before the official start of the great European mobility programs, Youth for Europe, Arion, Erasmus or exchange of young workers. That was something really new back then that caused enthusiasm and released dedication. Retrospectively, there was a kind of euphoric optimism with some idealistic ideas. This optimism was also nourished by former new emphases of some policies in the EU.



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A year before, Pietro Adonino presented a report to the European Council Ad Hoc Committee "Europe for citizens" of 1985, in which he explained how 'Europe' could be made an everyday experience for citizens. This advanced perspective was based on the realization that the economic and political integration of Europe remains fragmented and unstable without accompanying social and educational measures. Instead of a Europe of opaque, bureaucratic institutions a "Europe of citizens" should grow, in which people get to know each other, appreciate cultural differences, are mobile as well as a European identity should develop through an affirmation of Europe's fundamental values. From my perspective, it was about a social Europe as the citizens' Europe, about intercultural learning. Meanwhile, many things have changed - both in terms of the structures and my personal review.

### **You mean the increasingly economic interests of the European Commission?**

That economic interests always were a priority on the part of the EU, was already obvious back then, but not seen as a limitation for educational and intercultural mobility enhancing learning processes, although it was already to be read in the program Youth for Europe in 1988: "The Council .has affirmed .that young people need to be prepared adequately for adult and working life."

Today, the so-called "employability-claims", that is the call for employability, are represented much more aggressively. That shows programs on a structural level are basically due to economic premises. Nevertheless, they can unfold fertile and sustainable intercultural learning processes on a personal level.

### **How can we reasonably approach issues as effects, measurability of learning objectives, usefulness of non-formal learning?**

The measurability of learning objectives and the detection of effects is mainly a political demand in view of limited public funds. That matches the context of new steering models of social management. Depending on the perspective you can consider that a modernization or a economization of youth and social work, that nowadays has to demonstrate the efficient use of resources more than ever. This, at first, did not go down well in a field of action that feels especially obliged to pedagogical assumptions.

From a different perspective, many researches and recommendations - from PISA via the Leipzig theses of the National Youth Advisory Board in 2002 to the federal government's 12th Children and Youth report - revealed non-formal learning and educational processes with a significant meaning for the live of children and young people. That needs to be encouraged, because the importance of youth work can be well highlighted towards benefactors and the public with an appropriate proof of its positive impact. Action research



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and its results can also be used to legitimize a sustainable promotion of youth work. However, that turns out to be an increasingly balancing act.

**At present, effects are often determined by participants evaluating themselves as well as youth workers assess the adolescents. Is this a beneficial approach in terms of the expansion of the National Qualifications Framework to the non-formal learning?**

In the long term, methods are depending on legitimation and recognition by relevant stakeholders. Reliable and expressive self-assessments require a minimum level of diagnostic competence, self-reflection and corresponding benchmarks. It would be great and helpful if this was a competence for all people involved.

Qualifications frameworks such as the "European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning" (EQF) aim at a comprehensive readjustment of the relation between vocational training and academic education. The EQF describes operationalize learning outcomes on eight reference levels that people should basically show after a learning process. They describe what a learner knows, understands and is able to do. The attested qualifications should help to make different ways of learning and education as well as training and earned degrees transparent and comparable in Europe. Skills acquired outside formal education should be considered as well. Thus, labour-market mobility should be increased.

It is not just clear to me to what extent companies essentially appreciate certificates confirming successfully gained expertise through non-formal learning at a job entry. But if young people feel confident themselves to have extended their knowledge, non-formal learning arrangements already served their purpose.

**There is generally very little research on the topic of "learning mobility" in Europe. Is this supposed to change from now?**

A comparatively new subject cannot have a long history. It also has to be considered how terms and concepts as well as their social legitimation and meanings change historically in a particular social context. Some years ago, I conducted a historical study of international youth work with Andreas Thimmel, a colleague from Cologne. We worked out social legitimation approaches and concepts of international youth work in Germany from the last 50 years: international understanding, Europe, intercultural learning, diversity. "Learning mobility" apparently seems to be a new and appropriate approach. . That's not surprising. Who would mind learning? The crucial question is: Who learns what and what for? Which learning opportunities are offered?



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Moreover, Prof. Alexander Thomas conducted a seminal long-term study to explore the field of non-formal learning with other terms. Key results: stays abroad within learning and educational settings long term and sustainably lead to

- Increase in self-awareness and social skills;
- Increase of intercultural competences;
- Increase the language skills

and further have a lasting significance in a life-long biographical context.

### **How should researchers, practitioners and policy makers cooperate best in the future?**

Theory, practice and policy are scientifically considered subsystems in our society, each following an own logic and defining successful action pretty differently to some extent. That has to be clear in order to get on with that issue. It would not be a amiss in this context to remember the political program of the recent years:

The 11th Children and Youth Report of the Federal Government from 2001 was entitled "Growing up in a public responsibility". The 12th Children and Youth from 2005 report was entitled: "Education, education and care before and next to the school". This report clearly placed the learning issue in the educational and professional debate and linked education to a socio-political context by emphasizing societal responsibility for the success of educational processes. In the recently presented 14th Kinder and youth report the statement of the German Federal Government is:

"The Federal Government aims to simplify access to international youth work and to highly profile international youth work as a non-formal education. Especially for young people that are little successful in the formal education system non-formal education formats can provide new impacts".

### **And these impacts ...**

... strongly came and still come with high innovation potential from the researcher-practitioner dialogue in the field of international youth work; already existing and efficient for 25 years. Given the growing importance of the European issue, the rhetorical support from the responsible ministry is larger than the the ministry's financial support to keep up with. The bar could be set higher.



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The experience of the last 25 years has shown that the researcher-practitioner dialogue handled public funds very responsibly. Many actors in the environment do voluntary service. The cooperation could be improved by getting rid of a fragmented, annually distributed financial support. Project funding of - say - three years, linked with a target agreement defining aims for the next three years would certainly release more energy and innovation that serves everybody.

### **Does research need extra money?**

Of course research needs resources. Research also needs a supportive and appreciative environment and, from a socio scientific perspective, a high level of independence and freedom, as stated in Article 5 of the German Constitution. Therefore, research has to take into consideration which knowledge is used by whom and for what purpose. Our research format struggles to get money and largely depends on the initiative of researchers. That is probably easier for contract research, evaluation studies or practice accompanying research have it a little easier there, however they cannot always freely use their results.

### **Isn't the topic "intercultural learning" actually highlighted defined and equipped with excellent methods sufficiently- at least in terms of non-formal learning? Do not rather Erasmus students need to learn cross-culturally?**

Intercultural learning is at the very top of the agenda in the social and education since the 1970s. This is always based on the recognition: We need to prepare people to live and act in a multi-cultural society. Therefore certain skills in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes are required. One must not miss the fact that intercultural competence means something different for German pensioners in Duisburg than for a Spanish student who is studying abroad for a certain time. Personal requirements are significantly different. My experience with Erasmus students abroad clearly reveals that the gain in intercultural competence often exceeds the gain in professional knowledge - at least in the students' self-assessments. Prof. Alexander Thomas and his team proved and documented this in a research entitled "experiences that change".

### **What do you expect from the EPLM platform in five years?**

Now it is about patience and endurance of the involved actors. All stakeholders must recognize the benefit from such a network. This applies to research, policy and practice. Interests have to be balanced. This requires gentle action at eye level. In this regard, the conference has shown that it works. We rightly talked plenty about the need of "context awareness", which, in my view shows a certain tension with regard to the presented "best-practice examples". The initiators of the EPLM platform wanted to raise the basic idea of the



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German researcher-practitioner dialogue on a European stage. Accomplished. Now we can only proceed when and if many European actors join - with a lot of intercultural competence and solid resources. In 2015, the conference will probably be held in France, in 2017 maybe in one of the crisis-ridden European countries. That could also cast a different, namely less educational than socio-politically oriented perspective on "learning mobility".

(Interview conducted by Marco Heuer on behalf of JUGEND für Europa Germany; translated by EPLM Coordination/ transfer e. V., August 2013)

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