

## **Learning mobility in practice – a youth perspective**

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In 2009 the European Commission published a Green Paper “Promoting the learning mobility of young people”. The document showed a way towards a common and accessible path for young people to become mobile and develop skills which are absolutely crucial for the modern, globalising world. Nevertheless, even at the moment of its publishing, the Green Paper lacked certain policy provisions or left them underdeveloped. The disparity between the needs of young people and the reality is even more striking now, four years after the Green Paper. The European Youth Forum YFJ as the platform which gathers International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations and National Youth Councils back in 2009 appreciated the effort made by the Commission but at the same time pointed out some unrealistic objectives. The practice of organising and participating in learning mobility by young people proved that the concerns of the Youth Forum were correct.

First of all the concept of mobility should be clearer. Mobility plays a crucial role for young people in the areas of employment, education, voluntary activities and other elements essential to reach an autonomous life. Considering that take on mobility it is clear that mobility, and in particular learning mobility, should be based on voluntary basis and should not be caused i.e. by economic situation which forces young people to migration to other parts of the world where job placements are not as scarce as in the place of their origin. Very important for learning mobility is the aspect of acquiring skills and competences not accessible in the home country, such as intercultural, citizenship, critical thinking or linguistic competences. Not any less important is an opportunity of experiencing living an independent life and relying primarily on yourself. Therefore, all forms and opportunities for spending a period of time abroad are important, including educational mobility (such as student exchanges) but also non-formal education activities, such as trainings and volunteering.

A big risk for learning mobility derives from the focus on measuring outcomes in terms of future employment prospects. The most recent economic crisis put on a side track the discussion about a universal access to mobility schemes for all young people as a tool for intercultural learning, acquiring new linguistic competences, socialisation of young people and creating a common understating of Europe, with an open, active and tolerant society. Instead, the current discussion is mostly focused on employability and the added value of mobility for the future career perspectives of youth. The approach is not entirely wrong, undeniably the biggest problem of Europe nowadays is the situation of unemployed young people, especially in southern Europe, yet, learning mobility is not only about skills and competences necessary for the labour market, it goes far beyond those. But the change of prerogatives and incentives for empowering learning mobility is not the only problem of young people. The practitioner’s perspective provided by youth organisations, which are among the main providers, facilitators and beneficiaries of youth mobility, can help understanding the main problems that prevent young people from participating in learning mobility activities.

Mobility stems from the European integration process, where free movement is one of the four freedoms upon which the Treaty Establishing the European Community is based. However, learning mobility cannot be limited by the boundaries of the European Union or even the European Economic Area. Current visa and residence permit regimes in many European countries make it considerably hard for young people from outside the European Union to enter it for educational, volunteering or any other reasons. The newly proposed by the European Commission revision of the Visa Directive

(2004/114) provides some hope for the situation to change. Tabled on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March proposal still requires an approval of the Member States but significantly improves the access of young people to the European Union for purposes other than employment. Current situation is not encouraging. Many international non-governmental youth organisations do not limit their networks only to the European Union and they are disadvantaged because of that. It is not uncommon that young volunteers that are appointed for working in those organisations are not allowed to start their mandates because volunteering is not recognised as a reason for granting longer-term visas and eventually residence permits. That jeopardises not only their access to learning mobility but also the capacity of youth organisations that are preparing placements for them. Legal provisions for young people to access the European Union, for the purpose of learning mobility, is one of the main and most urgent problems.

Apart from the access to learning mobility which is limited by visas and the interpretation of what should be the purpose of it, young people at many occasions face a problem of validation and recognition of their stay abroad. Whereas students who participate in one of the study exchange schemes, such as Erasmus, Erasmus Mundus, Marie Curie, face considerably little problems, young people going abroad for volunteering purposes or short-term non-formal education activities struggle a lot to validate their outcomes. Since the establishment of the Bologna and Copenhagen processes formal education mobility has been facilitated and recognised. Schemes such as ECTS (the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) and ECVET (the European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training) allow students to compare their study results and transfer internationally their degrees or parts of them. At the same time non-formal education lacked a similar, international and widely recognised tool. Youthpass as a tool for Youth in Action still lacks common recognition. That lack of recognition of non-formal education and various forms of learning mobility causes problems for young people to legitimise skills and competences they acquire. The problem becomes particularly severe when a young person decides to serve for instance as a volunteer during obtaining a formal degree. Many educational institutions do not recognise it as a learning experience what causes study delays and in some countries leads to financial consequences.

The recognition of non-formal education problem is growing also because of an inconsistent approach of European institutions. While some initiatives like the Council's communication on the validation of non-formal education shows a positive development, other actions e.g. a lack of non-formal education in the Commission's "Rethinking Education Strategy" can be considered only as a bad sign. The misleading and contradicting signals do much harm to learning mobility and are a great obstacle for their providers, in particular international youth organisations, and their beneficiaries.

Among big problems for learning mobility the uncertainty of the future funding has to be also mentioned. In particular the problem is valid for non-governmental organisations which most likely will be denied access to long-term administrative funding that is now accessible for them under the provisions of Youth in Action. A new approach proposed by the European Commission to be applied with the new programmes from 2014 will mean for many international networks which provide and facilitate learning mobility lack of sufficient and stable support which is essential for ensuring high quality. At the same time the overall budget for education and youth at the European level is unknown. The cuts made by the European Summit in the budget line which encompasses also provisions for learning mobility might result in lowering accessibility of opportunities given to young people, and will definitely undermine reaching the ambitious goals set in the Green Paper in 2009.

To conclude, the perspective of youth on practicalities of learning mobility is a mixture of positive experiences, a lot of enthusiasm and struggles with dysfunctional policies and fear about the future. Therefore it is hard to say if the situation is good or bad. The Green Paper from 2009 set a direction for developing a consistent institutional framework for learning mobility. Yet, the practice shows that young people still struggle with visas, funding, recognition and validation of non-formal education related mobility. Changes are necessary and the recent proposal of the Commission on visa provisions sets a good example of fixing a mismatch between expectations and policy-development. Youth organisations, as well as the European Youth Forum hope that equally positive developments will soon follow also in the fields of validation and recognition of learning mobility, as well as funding for youth organisations as its providers and facilitators.

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