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„Research-Practice-Dialogue“ (RPD)

Since its foundation in 1989, Research-Practice-Dialogue (RPD) has contributed significantly to research activities regarding trends and future perspectives of international youth work. Research-Practice-Dialogue encompasses interdisciplinary and cross-organisational exchange between academia and practice in the field of international youth work.

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Fact Sheet 1/2018

“Why not? Young people and their access to international exchange projects: Restraints, barriers and contributing factors”

Methodology and key findings of the research project

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Context in Germany

Previous research has shown evidence about the positive impact of participating in learning mobility activities for young people. Participants can improve social, personal and intercultural competences. In the German context a diverse field of different providers and support structures is existing. Yet the majority of the target group is educated and belongs to a certain social group. Constraints and barriers which are hindering young people to participate are manifold. There are psychological, economical, structural and political reasons why young people are not partaking in international projects.

Objectives of the research

Every young person should have the possibility to gain international experience within the scope of international youth exchanges. That is why the research sets the following objectives:

- Close the data gaps in the field of international youth work and learning mobility,
- gain evidence-based knowledge about underrepresented groups and find out about their situation and needs for improving ways of access,
- identify barriers of access,
- develop strategies to improve access and reduce barriers.

The key questions of the study were as follows:

- How many young people have already participated? How many are interested or are likely to participate in future?
- Are there certain young people who are not reached yet from existing offers?
- Which aspects are influencing a young person in deciding whether to participate or not?
- What exactly are the barriers young people face?

Research design

In order to analyze these questions, the German Network “Research and Practice in Dialogue: international youth work” (RPD)¹, designed in cooperation with four research institute an interdisciplinary and multi-methodological research project:

- SINUS-Institute conducted a representative survey of 2.380 young people in the age of 14 to 27 using their model of youth milieus in Germany².
- „Institut für Kooperationsmanagement“ (IKO) analyzed existing literature and studies. Additionally, they interviewed 49 young people out of the survey’s sample who did not participate in international youth exchanges yet.
- The research association „Freizeitenevaluation“ offers a self-evaluation tool for youth exchanges, called „i-EVAL“³. Already existing data was reanalyzed to gain a clearer image of underrepresented groups. Moreover, a panel was initiated to improve the representativity of the data, which is still ongoing.



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- The institute for research in non-formal education at University of applied sciences Cologne (TH Cologne) asked 40 youth workers and other experts in the field about their experiences with the target group. The structural and youth policy framework was another focus in the interviews.

The project was supported by an advisory board. Representatives of departments and agencies as well as funding bodies were members of this board and ensured the dialogue with central stakeholders of practice.

Key Findings

Definition: What do we mean by international youth exchange?

The field of international youth exchange is diverse and covers a wide range of programs. In this context it was particularly important to define precisely the object of research. In the context of the study, international youth research includes programs which ensure encounter of young people living in different countries. The research consortium distinguishes between programs in non-formal or formal education settings. In both settings programs exist which are carried out individually or in a group setting. The object of the research includes youth exchanges, workcamps and volunteer services (non-formal education) as well as school exchange programs and internships abroad (formal education). Formats like Au-Pair, Work-and-travel, school trips or a semester abroad are not part of the research's object.

Participants and potential target groups

SINUS Institute asked young people about their knowledge of several programs as well as about reasons which lead to participation or hindered them of participating. It became obvious that there are large groups of young people, who already participated or are willing to participate in future. Three groups were identified:

1. Young people, who are experienced in the field of international youth exchanges (non-formal or formal education). They have already participated and are likely to participate again (26 %).
2. Young people who have already been abroad (i.e. on work-and-travel), but not in the sense of the defined focus of international youth exchanges (26 %).
3. Young people, who have not been abroad yet besides from holidays and expressed interest and motivation to participate in youth exchanges (11 %).

Besides these groups, 37 % of the sample said, that they are not interested in participating in the programs.

Social background of the target group and reasons to participate

To gather more knowledge about the social background of participants, SINUS model of youth milieus was used, which generated clusters of young people based on their educational degree and normative setting. The sample of the survey was also oriented on the model to reach a high level of representativity. The results show, that some groups are underrepresented, but important factors which lead to participation are comprehensive in all milieus. For 90% of the sample intrinsic motives like having fun, gather new experiences or getting to know a new culture are most important. These reasons seem to be relevant for all groups. Extrinsic motives like chances for their career or their parent's opinion are of secondary importance.

Obstacles and barriers

Young people are hindered of participating in youth exchanges out of various reasons. Often, they do not know about the opportunities or do not consider these opportunities to be relevant for themselves. This lack of information plays an important role, as many of them stated, that they simply do not know the programs. The social environment, family and friends are some of the most effective sources of information.

The studies of TH Cologne and IKO showed, that the chance of going abroad in the frame of a youth exchange is seen as a reward for high performing and active young people. A student with good marks is more likely to be taken along in a school exchange than a disruptive one. Especially experiences in formal education lead to those assumptions, which become than a hindering factor. Another relevant assumption is about the high costs of participating in youth exchanges, which also build barriers and hinder young people. Like the motives, expressed barriers are not related to the milieus young people belong to. This underlines the finding, that potential participants can be found in every societal group.

Survey of youth workers: Disadvantage and luxury

The access study shows that young people which are not participating in international youth exchange are diverse and to be found in every milieu. Following the results, the conclusion that young people, who are not participating in youth exchange programs are only those facing social disadvantages is therefore not valid. Nevertheless, for the interviewed experts and youth workers this assumption is clearly present, and they tend to build clear connections between disadvantages and non-participation. Besides the field of international youth exchanges is described as a high-level and luxury activity, which is demanding for professionals and happens on top to their regular work. Funding programs are seen as complicated

structures which are not easy to access. This correlation replicates the assumed disadvantage and leads to the creation of special programs for the so-called disadvantaged and build better access for those. This approach can be effective since it is reaching out to a certain group of non-participants. But it does not support the removal of structural barriers grounded in the framework of youth policies.

Strengthening youth work

In the perspective of the research consortium resources and structures of youth work needs to be improved especially on a local level to remove barriers of access in youth exchanges effectively. To reach all groups of young people, youth exchanges need to be related to young people's living environment. Participative approaches and programs created by young people can be realized in local youth work by the support of regional, national and European structures. Professionals need to be better qualified in coordinating and implementing exchange programs. Moreover, funds should be easier to access and proposals for budgets less complex. For that purpose, fundamental modification in the financing system of international youth exchanges need to be achieved in order to give the opportunity of participating in international youth exchange to every young person.

¹ <https://www.sinus-institut.de/en/sinus-solutions/sinus-youth-milieus/>

² <https://www.i-eval.eu/en>

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