



# Transnational peer learning as an instrument for enhancing European cooperation in the youth field

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# Introduction

(Transnational) peer learning is a European process that provides opportunities for Europe's policy makers and practitioners in similar positions to learn from each other's experiences and knowledge through direct contact and concrete cooperation.

In bringing together expertise from a variety of backgrounds, shared learning provides new insights and broadens the range of cognitive structures. Combining these different perceptions leads to new ideas.

In the context of European cooperation between countries, peer learning schemes are being implemented ever more frequently in various policy fields (education, employment, social policy) as important and complex instruments of mutual learning that help to deliver innovative policies and practices in a rapidly changing society. However, in the youth field there is still little systematic experience with peer learning activities in the sense of professional and structural mutual learning.<sup>1</sup>

In March 2015, the German National Agency of the Erasmus+ Youth in Action programme and the Dutch Youth Institute organised a European expert meeting on peer learning in the youth field to help produce a common understanding of the term peer learning in the youth field in Europe.

Around 25 experts came together to

- present and discuss various formats of cross-border peer learning and experiences in-depth, also from other EU policy fields,
- clarify the conditions and identify the potential of peer learning,
- discuss strategies to raise awareness of peer learning as an effective instrument for promoting youth issues and youth policy.

This paper outlines some of the core results of this meeting and aims at inspiring the European debate around peer learning in the youth field.

The European Union's current Work Plan for Youth (2016-2018) foresees to address peer learning in a more structured way.

This paper is designed to contribute to this process, whose clear aim it is to develop a systematic approach to peer learning as a strategy so it can feed into policy developments that seek to bring about systematic change.

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<sup>1</sup> Mutual learning can be seen as a generic term with more or less the same meaning as the term peer learning. However, in the European debate peer learning is increasingly replacing mutual learning which was, e.g., still used in the Council Resolution on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018). In the present text, peer learning is mostly used instead of mutual learning. It seems recommendable to continue using peer learning in future.

# Context and political framework

There are many reasons why countries or organisations engage in international exchange and cooperation to generate input to further develop their national frameworks. These reasons can be found above all in the global processes of change (globalisation). It has become clear that today's fields of experience and actions are more and more determined by global dynamics. Ludger Pries (2007) refers to this as the "transnationalisation of the social world", meaning that national social policy and social work approaches in isolation are unable to offer viable solutions in what is an increasingly transnational world.

Generally, the realisation has grown that international discourses, comparative thinking, research and cooperation in social work is of increasing relevance.

This is also why peer learning is becoming more and more important also in the youth field, and has become established as a concept in the European Union and Council of Europe's common work on youth issues.

An important framework document for youth policy is the Council Resolution on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018) which proposes mutual learning<sup>2</sup> as a core instrument of youth policy and of the European cooperation: "Mutual learning is a key element in this framework of cooperation. It provides the opportunity to identify and learn from good practices in different Member States. Mutual learning will be carried out by such means as peer learning activities, conferences and seminars, high level fora or expert groups as well as through, studies and analyses, and web-based networks, with the involvement of relevant stakeholders."<sup>3</sup>

The foundation for youth policy in the European Union is the open method of coordination (OMC), an intergovernmental mechanism of policy cooperation in those areas in which the EU has no real competence. The OMC rests on soft law mechanisms such as guidelines and indicators, benchmarking and sharing of best practice<sup>4</sup> The OMC could not function without instruments like peer learning. This is what lends peer learning such an important role in this policy cooperation. It is not about solving certain issues directly, but rather about working towards political decision-making. It is an approach that involves learning from each other in certain aspects of youth policy by listening to each other and building relationships. Peer learning gives priority to the process, not to certain predetermined goals and outcomes.

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2 See footnote 1.

3 See [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32009G1219\(01\)&from=EN](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32009G1219(01)&from=EN)

4 See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open\\_Method\\_of\\_Coordination](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_Method_of_Coordination)

The European Union's Work Plan for Youth, which runs through to 2018, puts a more thematic focus on youth cooperation. It provides a framework for generating knowledge and evidence through expert groups, which in turn will create a basis for peer learning activities and peer reviews.

European cooperation is also a focal point of the Council of Europe's political agenda on youth. In its Agenda 2020, the Conference of Ministers defined in 2008 the priorities for youth policy and action of the CoE. These include the promotion of human rights and democracy, of living together in diverse societies and of the social inclusion of young people.

Its implementation is based among other things on two instruments:

- intergovernmental and international cooperation on youth policy development, with a particular focus on setting standards and supporting their implementation;
- the provision of services for countries, in particular through international reviews of national youth policies and youth policy advisory missions.

The main body overseeing intergovernmental cooperation in youth is the European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ), which is composed of representatives of ministries or public administrations in charge of youth affairs. The CDEJ predominantly oversees the work being done to develop youth policies in the member states of the CoE. An important peer learning tool is the international reviews of national youth policies, which involves evaluating national policies so they can inspire changes in national policy-making based on international "standards". These national reviews also feed into a cross-border assessment of youth policy challenges and solutions in Europe. In this way, the international review contributes to more knowledge on and to the development and implementation of the Council of Europe's youth policy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cf.: CoE „Intergovernmental co-operation in the youth field“ and  
➤ [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/youth/IG\\_Coop/youth\\_policy\\_reviews\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/youth/IG_Coop/youth_policy_reviews_en.asp)

# Peer learning tools and experiences in other policy fields

Learning from one another through Europe-wide cooperation has been a core element of the European integration process since its inception. EU funding policy, especially in regard to the Structural Funds, has promoted transnational learning at the political and civil society level since the late 1980s. A more systematic understanding of peer learning began to evolve around 2000 as a consequence of a more formalized open method of cooperation in the social, employment and education fields. A common concern from the beginning was how to ensure the greater involvement of decision and policy makers in the EU member states and how to organize a learning process when systems, cultures and problem-solving concepts are different.

Policy fields such as employment and social protection or even the education and training sector with its elaborated peer learning measures could be expected to inspire the youth field.

The peer review in the field of social inclusion and social protection policies of the EU serves to stimulate and support mutual learning and the exchange of good practices between the Member States, with the final objective of contributing to the further development and improvement of national and European social inclusion policies.

Peer reviews focus on good practices, specifically any particularly good results in themes relevant to the agendas of the European Union, or support member states in gathering expert advice from other states in preparation for a policy reform, new programme or institutional reform.

- At the heart of a peer review is a good practice, which is understood as “a concrete, well-documented and assessed policy measure/initiative which:
- proved to be a success and to exercise a positive impact;
- illustrates an approach that inspires others;
- allows others to capitalise on the experience (what does and does not work under what circumstances);

highlights possibilities and constraints for transferability. It is not necessary that the practice can be replicated 1:1 in other countries/settings: The aim is inspiration, not imitation”.<sup>6</sup>

In the context of European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020), peer learning is again understood as an integral part of the cooperation process. A core element is a set of working groups whose primary focus is to support the member states in further policy development through peer learning and the identification of good practices, as well as to understand what works in education. The working groups bring together experts - on a voluntary basis - from the member states, which identify and analyse pertinent examples of policies within the EU to identify common principles, challenges and success factors that can be transferred to other member states.

Clearly defined mandates decided by the member states and the European Commission for the working groups (six for 2016-2018) ensure a thematic focus, clear expectations regarding outputs (e.g., shared tools, handbooks, policy guidance, peer learning activities as stand-alone outputs, support for following up and incubating Erasmus+ KA 3 policy experimentations), the role and form of peer learning, and dissemination activities.<sup>7</sup> These thematic working groups take existing evidence, broaden it and initiate evidence-based discussions and learning exchanges.

The European Territorial Cooperation activities as part of the European Cohesion policy promote cross-border policy learning among regional and local entities. Policy making is understood as being embedded in a sphere in which different stakeholders may impact on design, implementation and evaluation along the policy cycle and across territorial government levels. Nevertheless, in many of these cross-border programmes policy learning starts with administrative capacity-building. This cooperation gives the European Commission a more active role in coordinating and complementing the efforts at national level to learn from the various ways the regional cross-border initiatives organise their exchanges of experience.

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<sup>7</sup> European Commission, Education and Training 2010, Working Group Mandates 2016-2018.

The peer learning experiences in various European policy fields show that it is important to define the aim of learning and cooperation. Is the aim to work together developing a shared understanding and recommendations for policy and practice? Is it to inspire change and reform, or mainly to engage in policy learning and transfer or, ultimately, to exchange practical know-how or capitalise on EU-funded projects?

Taking into consideration the various traditions, methods and outcomes, the guiding principles of peer learning can be summarised as follows: a European agenda with clear objectives, a knowledge base, cooperation between experts and decision-makers, a relevance to Member States, and the vertical levels.

Practitioners' experience shows that policy learning is mainly successful when the following prerequisites are in place:

- Both substantive policy issues and operational issues are addressed.
- Underlying philosophy, values, ideas and principles are shared.
- Needs (at regional and local level) are identified and messages, indicators and methods developed on that basis.
- Expectations are precise, objectives are clear, and people have clear expectations of the learning experience, and about what/how they should contribute.

“With regard to policy learning and transfer, innovation is needed but often meets reluctance. If networks still appear as good channels to boost common learning/values/experiences, some trends emerge, as the following: interactive events and tools, focus group approach, stronger focus on stakeholder-driven projects and activities, increased transnational outreach, rapid response to demands by policy-makers (shorter and easy-accessible publications), e-learning and Webinars, intensive use of ICT and social media (with working groups for instance), study visits (revival), use of infographics, peer-reviews. There is a true need to go for different formats of events, non-conferences and for learning in appropriate environments”.<sup>8</sup>

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8 CoR, Policy learning and transfer between EU regions and cities: Successes, lessons learnt and trends, 2015.

# Peer learning tools and target groups in the youth field

The term peer learning can refer to a variety of methods and approaches. In fact many of the characteristics of peer learning can be understood as dimensions rather than clear cut methodologies. When it comes to the different forms of peer learning there are of course different levels of learning – political, structural or individual. The core aim may be to develop European policy strategies and solutions, or it may be to stimulate the further development of local and national policy and practice. Other aspects that determine the form of peer learning are comparability, effects of dissemination, financial and temporal resources, and existing instruments.

The following are just some examples of peer learning from the youth field that differ in terms of impact and approach<sup>9</sup>:

- Virtual knowledge systems and networks,<sup>10</sup>
- lectures by foreign decision-makers, researchers or experts,
- European and international seminars and training courses for professionals,
- study visits and expert programmes,
- European and international workshops, expert meetings and conferences,
- expert exchanges, observation visits and job shadowing assignments,
- European and international project and network cooperation.

In cases where peer learning aims to promote youth policy cooperation and achieve concrete political outcomes, the following forms are relevant:

- Peer reviews,<sup>11</sup>
- policy reviews,<sup>12</sup>
- multilateral/transnational youth policy cooperation,
- thematical expert groups,
- high-level expert meetings/forums,
- peer learning cluster/peer learning groups.<sup>13</sup>

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9 See also. Peer Learning als Instrument der EU-Jugendstrategie (Peer learning as instrument of the EU Youth Strategy), Diskussionspapier der Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Kinder- und Jugendhilfe – AGJ (Child and Youth Welfare Association), Berlin 29./30. November 2012.

10 IT and digital peer learning is becoming increasingly relevant. Thanks to the internet all kinds of people can be quickly and efficiently reached. Crowdsourcing makes use of this possibility by “outsourcing” problem-solving or learning to a larger (online) public. Whatever you intend to explore, online there are a number of people who have experience with that particular issue, and the opportunity for peer learning is there. According to its proponents, crowdsourcing has become „learning for everyone, by everyone, about almost anything.“

11 Examples of peer reviews are the National Youth Policy Reviews run by the Council of Europe to evaluate the youth policy systems of CoE member states.

12 Policy reviews are comparative examinations of political approaches pursued by a group of member states.

13 Peer learning clusters are peer learning activities at EU level that are organised by groups (“clusters”) of member states interested in specific topics.

These few examples indicate that peer learning takes many forms and serves many interests.

### **Some concrete examples from the youth field**

In the youth field, peer learning can be used on very different levels: by young people themselves, youth work students, youth workers, youth policy makers, youth work organizations, municipalities, and international organizations and networks. It can be used to promote young people's social skills, grow their identity, develop agency, etc. Peer learning is also an instrument for youth workers to learn from their colleagues' practices. Youth work departments and youth organizations can engage in peer learning to observe each other's best practices. Finally, peer learning can be a means to develop and enact youth policies and policy initiatives by finding issues of common interest which require national or international support.

### **Young people learning from each other in international youth work settings (youth exchanges)**

We understand youth work to be above all a *field of learning*, and international youth work with its manifold learning experiences is no different. International youth groups such as those that form during a youth exchange or similar form an intense "learning community". (Peer) learning in such settings occurs in many different forms. The young participants acquire intercultural, communication, linguistic and social skills in a group. Together, they develop values and learn how to interact with each other.

### **Youth workers learning from each other in international contexts (youth worker mobility)**

What applies for young people is also valid for youth workers. In international settings, peer learning among youth workers occurs via different activities such as transnational/international seminars, training courses, contact-making events, study visits or job shadowing/observation periods abroad in an organisation active in the youth field. The participation of youth workers in such activities contributes to their own capacity building as well as to that of their organization provided the key end product of learning is new knowledge transformed into work practices.

On the European level, professional and more systematic peer learning among youth workers and their organisations has been established through the foundation of POYWE (Professional Open Youth Work in Europe) – the first European network of its kind.

### **Inter-service learning – local youth services learning from each other**

At the municipal level, the foundation of the peer learning network “InterCity Youth - The European Network of Local Departments for Youth Work” (November 2014) indicates that there is widespread interest among the municipal departments and their directors in learning from each other. In many countries municipal youth services have already established national networks to promote peer learning. The challenge for the European network is to create formats for long-term peer learning that reflect the diversity of European local government youth work.

### **Policy development – policy makers, experts and national authorities learning from each other**

We understand policy development and policy change to be a core element and aim of international peer learning processes. European youth policy is essentially characterized by a European cooperation framework based on the open method of coordination. Different tools and instruments are applied under the OMC, among which are tools that can be described as peer learning schemes, such as high-level expert meetings or the relatively new form of European expert groups that the European Commission established as part of its Work Plan for Youth. Another OMC-based form of peer learning between member states is multilateral cooperation projects where delegations of different member states learn from each other over a longer period in a series of various events (seminars, job shadowing, conferences etc.) on a predefined topic.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> One example of a multilateral cooperation project was “European Peer Learning on Youth Policy” that was initiated by Germany and ran between 2011 and 2013. The project brought together seven member states and focused on core youth policy questions.

# Framework conditions and characteristics of peer learning

## Clarifying the term “peer”

Transnational peer learning is a mutual learning process between two or more persons, groups or organisations within an international context. But what is the exact meaning of the term *peer*? Which persons, groups or organisations learn from each other, or more precisely, which criteria must persons, groups or organisations fulfil so that a mutual learning process can be effective?

The term *peer* is generally used to describe a “group of same age” or a “group of equivalent persons” and is often used in a youth research context. This definition is based on the hypothesis that especially during the phase of life that is youth, individuals are far more likely to align their lifestyle with those of people of the same age than to those of their parents. In this context, the term *peer education* is often mentioned, which refers to the process of mutual learning in a group of similarly aged individuals.

However, peer learning may also take place in mixed-age groups or in groups in which the members have similar interests. The peer group may then also be referred to as an interest group, composed of members who may have completely different social backgrounds but are linked for a certain time thanks to a similar or identical interest and who are not hierarchically organised (by virtue of their position or responsibilities). The special effect of this kind of peer learning is that similar interests generate a group dynamic which stimulates and promotes learning.

Thus our use of the term *peers* in a youth context refers to groups of people who are linked by similar interests and backgrounds and who hope to gain an additional learning effect through peer learning.

- \_ Similar interests may be based on
- \_ their background in a specific field of work or action,
- \_ similar institutional or structural basic conditions,
- \_ joint work on a problem or
- \_ a specialist understanding.

“Similar” does not necessarily imply that one is a *peer* in the sense of “same”, “same age” or “same social background”. Nevertheless, there are core requirements that should be respected in order for the process to be called *peer learning*:

- \_ The similarities are strong enough to produce a shared understanding of the learning process and
- \_ the existing differences create productive “irritation” (which leads to learning).

In any case, a precise composition of the peer group according to their field of work or action, the topic and the problem at hand is crucial.

## Peer learning is non-formal learning

In our understanding, there are major overlaps between peer learning and non-formal learning. The core principles of non-formal learning are also those of peer learning:

### — *It is voluntary*

Peers engage in the learning process voluntarily. Any form of pressure or formalisation would distort the character and potential of peer learning.

### — *It is learner-centered*

Peer learning focuses on the specific learning needs and wishes of the peer or peer group and does not follow a fixed curriculum or learning aim.

### — *It is process-oriented*

Peer learning does not strictly follow common goals nor does it pursue expected outcomes. The peer learning process as such must be dynamic and flexible.

## Collective learning

Peer learning, also referred to as collective learning, collaborative learning, community of learners, knowledge building community, etc., is a collective activity. It clearly stands out from the current formal learning paradigm that is dominated by the idea of individual learning. Youth work, e.g., is mainly characterised as learning through or in groups.

## Reciprocal learning

Peer learning should ideally happen in an atmosphere of equality. It is not a one-way street, but rather a form of learning which takes place between equals and which presupposes *reciprocity*. Reciprocal learning refers to a situation in which both learners, or an entire group, have something to give to each other. Learning from best practices, e.g., is a one-way street. One-dimensional dialogue and individual relationships are not good settings for peer learning. The aspect of reciprocity is crucial for peer learning.

## Other features of peer learning

### **Openness**

Openness primarily means to approach peer learning in an unprejudiced way in regard to the results, the process itself, the planning, and the involvement of partners. Openness requires a certain flexibility when it comes to the planning and implementation of the learning process.

### **Preparation**

Preparation is fundamental to any peer learning process. Preparation requires dealing actively with the topic in question, but also with the partners and their respective situations and basic conditions in their countries.

The contextual knowledge about the participating countries and their respective youth systems is vital to peer learning. In this context, important aspects include the social or youth policy context of a given country, the role of child and youth services and youth work, any legal, administrative, financial and structural issues, as well as the responsibilities and powers of statutory bodies vs. voluntary organisations on all levels (local/regional/national). The basis for this knowledge is systematic information and communication and a stable and trustful relationship between the partners and organisations involved in the peer learning process.

Possible forms of preparation can include intercultural training sessions, checklists and manuals, regional studies, the use of the European Knowledge Center for Youth Policy etc.

### **Facilitation**

A peer learning process requires sound facilitation that allows all participants to focus fully on the exchange and the learning process.

### **Documentation and dissemination**

The aim of documentation is to ensure the traceability and the transparency of the process and to chart individual steps, agreements and results. The documentation with all its elements (text, pictures, films) should be freely accessible to all participants. The documentation may be the main element of the transfer of results. This transfer and the dissemination of results is an integral part of the peer learning process and should be negotiated beforehand between the partners.

### **Resources**

To implement a peer learning process all partners should have at their disposal sufficient resources, especially sufficient time and financial resources. All partners should be able to contribute in equal measure, which guarantees a level playing field.

### **Continuity and accountability**

A (long-term) peer learning process requires continuity in terms of the participating persons, groups or organisations. All partners have to take responsibility for the process. Therefore it may be necessary to have a clear agreement on tasks and conditions between the partners.

# How Erasmus+ YIA can support peer learning in the youth field

Erasmus+ Youth in Action is the key instrument of European cooperation in the youth field. The core philosophy of the programme is to support peer learning. The various Key Actions of the programme offer opportunities for peer learning in its various forms as described in this paper.

## Key Action 1 – Mobility opportunities for young people

KA 1 promotes the mobility of young people (through youth exchanges and European Voluntary Service) as well as of youth workers (training courses, seminars, job-shadowing, study visits etc.) who wish to engage in a learning experience in another country. The different activities under KA 1 provide a wide range of peer learning experiences.

## Key Action 2 – Cooperation for innovation and exchange of good practices

Strategic Partnerships are the key feature of KA 2. They are an opportunity to collaborate with partners in other countries for a number of years on a given topic, undergo peer learning processes, or develop and test innovative practices.

Within KA 2, peer learning is understood as a continuous process of peer learning between experts and/or decision-makers working in the field of youth with regard to professional and political issues. Strategic Partnerships must have an impact that both benefits individual participants' professional development and feeds into the work of organisations and institutions.

Erasmus+ YIA should contribute to a more systemic impact. Strategic Partnerships have a special potential to do so.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See JUGEND für Europa, Funding Strategy for Strategic Partnerships for KA 2 - Strategic Partnerships under ERASMUS+ Youth In Action in Germany under

➤ [https://www.jugend-in-aktion.de/downloads/doctrine/JugendFuerEuropaJugendInAktionBundle:Dokument-file-147/JiA\\_Funding%20Strategy\\_SPs\\_EN\\_edg\\_fact\\_sheet.pdf](https://www.jugend-in-aktion.de/downloads/doctrine/JugendFuerEuropaJugendInAktionBundle:Dokument-file-147/JiA_Funding%20Strategy_SPs_EN_edg_fact_sheet.pdf)

## **Strategic cooperation projects within TCA**

The Transnational Cooperation Activities are an instrument for the National Agencies to support the implementation of the priorities and objectives of Erasmus+. The aim of TCA is to bring added value and increased quality to the overall programme implementation and thus contribute to strengthening the impact of the programme at systemic level.

Through various activities which are mostly based on the concept of peer learning, TCA helps to implement European cooperation in the youth field.

## **Key Action 3 – Support for policy reform**

Support for policy reform includes activities relating to the implementation of the European Union's youth policy agenda. Support for innovation and reform is the main element of this KA, based on transnational cooperation and learning from each other. KA 3 includes specific activities, such as forward-looking cooperation projects on policy development and European policy experimentations. Forward-looking cooperation projects are designed to support transnational cooperation by identifying, testing, developing and assessing innovative approaches in the field of youth. European policy experimentations are transnational cooperation projects that support the implementation of the objectives and themes of the European cooperation in the field of youth.

Transnational cooperation projects build on peer learning, exchanges of experience and good practice as well as evidence-building.

KA 3 supports transnational learning processes which more strongly consider the transfer and implementation angle of the EU's peer learning concept.

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