



EUROPEAN PLATFORM ON LEARNING MOBILITY in the youth field

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The role of intercultural competence in learning mobility

The Green Paper *Promoting the learning mobility of young people* mentions that “learning mobility adds to human capital, as students access new knowledge and develop new linguistic skills and intercultural competences”. However, people do not automatically develop their intercultural competence just by learning or working in a different country; like they do not automatically improve their language skills. Studies show that this happens when certain criteria are met, otherwise learners may come back home with more stereotypes and less intercultural sensitivity.

Therefore, people involved in organizing learning mobility projects need to be interculturally competent in order to ensure proper quality of the process for learners and to facilitate access to all and in diversity. Needless to say, intercultural competence becomes even more relevant when those involved in the learning processes belong to groups which are target of prejudice and discrimination.

SALTO Cultural Diversity defines intercultural competence in youth work as “qualities needed for a young person to live in contemporary and pluralistic Europe. It enables her/him to take an active role in confronting social injustice and discrimination and promote and protect human rights”. In this view, culture and identity are no longer seen as static and predefined characteristics, but as dynamic and multifaceted processes. A recent research based on this definition draws attention to the fact that a limited understanding of intercultural competence and related concepts could lead to the use of counter-productive tools.

In order to ensure access for all and in diversity to the learning mobility programmes and to develop quality intercultural learning processes, certain key aspects need to be taken into account.

Firstly, learning processes that aim at developing intercultural competence need to go beyond celebrating diversity. Intercultural learning should not be equalled to knowledge about different cultures or an idealised image of cultural diversity in society, but should aim at inflecting ethnocentric perspectives, fighting prejudices and promoting solidarity actions that support equality in human dignity and respect for the plurality of identities.

Secondly, learning mobility programmes need to focus on addressing all aspects of plurality in society, where cultural aspects represent only one dimension, along with other dimensions like social and political ones. Therefore, multiperspectivity and critical thinking are important skills to understand the complexity of situations and to avoid being manipulated by media or political discourses.

Another aspect that plays an important role in the dynamics of learning mobilities refers to power relations and mutual perception of the power relations between sending and receiving countries.

Learners should not be viewed (nor view themselves) as ambassadors of their countries. However, organisers of learning mobilities need to be aware of the possible discriminations their participants might encounter in their interaction with local citizens or entities. Stereotypes that come into place based on these power relations need to be discussed among those involved in learning processes (participants, organisers and third parties) in order to find ways to overcome them.

Moreover, a special focus needs to be put on stimulating action. In order to ensure a multiplier effect, learners need to be equipped with the motivation and skills to take action, to bring an active contribution to in the development of an intercultural society, in ensuring access to social rights and equal opportunities for all. In this view, the aims of learning processes should range from awareness raising to social action, while the competences of participants should range from being open-minded and embracing diversity to taking a stand against discrimination and social injustice, an active role in combating hate speech and hate crimes. Through the development of learning environments in a human rights-based approach, learners can be stimulated to engage in meaningful interactions and to develop motivation and skills for social transformation.

In order to ensure quality learning mobilities that aim at developing intercultural competence, organisers need to ask themselves the following questions:

- How prepared are we to ensure quality criteria for all participants?
- How prepared are we to include members of disadvantaged groups?
- How aware are we about more in-depth intercultural aspects when:
 - promoting opportunities for participation;
 - preparing learners before departure;
 - developing learning activities and environments;
 - mentoring and monitoring learners;
 - supporting them in re-integrating in their home environment, using their new skills and sharing their learning experience.

In other words, a serious reflection needs to be done in order to analyse if the means fit the purpose. Namely, if the tools and approaches we use are suited for the complex goal of developing intercultural competence.

Lately, European bodies like the Council of Europe or the European Commission have given closer attention to this topic and focus on developing tools for quality assurance in educational activities aiming at developing intercultural competence, in order to support grass-root organizations.

One of the tools that will be launched soon by the Youth Partnership between Council of Europe and European Commission is a guide for trainers/facilitators/organisers entitled: „Indicators for intercultural dialogue in non-formal learning activities”. The aim of this tool is to promote an on-going reflection on our understanding of intercultural learning and to reduce the gaps between different interpretations, by helping trainers and facilitators reflect on the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of intercultural processes and concepts. The tool offers a set of criteria and indicators that need to be taken into account in different phases of a learning activity (preparation, implementation, follow-up), and it refers both to activities which focus mainly on intercultural dialogue, as well as to activities that focus on other topics, but which embed an intercultural perspective.

Bibliography

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