Conceptual background paper

Quality in learning mobility

As learning mobility is increasingly being employed as a pedagogical tool both in formal and non-formal contexts, issues of quality become a more pressing concern than before. And for good reason: good quality in learning mobility will ensure that outcomes are optimised and that processes of recognition are facilitated. Moreover, there is a – sometimes very direct – correlation between quality and quantity: the more we know about quality and how to achieve it, the more confident and effective we can be in our efforts to reach out and offer a mobility experience as a meaningful opportunity to all young people, and not just the most privileged and resourceful.

This paper is designed as an input to the discussion on quality in learning mobility in the context of the European Platform for Learning Mobility (EPLM). It is accompanied by a draft for a concrete quality framework (quality criteria for learning mobility in the field of youth).

Introduction

"Quality" is not a straightforward concept – and neither is "learning mobility". In an EPLM-context, the latter is defined as "transnational mobility undertaken for a period of time, consciously organised for educational purposes or to acquire new competences or knowledge", and even when limited to youth work, it covers a bewildering variety of projects, activities and target groups. When we put together to such complex concepts, we may very well end up with either an inscrutable complexity or a set of such simplified abstractions that it becomes useless in all spheres outside of pure academia. Yet it is the declared aim of this paper to try and connect with current practices in the field with a view to developing hands-on guidelines for improving the quality of learning mobility in the field of youth.

Finding the right answers is a matter of asking the right questions. This background paper will therefore initially and in a very general way examine notions of quality and hold these up against the phenomenon of learning mobility with a view to eliciting the questions that can frame the discussion. Afterwards, it will try and provide answers – or perhaps more humbly: stepping stones to the answers – by drawing on relevant policy and practice, as well as theory and evidence.

What is quality[1]?

At a very general level, we may say that we perceive a product – like a mouse trap, a bicycle or a laptop computer – as being of good quality when it lives up to our expectations. However, these expectations may

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[1] The following brief discussion on the nature of quality is inspired by Van den Berghe, W: Achieving Quality in Training (Wetteren, 1995)

vary according to context, product and of course the persons that formulate the expectations. With an industrial product for use in a specific context, we may formulate these expectations in a very clear and concise way, but with service products, this is often blurrier and open to interpretations.

What are our expectations to learning mobility? And what implications does this have for our perception of quality in this context?

Quality control or quality management?

When we assess the quality of a given product, we may in principle either use a *product-based* or a *manufacturing-based* approach (or both – they need be not mutually exclusive). The former is an *ex post* exercise, where we base our assessment on a number of measurable attributes, checking the final product against these and controlling whether it lives up to our expectations or not. If not, we discard it or refuse to pay for it. In the latter, we focus on the *ex ante*-situation and the production process rather than the result of this. On the basis of a careful description of what we want and how we want it done – the design, what raw materials to use what tools, what qualifications the workers should have etc. – we establish a set of specifications. If all of these are met in the production process, we are certain that we will end up with a quality product, and we consequently need not control the output at the end of this – quality is guaranteed (or assured).

Which approach – quality control or quality management – makes most sense to use when we are dealing with learning mobility?

Norms, standards or criteria?

Sometimes, we recognise quality straight away when we see it – but with more complex products we may need to check things out more carefully before we pass judgment. We look for certain signs that we have defined beforehand as indicators of good quality. We call these signs *norms*, *standards* or *criteria*, and they may relate to either the finished product or the production process. They are in some quality-contexts used interchangeably as synonyms, but there is a tendency to differentiate between them according to their specificity: *Norms* being a set of very detailed specifications linked to a concrete and measurable (physical) product; *standards* also referring to a precise context, but often employed to denote non-physical artifacts; and finally *criteria*, which is used as the most general, most generic term.

What are we dealing with when discuss quality in learning mobility, and what is the most appropriate term to use?

Quality in mobility

Even though success rates of mobility programmes are often provided as numbers of participants, it is clear that this perspective is meaningless in a quality perspective. The fact that 100, 1000 or even 10000 young people went abroad is in itself of no importance; what is important is what they brought home with them in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes, and how this contributes to the development of societies and individuals. Our expectations in this respect – in other words: the learning potential of mobility – is often expressed in terms like the following:

"Learning mobility, meaning transnational mobility for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge, skills and competences, is one of the fundamental ways in which young people can strengthen their future employability, as well as their intercultural awareness, personal development, creativity and active citizenship. Europeans who are mobile as young learners are more likely to be mobile as workers later in life". From: Council Recommendation of June 28, 2011 ("Youth on the Move")

From evaluations and evaluative research carried out we know that good quality learning mobility can indeed bring about such outcomes. What they also tell us, however, are that they do not come about by themselves merely as a function of being abroad, and – equally important – that they cannot all be realized within one and the same project: there are many types of learning mobility, and specific types of mobility are conducive to specific kinds of learning outcomes.

As an illustration of these points we may take the learning outcome "intercultural awareness" from the enumeration above. "Intercultural awareness" is here defined as an understanding other mindsets and cultures and as a deconstruction (or prevention of the creation) of prejudices stemming from racism, nationalism and xenophobia. It is frequently listed as a learning objective for mobility in the youth field, but it is not always achieved. Already in 1969, the Israeli psychologist Y. Amir[2] formulated the so called "contact hypothesis", which identified a number of conditions that were conducive to this type of learning and which mobility projects aiming at this learning outcome need to take into account to ensure a relevant outcome. More specifically, Amir saw the following points as crucial if intercultural awareness is to develop as an outcome of an encounter between people from different cultures:

- *Equality in terms of status*: i.e. that both parties in the encounter share a roughly similar socio-economic status to allow them to identify with each other;
- *Convergence of aims*: i.e. that both parties must have at least a degree of shared aims and interests to ensure that contact between them develop;
- *Appropriate attitudes prior to implementation*: i.e. that there are no overly negative attitudes towards people from the other culture beforehand;
- *Appropriate contact intensity and length*: i.e. that the contacts should last for a certain period and must not be superficial in nature;
- *Low cultural barriers*: i.e. that cultural barriers are not so high at the beginning of the actual encounter that interaction is made impossible;
- *Social and institutional back*-up: i.e. that the encounter is organised in the framework of an integrative institutional framework, and that a climate of mutual back-up exists;
- *Appropriate preparation*: i.e. that participants are given adequate linguistic and cultural preparation before the encounter.

Amir's set of conditions is aimed at a specific type of learning (intercultural awareness) and a specific type of mobility activity (encounters between groups of young people around a joint project). However, it would not necessarily apply to the same extent other types of learning objectives (e.g. employability) requiring other types of mobility activity (e.g. work placements). Whereas some of Amir's conditions are transferable to other contexts, others need to be adapted, a few are not relevant, and new ones would have to be added. In an employability context and with work placements, additional conditions could e.g. comprise e.g. the suitability of the work place for the type of learning intended, the qualifications of colleagues, the nature of the tasks performed by the participant etc.

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[2] Amir, Y.: Contact Hypothesis in Ethnic Relations, in *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 71, no. 5 (Washington, 1969)

A final point in connection with quality in learning mobility is the issue of intended and non-intended outcomes. In many mobility projects it is possible, besides the formulated learning objects (the intended outcome), also to find outcomes that were not on the initial list of expectations. These non-intended outcomes may be very valuable, but in a quality discourse we are concerned with the specifications that were set up beforehand – the "expectations" – and which form the justification for the activity.

Approaches: quality control versus quality management

Many – if not all – projects and programmes of learning mobility are subjected to some kind of control (evaluation) afterwards, where it is ascertained whether and to what extent the objectives were achieved. These ex post (summative) evaluations serve to ensure that our expectations are met, but depending on the type of learning objectives pursued, there are challenges with regard to measuring the level of achievement:

- *Knowledge, skills and competences of a cognitive nature* are in many instances directly visible and hence measurable. This goes for foreign language proficiency or concrete vocational skills. We can run a test or make an assessment, compare to accepted scales or curricula, and the results can in many instances be recognised as part of a formal qualification.

- *More complex learning outcomes*, described in terms like "intercultural awareness", "personal development", "creativity" etc. are much more slippery to handle. Definitions are imprecise and methods of measurement rely on elaborate tests and/or intersubjective assessments (triangulation) that are difficult to calibrate in relation to formal contexts.

- Finally, some outcomes are essentially of an *affective* (i.e. linked to attitudes, convictions and emotions), and they can only be ascertained or measured by observing the behavioural patterns of participants over a period of time after the stay abroad. Establishing the connection (causality) between the mobility experience and subsequent behaviour can be very difficult. This goes for e.g. employability (defined as the ability to find and hold down a job), active citizenship and cross-border labour mobility.

As a means of ensuring quality, however, full ex post evaluations of learning outcomes in mobility projects are complicated, time-consuming and costly. A product- (or control-)based approach is therefore not really possible; also because we are dealing with human beings, and consequently cannot – unlike with a cheap, industrial product – simply scrap the dissatisfactory item and produce a new one. We therefore have to use a manufacturing-based approach and focus on the process, ensuring that this is conducive to producing the desired learning outcomes.

This requires that we have a thorough understanding of learning processes in learning mobility and can identify the factors – or conditions – that are necessary in order for the full potential to unfold. The key question here is: what is it that makes a stay abroad a particularly valuable pedagogical tool? A partial answer to this can be found in the learning theory developed by Piaget[3]. He operates with two different types of learning: *assimilative learning*, where we learn by adding new elements to already developed cognitive frameworks, and *accommodative learning*, where these frameworks are altered or replaced because we encounter new phenomena, that do not fit into these already developed frameworks. Through accommodative learning, we "challenge our mindsets", "revise our attitudes" and "expand our horizon" –

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[3] Piaget, J.: The Psychology of Intelligence. Routledge, 2001

learning outcomes that by many are perceived as particularly valuable in a society that is characterised by globalisation and change. This type of learning has also been termed *transformative learning* (Mezirow[4]). We can identify both assimilative and accommodative/transformative learning processes in transnational mobility projects, but it is particularly suited for the latter: Encountering a different culture represents a powerful platform where this kind of learning may develop, because our usual notions of normality are challenged by new concepts and practices – as has been expressed by another theoretician, we "learn through experiences of disjuncture" (Jarvis[5]). However, this type of learning is no foregone conclusion, because we may also react by rejecting what we see, discarding it as irrelevant to our situation, or simply by misinterpreting it. Therefore certain conditions need to be met and certain support structures and services – pedagogical interventions – must be available to the learner to ensure that such learning takes place. These form the building blocks of a quality management system for mobility.

Amir's "contact hypothesis" represents an attempt to reach such an understanding and to formulate the necessary conditions and support, albeit for a specific type of learning (intercultural awareness) and mobility activity (intercultural encounter between two groups of young people). A more general model of learning processes in mobility projects (Kristensen, 2004, 2015[6]) posits four interconnected conditions:

Immersion: That participants must be subjected to a real encounter with culture and mentality of the host country, and not a superficial, sanitized version;

Responsibilisation: That participants are actively involved in working out solutions to problems and challenges arising out of experiences of disjuncture encountered in the process, but that these are at a level which is not beyond what the target group can cope with;

Relativation: That issues addressed and tasks undertaken are relevant and recognisable to the participants, so that culturally determined differences between ways of organising and doing things become visible and can be compared and discussed;

Perspectivation: That participants are engaged in a constant process of reflection on experiences and that the necessary support for this process is available before, during and (especially) after the event.

This theoretical understanding of how learning outcomes in mobility projects are produced needs to be translated into an identification of what practical interventions are needed to underpin quality in learning in mobility. Certain general principles can be inferred from the model, for example that

- That learning processes in mobility do not only comprise the time spent abroad, but also phases before and after;
- That pedagogical support geared to the needs of the target group must be available during all phases of the process;
- That a certain duration of the experience is necessary in order to ensure immersion;
- Etc.

These principles may then in turn be worked into a coherent quality management system for learning mobility.

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[4] Mezirow, J. et al: Learning as Transformation. Jossey-Bass, 2000
[5] Jarvis, P: The Practitioner-Researcher. Jossey-Bass, 1999.
[6] Kristensen, S.: Learning by Leaving. Placements abroad as a Pedagogical Tool in the Context of Vocational Education and Training in Europe, University of Aarhus 2004 & Kristensen, S: Measuring the Un-measurable: Evaluating Youth Mobility as a Pedagogical Tool for Intercultural Learning, in Küppers, A. and Bozdag C.: Doing Diversity in Education through Multilingualism, Media and Mobility. Istanbul Policy Center, 2015

We may work with all three of these concepts in a context of learning mobility, if we see the relationship between them as one of specificity; i.e. a descending level of disambiguation, where norms = the most specific, and criteria = the most generic. A concrete aspect of the learning process in transnational mobility projects – e.g. the duration of the stay abroad – may thus be expressed either as a norm, a standard or a criterion, depending on the specificity of the environment where the quality management system operates:

Norm: "The participant will spend a period of 3 months abroad" (exact requirement)

Standard: "The stay will last a minimum of 3 weeks" (minimum requirement)

Criterion: "The length of the stay must be of a duration that affords the participants a realistic opportunity to reach the stipulated learning objectives" (generic principle)

Another example could be linguistic preparation:

Norm: "The participants will undergo a three weeks' preparatory course in the language of the host country prior to departure"

Standard: "All participants must possess a proficiency in the language of the host country at least at level B1 of the European Language Portfolio"

Criterion: "Participants must be able to interact linguistically in relevant situations with colleagues and counterparts in the host country".

Whereas norms would be appropriate in relation to specific programmes and target groups, standards are used for more general types of mobility, and criteria to cover all types of learning mobility within a given field. Norm-based approaches are hardly relevant in an EPLM-context, as this covers such a wide variety of different types of activities that the specific requirements inherent in this approach will be far too narrow to cover all of these. Standard-based and criteria-based approaches are therefore more relevant.

As an example of a standard-based approach, one can mention the "Q-placement model" (see www.q-placements.eu), which has been developed by actors (vocational colleges) in 10 European countries with a view to promoting high quality and sustainable work placements abroad for young people in initial vocational education and training (IVET). In this quality framework, all procedures linked to the activities have been described, the functions and responsibilities for all actors have been identified, and standards for performance have been formulated in terms of minimum requirements. To support the standards, templates for relevant documents (e.g. placement agreements with enterprises) have been produced in the languages of all the participating countries.

The most widespread and well-known example of a criterion-based approach is the European Quality Charter for Mobility[7], formulated as a recommendation by the Council of Ministers and the Parliament in 2006. This consists of ten principles implemented on a voluntary and flexible basis, being adaptable to the nature and peculiarities of each stay. These principles are:

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[7] Recommendation (EC) No 2006/961 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on transnational mobility within the Community for education and training purposes: European Quality Charter for Mobility [Official Journal L 394 of 30.12.2006].

- *information and guidance*: every candidate should have access to clear and reliable sources of information and guidance on mobility and the conditions in which it can be taken up, including details of the Charter itself and the roles of sending and hosting organisations;
- *learning plan*: a plan is drawn up and signed by the sending and hosting organisations and participants before every stay for education or training purposes. It must describe the objectives and expected outcomes, the means of achieving them, and evaluation, and must also take account of reintegration issues;
- *personalisation*: mobility must fit in with personal learning pathways, skills and motivation of participants, and should develop or supplement them;
- *general preparation*: before departure, participants should receive general preparation tailored to their specific needs and covering linguistic, pedagogical, legal, cultural or financial aspects;
- *linguistic aspects*: language skills make for more effective learning, intercultural communication and a better understanding of the host country's culture. Arrangements should therefore include a pre-departure assessment of language skills, the possibility of attending courses in the language of the host country and/or language learning and linguistic support and advice in the host country;
- *logistical support*: this could include providing participants with information and assistance concerning travel arrangements, insurance, the portability of government grants and loans, residence or work permits, social security and any other practical aspects;
- *mentoring*: the hosting organisation should provide mentoring to advise and help participants throughout their stay, also to ensure their integration;
- *recognition*: if periods of study or training abroad are an integral part of a formal study or training programme, the learning plan must mention this, and participants should be provided with assistance regarding recognition and certification. For other types of mobility, and particularly those in the context of non-formal education and training, certification by an appropriate document, such as the Europass, is necessary;
- *reintegration and evaluation*: on returning to their country of origin, participants should receive guidance on how to make use of the competences acquired during their stay and, following a long stay, any necessary help with reintegration. Evaluation of the experience acquired should make it possible to assess whether the aims of the learning plan have been achieved;
- *commitments and responsibilities*: the responsibilities arising from these quality criteria must be agreed and, in particular, confirmed in writing by all sides (sending and hosting organisations and participants).

Finally, we should distinguish between what is "selection norms/standards/criteria" and what is "quality norms/standards/criteria". Most learning mobility activities are financed by programmes, and all programmes are ultimately the result of political compromises and decisions, and often pursue other goals alongside that of promoting mobility as such. Project selection is therefore often motivated by other (extrinsic) considerations rather than by an assessment of the intrinsic merits of a particular project alone. A quality framework should therefore have a general theoretical basis rather than being grounded in the rationale and practices emanating from a particular programme. Selection criteria are normative, and may refer to specific target groups, choices of host countries, use of specific tools etc.

Towards a quality framework for learning mobility in a context of youth work

The primary challenge with regard to formulating a quality framework in and EPLM-context is the very broad scope of activity types, target groups and learning objectives that it must cover:

"The EPLM focuses on the learning mobility of young people and of practitioners in the youth field, and particularly in various forms of youth work, which, in the view of the EPLM, should be supported by European youth policy. The EPLM focuses on non-formal learning with links to informal learning as well as to formal education. Learning mobility in this framework aims to increase participation, active citizenship, intercultural learning and dialogue, individual competency development and employability of young people. Mobility is also to be understood as a possible source of genuine and diverse learning experiences, and it therefore becomes important to critically investigate links between learning mobility (settings and contexts) and identity building. The EPLM, in its work, not only considers European youth mobility policies and programmes, but is also more generally interested in learning mobility as a set of complex social processes transforming the conditions of growing up in Europe".[8]

Learning mobility-activities under this umbrella thus covers activities as diverse as:

- project-based, short-term multilateral encounters of groups of young people
- individual, long-term school stays in a framework of formal upper-secondary education, as organised by exchange organisation such as AFS and Youth for Understanding
- individual placements in organisations and institutions under the European Voluntary Service (EVS).

Any quality framework would need to take this diversity into account, either by producing different sub-sets of quality framework for different types of learning mobility (the standard-based approach), or develop a general framework that covers all types of learning mobility (the criteria-based approach).

A second challenge concerns the epistemological grounding of standards/criteria in such a quality framework. Even though learning mobility is widespread and involves very large numbers of young people in Europe every year and substantial funding mechanisms[9], it remains an under-researched phenomenon. Consequently, much of our knowledge on this is not based on systematic research, but relies on anecdotal evidence and so called "examples of good practice", whose status is somewhat uncertain. As an example of this, we may take the "principle of concordance" (or "personalisation" as it is called in the European Quality Charter for Mobility), which stipulates that there should be coherence and cohesion between target group, learning objectives and type of learning mobility. Whereas it makes sense that not all types of learning mobility are suited to all types of target groups, and that certain learning objectives are better acquired in some contexts than others, we only have little research-based evidence that can tell us e.g. exactly what types of learning mobility that are best suited to specific learning outcomes; or how they are suited to different target groups.

Important preliminary steps towards the elaboration of a quality framework for learning mobility in the youth field must therefore comprise –

- a discussion and decision on the exact scope and nature of the quality framework
- a comparative analysis of existing frameworks, and how and under what circumstances the new framework complements or even replaces these;
- an overview of existing knowledge in the field with a view to securing- if possible – a firm, evidence-based grounding for the framework.

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[8] EPLM website 16.04.2016 (http://pjp-eu.coe.int/da/web/youth-partnership/european-platform-on-learning-mobility)
[9] See e.g.: Study on mobility developments in school education, vocational education and training, adult education and youth exchanges. European Commission, 2013