

Learning mobility in the youth field from the research perspective

Helmut Fennes, Berlin, 21 March 2013

Research overview

Learning mobility – a new concept?

‘Learning mobility’ is a relatively new term in combining the term ‘mobility’ with ‘learning’ while other combinations such as ‘student mobility’, ‘youth mobility’ or ‘work mobility’ have already become commonly used terms. The term is also fairly new in the academic field – it is not yet used as a keyword in library catalogues which makes searching for the respective literature quite time consuming. Nevertheless, learning mobility is not new as a concept: the ‘waltz’ – a tradition of travelling craftspeople in the middle ages resulted in exchange and learning of skills and techniques as well as in exploring different traditions of work and life. Studying far away from home has a long-standing tradition (at least for elites) in educational settings with teaching – learning relationships. International student, youth and pupil exchange programmes as well as voluntary services abroad were established already after World War I and specifically after World War II, often as confidence building measures between former enemy countries (for example, AFS, ICYE, YFU-EEE and the Peace Corps). International exchanges became increasingly popular since then, most of them also aiming – explicitly or implicitly – at learning: personal development, development of social and intercultural competence, language learning etc. The European Community started a learning mobility programme already in the 1960ies – the Young Workers Programme – long before launching Erasmus and Youth for Europe in the late 1980ies. This broad scope of initiatives and programmes considered different connotations of learning mobility: mobility *for* learning; learning *through* mobility; learning *for* mobility. The non-formal and informal learning dimensions of learning mobility were recognised from the beginning of organised learning mobility initiatives and programmes for all kinds of contexts – university-based, school-based, in the youth field, work-related, volunteering or internships abroad, au pair etc. – all of these contexts provide for informal and partly for non-formal learning through mobility. In this respect, research on learning mobility should integrate and seek for synergies between the different contexts and sectors rather than working in parallel without relating and referring to each other.

Learning mobility – a new research field?

Learning mobility is not really new for research either: early studies date back to the 1960ies. The researchers-practitioners dialogue was established in the late 1980ies and since the establishment of Erasmus, Youth for Europe and other EU programmes in the field of education, training and youth literature on the topic of learning mobility (although not identified with this term) has grown considerably. In view this, research on learning mobility has been conducted since decades – but not under the heading ‘learning mobility’.

An example for early research activities in the field of learning mobility is provided by AFS Intercultural Programs. Since the late 1940ies, AFS has been organising individual exchanges for pupils who are living in host families and attending secondary school abroad. AFS conducted

standardised evaluations since the 1950ies, did first studies on various aspects of their programme in the 1960ies and consistent research since 1977. An impact study (1977 – 1986) explored changes of attitudes, values, skills and knowledge (which would be referred today as ‘competence development’), using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods and inviting 100% of a cohort to pre- and post-surveys. The instruments were further developed and a study in 2002/03 included also surveys with origin families and host families (providing for triangulation of data) as well as e-journals of participants on critical incidents. In 2008 a long-term impact study was conducted, exploring perceived effects on participants 20 to 25 years after their mobility experience.

Research on learning mobility

Literature on learning mobility provides a diverse picture:

- different disciplines addressing learning mobility – educational science, social science/youth research, political science, human sciences and cultural science, taking different perspectives – education, work/labour, youth, citizenship etc.;
- a large proportion of literature is theoretical/conceptual – a relatively small proportion of research is empirical;
- a large proportion of literature is on mobility in the context of higher education (mostly in reviewed journals); not so much literature is available on mobility in vocational education and training, school-based exchanges, volunteering abroad, work placements abroad etc.; in particular, relatively little literature can be found on youth mobility;

Research on learning mobility in the youth field takes diverse approaches (e.g., theoretical/conceptual as well as empirical; evaluation as well as research-based analysis and monitoring/‘wissenschaftliche Begleitung’; national focus as well as bi-/tri-/multi-/trans-/international studies etc.); it pursues diverse objectives at the macro-, meso- and micro levels (e.g., policy development, quality development); it explores different aspects of learning mobility (e.g. motivation, participant profile, obstacles, effects, pedagogical aspects etc.); it applies a variety of research methods and methodologies; it is conducted by universities as well as by private institutes or free-lancers; and it is financed by different types of institutions (universities, organisers of learning mobility schemes, public bodies).

We do not know what is known

The findings outlined above provide a diverse and heterogeneous picture of research on learning mobility in general as well as in the youth field: there exists no systematic overview of research on this topic; there are different communities of researchers as well as different pools of literature and studies which overlap only to a limited degree; there is no common pool of knowledge and the knowledge is fragmented and to a considerable proportion represented in ‘grey literature’. Research on learning mobility is largely fragmented, dispersed, not systematic and not coherent. There are many rather small scale studies or studies limited to specific organisers or specific countries; transnational studies are mostly conducted by big organisations or are commissioned by the European Commission; there is relatively little empirical research and there are a relatively small number of specialised researchers in this field.

Research-based analysis and monitoring in Youth in Action (RAY): an example for research on learning mobility in the youth field

The RAY project was established in 2008 by the Intercultural Centre in Austria and the Institute of Educational Science of the University of Innsbruck and it involved since its establishment research partners in 16 countries. The objectives of RAY are to contribute to evidence-based practice and quality development, to evidence-based policy development and to fundamental research on non-formal/informal learning/education. Research questions addressed are: what is the effect of Youth in Action (YiA) on the actors involved? What is learned in YiA projects? Which competences are developed? How does this learning take place? What contributes to this learning? What are the effects on the organisations, structures and environments involved in the projects?

RAY uses a multi-method approach, in particular regular online surveys with participants and project leaders, coordinated qualitative research as well as special international and national studies. The international scope of the network cooperation provides for multilingual research in 14 languages and allows involving a large proportion of YiA actors in the research activities. Between 2009 and 2012, around 60,000 participants and 20,000 project leaders involved in YiA projects were invited to seven surveys and to respond to two different types of questionnaires (one on perceived effects and one on learning processes in YiA projects). More than 25,000 participants and project leaders completed the questionnaires to a considerable extent (32% response rate). A coordinated qualitative study in 2013 includes interviews with project leaders and focus groups with participants, exploring *what* is learned in YiA projects as well as *how* this learning takes place and what supports it. A study on competence development in six countries in 2012 aimed at validating competence development through YiA.

Some of the main findings of this research project are:

- both participants and project leaders express that all eight key competences for lifelong learning were developed through their participation in YiA, in particular social, intercultural, citizenship and foreign language competence as well as cultural awareness and learning competence (learning to learn), but also communication in the first language and mathematical competence;
- project leaders also report an effect of YiA projects on their organisations, in particular with respect to internationalisation, participation of young people in the practice of the organisations, organisational development and development of youth work and non-formal education competences;
- participants and project leaders report effects on their educational and professional career perspectives, in particular with respect to their intention or plans to participate in continuing education and training, and a perceived greater employability;
- overall, the effects for the 'hosting' partners are perceived to be at least as effective as for the 'sending' partners;
- different project types are reported to have different scopes of effects; nevertheless, so far there is no indication of effects depending on the project duration.

With respect to learning in YiA, the following main conclusions can be drawn:

- most projects apply a broad variety of methods/situations covering the full spectrum between informal, non-formal and more formal learning, many of the methods used being new for both participants and project leaders – YiA can be considered to be a laboratory for training/teaching and learning;
- while traditional methods dominate (presentation – discussion), other methods and approaches are reported to play an important role, such as reflection (individually and in groups), advice and mentoring as well as participation of participants in the project organisation;
- participants report to develop competences through a combination of informal, non-formal and formal learning situations/methods, with non-formal situations/methods being dominant, followed by informal experiences with people around the project;
- also project leaders report to learn best in a combination of different situations/activities, in particular when developing and implementing the project as well as when cooperating with colleagues from own their country or from other countries.

There are very high and very significant correlations between the responses of participants (self-perception) and of the project leaders (external perception) as well as between the responses to the different surveys. At the same time it needs to be noted that there are some limitations of the surveys with respect to the representativity of the samples and due to the fact that conclusions are drawn from *perceptions* of participants and project leaders.¹

Challenges and perspectives

A major challenge for research on learning mobility is the development of a coherent research strategy. This would require

- a mapping of existing research and the consolidation of existing knowledge, e.g. through a meta-study and/or a comprehensive literature and research review in the field;
- the development of research priorities and of a research agenda;
- the inclusion of research in mobility, youth and education policies in order to ensure respective funding;
- the exploration of synergies of research on learning mobility in the different sectors (formal education, vocational education and training, non-formal education/youth, etc.).

Research topics should include competence development through learning mobility, long-term effects of learning mobility, educational approaches and methodologies contributing to learning in learning mobility activities, competences required for fostering and facilitating learning mobility (in the youth field), and effects of learning mobility on the organisations involved ('learning organisations').

A challenge is also be the development of adequate research instruments, e.g. for objectively assessing change caused by learning mobility (in particular competence development) which does not depend only on self-perceptions and external perceptions (e.g. by defining competence levels and respective indicators, and by developing pre-/post-tests and surveys involving also control

¹ More information and documents can be found under http://www.uibk.ac.at/bgl/projects_networks/projekte.html.en#p14

groups). Furthermore, instruments for on-going evaluations by project organisers could be developed.

Finally, a challenge is the transmission of research findings to policy and practice development. This would require that the existing knowledge is made easily accessible to practitioners and policy makers, e.g. through an online-database with research on learning mobility (in the youth field), through 'translating' the findings so they are understandable for the target groups, and through workshops for practitioners and policy makers.

An overall challenge is to establish a balance between research integrity and funding available for research in this field.

Helmut Fennes