

New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 51

Active Participation and Informal learning in Young people's transitions to the labour market

This is an Interim Briefing Paper of the project that started in July 2001

Context of the Research

Many young people move from formal education into work by actively choosing what they wish to do in the labour market. However, for some, especially those with poor qualifications, their active participation in choosing their pathway is rather more limited and can result in a lack of motivation and disengagement. Their transition often involves them being channelled into training schemes, neglecting individual aspirations and failing to address individual strengths that do not directly correspond to formal qualifications.

This project focuses upon young people's active participation in their transition to the labour market by comparing disengaged young people with "risk biographies" to those with "choice biographies". In addition, it also considers the impact of both formal and informal learning on this transition process by analysing policies for young people in transition, that involve active participation and recognition of informal learning. Using the case studies from different regions the project aims to assess whether these policies are successful at enhancing motivation for active re-engagement in transitions to work compared to existing conventional schemes. Specific consideration is being given to the impact of strengthening the role of local youth policies within national transition systems.

The research is taking place in nine European countries - Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom.

Initial Conclusions

1. Getting the active involvement of young people does not form a key part of existing transition policies.
- Disadvantaged young people are seen as having "individual deficits" that need to be rectified rather than they being entitled to subjectively choose a meaningful career.

- Compared to other parts of Europe, the Scandinavian countries seem to provide the most scope for active participation by providing choice at different levels. The orientation towards individual development of young people tends to be more important than direct entry into the labour market. Individual counselling is focused on enhancing intrinsic motivation. Participation in education and training is rewarded by financial allowances.
2. Young people across Europe and at different levels of education share a high distrust of formal education and employment related services such as vocational guidance.
- They consider that they are not treated as individuals and are critical of being subjected to curricula and procedures that do not enhance their life prospects.
 - If available, they prefer informal rather than formal support.
 - But this does also reproduce social inequality. Those without formal qualifications and family support strategically increase their “resources” through informal learning and support. However, often they do not get the necessary recognition for their informal skills. Their social networks can be supportive, but also increase exclusion due to the lack of connections to other social systems.
 - There is some evidence that young men have more difficulties in maintaining motivation after a series of de-motivating experiences in the formal system. Young women seem to be more capable of managing their motivation in a reflexive way although this may be hidden from those offering advice and support. But, this does not mean that they are more successful in finding their ways into recognised positions.
3. For most young people interviewed, their involvement in initiatives represented a “biographical turning point” where they could either re-invest the motivation they had individually maintained or experience a re-discovery of their motivation. They experienced: -
- Relationships with project workers based on trust.
 - Being part of a “family” – due to close relationships with project workers and with other participants (group building being a central part of the project methods).
 - Non-formal learning and training situations in which they can influence the content, the speed and forms of learning.
 - Being given responsibility for their own learning, but also for processes and decisions regarding the group and the project.

- Respect and recognition for their own choices and aspirations – even if not corresponding to the projects' objectives (e.g. dropping out).
4. However, the experience of motivation through participation does not result in sustainable inclusion for all young people:
- There is limited success in effectively providing young people recognised qualifications *and* experiences of empowerment and motivation through active participation (still there are a few that do succeed).
 - Organised youth work projects are often highly participatory, but the competencies they provide are hardly ever recognised by employers, the employment service or training institutions.
 - Vocational training and employment schemes are often administered by rigid guidelines limiting the space for individual choice and influence.
 - Projects funded by local municipalities are more likely to combine subjective and systematic aspects, respectively to integrate youth policy elements with education, training and labour market policies. However they are more vulnerable to policy change and they are a minor part of national transitions systems.
 - Most agencies are third sector organisations that have credibility with young people and the flexibility to consider individuals with different needs and interests. However, their funding situation is often unstable due to short-term policy initiatives.

Initial Recommendations

Policies addressing young people in their transition from school to work need to: -

1. Put young people at the centre of the policy and involve them in active participatory initiatives.
2. Consider that the lack of motivation of young people is due to restricted choice and lack of recognition of their assets rather than due to "individual deficits".
3. Recognise and include youth work initiatives within integrated education, training and labour market policies.
4. Fund initiatives in a way that provides security and continuity for the organisations running them.

5. Develop initiatives that provide “hard” resources such as recognised qualifications, jobs and/or income for young people but within “soft” youth work settings.

Research into young people in their transitions to work should: -

6. Consider the dynamics involved in the processes of de-motivation and re-motivation and what facilitates them.
7. Include subjective perspectives through qualitative research that can provide knowledge on the relevance that “policy offers” have for their “clients” and thus explain why some initiatives are used by young people and others not.

Further Information

The full title of the project is: “Youth Policy and Participation. Potentials of participation and informal learning in young people’s transitions to the labour market. A comparative analysis in 10 European regions”. The final report is due in October 2004.

The project web site at <http://www.iris-egris.de/yoyo/> . Several intermediate reports are available at this web site.

Partner details

Key Publications

No publications have been produced yet except working papers that can be downloaded from the project website.

Research Institutions

IRIS, Institute for Regional Innovation, Tübingen, Germany
Deutsches Jugendinstitut München, Germany
AREA, Asociacion Regional y Europea de Analisis, Valencia, Spain
University of Leiden, Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences, Netherlands
National Agency for Supporting Youth Initiatives, Bucharest, Romania
University of Copenhagen, Department of Psychology, Denmark
University of Lisbon, Institute of Social Sciences, Portugal
University of Ulster, School of Policy Studies, United Kingdom
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