

48 hours in transition: Fresh ideas from young people

International youth conference “Visions for your Future”

Verena Münsberg

“Talking to other young people has given me lots of new hope for my job search”, says Ernestine from France. Ernestine, 22, is one of around 40 young people from all over Europe who travelled to Bonn to attend from 13 – 15 October 2014 an international youth conference entitled “Visions for your future” and to discuss the challenges that young Europeans face during their transition from school to vocational training or working life. They developed ideas on how to improve their situation and, towards the end of the conference, discussed them with youth policy and child and youth services experts.

Youth conference participants





Presentations and discussions at the youth conference

This meeting was not the first cross-border mobility experience for the young participants. All of them had previously taken part in different international youth projects where they discussed the challenges of transition with their peers. And all of them have first-hand experience of these challenges because of their personal situations: some come from socially disadvantaged families with few educational opportunities, others dropped out of school early, and some have an academic qualification but no hope of a job because of the long-term downturn in their home country's economy.

A dynamic warm-up exercise

The young participants travelled to the conference together with their personal coaches – the youth workers and educators who had already accompanied them in their international youth projects. They were delighted to reunite with the friends they had made during the projects, and curious to meet others who had attended projects other than their own. To break the ice, coaches Ute Sauerwein-Weber and Ansgar Büter-Menke began by mixing and matching the group randomly. Once they'd been assigned to small groups, they scribbled each other's first names on posters and the spelling of some produced much hilarity. Then came some physical exercise: Accompanied by heavy bass notes from the loudspeakers, the group marched through the large room in lines, clapping rhythmically and shouting "transitions" again and again. After the warm-up session came a speed-dating round: Everyone was given exactly one minute to find out as much as possible about the unknown person in front of him or her – a highly intense exercise that made the room buzz with conversation.

Introducing four international projects

With much anticipation, the young people and their coaches listened to the others' presentations of "their" international exchange projects. ManuFUNtory was first. Initiated by the Bruno Bröker Youth Centre in Ahrensburg, Germany, the project was implemented together with partners from Portugal, Denmark, Italy and Slovakia. The young participants had travelled to Germany to discuss the challenges of transition and spend a few days working in various local crafts and trades businesses. Haus der

Offenen Tür in Sinzig, Germany, joined forces with partner organisations in Italy, Spain and Hungary to tackle the transition challenge: The aim here was to let young people experience an international exchange that would strengthen their personal development and help them gain access to vocational training and employment. The Youth for Employment project, run by a Catholic youth social work organisation in Landshut and Munich, invited 40 young people from Egypt, Russia, Poland, France, Sweden and Germany to discuss and find solutions to the problem of youth unemployment. They identified best practices for promoting youth employment, drew up a list of existing support projects to encourage cross-border mobility, and developed political demands. The fourth initiative, the German-Spanish model project JobScouts on Tour, aims to make young people more employable by giving them an active role to play in careers counselling in formal and non-formal educational settings. This initiative, which also works with local businesses, was developed by Verein Niedersächsischer Bildungsinitiativen e.V. (VNB), an educational organisation, and Integrative Gemeinschaftsschule Hannover-Badenstedt, a comprehensive school. These organisations will continue to implement the project until mid 2015 together with their Spanish partners.

It actually works! Peer learning and intercultural experience

The youth conference was a good opportunity for participants to reinforce what they had already learned and experienced in their international exchange projects. *"On my project, I met people from Italy who are completely different from me but have similar problems. They just said, I can get through this. So I thought, I can too. I've decided to believe in myself and start a course in tourism management",* says Filipe from Portugal. Filipe, who is 19 and has African roots, lives with his unemployed father and three siblings in a run-down part of Lisbon. He used to hang around in the streets after school without much of a plan.



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Filipe

The committed social workers in his district invited him to the ManuFUNtory exchange project. He signed up, travelled to Germany and met young people from five countries with whom he spent a few days working for crafts and trades businesses in Northern Germany. Filipe realised for the first time in his life that despite the language barrier, his skills were valuable. It was very helpful, he says, to have been able to try his hand at various jobs. But the most valuable experience of all was meeting people from other European countries, he continues. *“I’ve learnt to extend my horizons and not to clam up when I meet people who have different opinions. This will be very helpful to me if things become difficult in future”,* he concludes.

Inspiration through cultural diversity

For his mate Emanuele, from a town near Turin in Italy, ManuFUNtory was also a turning point. After suddenly dropping out of school in March, Emanuele, 18, has decided to return to school and graduate. Despite the difficult labour market in Italy, he’s also decided to take a positive attitude to his future career plans. *“For us young Italians, it’s very helpful to see how successful Germany is at getting young people into training and introducing them to the world of work, for example by offering them internships. I’d love to somehow share this experience with people back home”,* he says. Emanuele was particularly impressed to see how people from very different cultural backgrounds were able to live and work together as part of their exchange project. *“Everyone wanted to share his or*





Thomas Thomer, Deputy Director-General at the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) at the youth conference

her talents, knowledge and identity with the others. That was amazing”, he says enthusiastically. The positive effects of all this cultural diversity spilled over into the youth conference, too: during the Intercultural Evening, the young people and their coaches presented the many culinary specialities that they had brought along especially for this occasion: sardines from Portugal and herring from Poland, cheese and ham from France and Italy, artisan sausages from Northern Germany and of course lots of sweets and desserts. The buffet was a great success and a major talking point for all participants.

In strong demand: Precise information

Time and again, the conference showed that many young people lack access to suitable information and advice at the local level. *“We need more youth centres that help us to find training places and give us information. You can’t just close them and claim it’s because there’s no money”*, demands Seyithan from Sinzig, Germany. Seyithan, 20 years old and son of Kurdish immigrants, graduated from technical school this year. All his applications for an internship were refused. The job centres were unable to help him in this situation, he remembers. On the contrary: They already put pressure on him to start applying while he was still sitting his exams. The only place he felt taken seriously was the youth centre in Sinzig. The counsellors sat down with him, discussed his career prospects and finally

offered him an internship in the accounts department. Seyitan is interested in politics and is lobbying for more youth participation. He also wants the voting age to be lowered. *“I want politicians to realise they need to spend more on education and youth work, because young people are the future”*, he says forcefully.

A necessity: Cross-sectoral cooperation

When it comes to managing the challenges of transition, it can be helpful for schools, non-formal educational institutions and local businesses to work closely together. *“I think, it’s great that we’re able to spend so much time talking to our teachers about our strengths and weaknesses and our future. We’re even able to invite local businesses*



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Emanuelle and Coach Chiara

to come and discuss career and training opportunities with us”, says Sarah. Sarah is a ninth-grade student at a comprehensive school in Badenstedt, a run-down part of Hanover, and participates in JobScouts on Tour, a model project led by her school in cooperation with an educational organisation (Verein Niedersächsischer Bildungsinitiativen e.V.) in her home state. Gabriella from Hungary, 24 years old, wishes her school back home had partnerships like this. It doesn’t offer any career guidance, the government-run information centres have only just been set up, and non-governmental organisations have hardly any money at their disposal for information that would be suitable for young people, she says. Gabriella did a number of internships and temporary jobs before the Carpathian Foundation Hungary introduced her to a project called “JobNet – Active citizens combating youth unemployment”. Together with Haus der Offenen Tür in Sinzig, Germany, and other organisations,



the project conducted a survey of labour market experts, unemployed and employed young people, social workers and company managers to find out what challenges young Europeans face as they look for jobs and training. The concluding report proposed a number of strategies to overcome these challenges.

Visions for the future

What do I want to be? What do I want to achieve? These are the most pressing questions for young people as they consider their future careers. So the next day, the young conference participants designed their own avatars: an idealised image of themselves, equipped with all the talents they need to look ahead to the future with confidence and



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Coach Jean-Baptiste



Youth conference participants presenting their ideas

courage. Their colourful drawings were proof that despite the differences in their situation, all young people have similar expectations for their future: They want a fulfilling, reasonably paid job that corresponds to their skills and interests. Besides work, they want to have enough time to spend with family and friends, and many also want to do charitable work. However, as Jean Baptiste Collet regretfully says, these social aspects are very often neglected in the debate surrounding transition. Jean Baptiste, 27, from France has been “in transition” for a long time, as he puts it himself. When he left school, he tried out various jobs and now works for organisations that manage international youth projects. Most recently, he was a coach on the Youth for Employment project. *“At the moment, all our children learn at school is how to make a quick buck. They’re not taught enough about how to contribute to their communities”, he says. “And those who fail at school are left behind. Society needs to rethink its attitude to these aspects.”*

Seize every opportunity...

Don’t give up in the face of adversity and seize every opportunity, even if it’s only small – those were the messages that Ralf Mengel from Hanover wanted to put across to the participants on the afternoon of day 2. In an inspiring interview, the 28-year-old former technical school pupil



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spoke of the high and low points of his search for an apprenticeship in the IT industry, of temporary employment contracts and his varied experience with government support programmes. The turning point for Ralf Mengel came in 2012, when a representative of an educational organisation (VNB) in his home state of Lower Saxony told him about an international exchange programme for long-term unemployed young people. Ralf jumped at the chance. Towards the end of the exchange, the Turkish partner organisation asked him whether he would like to stay in the country and spend a few months volunteering with them. *“I didn’t hesitate for a minute. My time in Turkey had been incredibly enriching, and I finally felt I was being offered some real prospects”, he remembers. He even decided to turn his back on Germany completely because his Turkish colleagues wanted to employ him as an IT specialist. However, just three months later the promise of long-term employment fell through and Ralf returned to Germany, homeless and jobless. Having completed yet another internship, he then fought his way back onto the labour market and today has a stable job in the computer industry. “I feel grateful that I was able to live and work abroad, that there were always people around me who would give me a chance, and that I never gave up on myself”, he says.*

...and believe in yourself

The participants then split into international groups to prepare presentations that they later held in front of the entire group. All of them took a critical yet positive look at their potential futures. Some groups had prepared short role-plays to show how young people with less than ideal prospects can gain access to training and employment if they develop intercultural skills in an international exchange programme or by volunteering. A humorous Polish-Italian talk show appealed to young people to be crea-



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Monika

tive when looking for jobs. And the energy-filled “future rap” using the well-known tune “Don’t worry, be happy” urged the audience to believe in their dreams and never stop pursuing them: “If you can dream it, you can do it!”

Be proactive!

So it’s clear that for many young people, being proactive, creative and open-minded is very important when it comes to planning the future. Hannah and Alex, friends from Ahrensburg in Northern Germany, would agree. The two girls are still reeling from the positive experiences they had while taking part in ManuFUNtory in July. Although they won’t graduate from school for a while yet, they are already thinking about what they want to do afterwards. Alex wants to be a media editor or actress, while Hannah is considering event management or marketing. “*You need to have a realistic idea of the professions that interest you, and talk to lots of people who work in those areas*”, says Alex. “*No one will tell you about these jobs if you don’t ask them to. You need to ask the right questions yourself*”, adds Hannah. Taking action, showing initiative – the girls know exactly what they are talking about. Both of them

decided to leave home after some severe trouble with their families. They’ve lived in a residential facility for young people for two years. The financial support they receive from the government doesn’t stretch to much, so Hannah and Alex feel it’s important for them to prepare now for life after school. That’s the reason why they decided to join ManuFUNtory and explore various professions, such as bricklaying, heating engineering and printing. “*We definitely don’t want to work in crafts and trades. But you need to try these things out so you get a realistic impression of what it’s like to work*”, says Hannah and Alex agrees: “*We’ve realised that it’s all about finding something that matches your personality. If you are not motivated, you’ll never be successful.*”

Mobility for all

Experiencing international mobility is incredibly valuable for one’s personal development, concluded the young conference participants on the last day during a session with youth policy and child and youth services experts from France, Germany and Luxembourg. They all agreed that there is a lot of room for improvement when it comes to informing young people about existing support programmes. Thomas Thomer, Deputy Director-General at the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) pointed out that mobility programmes need to be open to all young people, especially those with fewer opportunities. Albert from Spain agrees wholeheartedly. “*Don’t forget us young Europeans. Reach out to all of them, including the low academic achievers*”, he urged. Albert, a gardener by training, lives with his parents in a small town close to Barcelona. He’s been looking for a job for four years, has taken online courses on various subjects and dreams of building energy-efficient, “smart” houses one day.

An attentive audience at the youth conference





In the shark pool

Albert's story illustrates the damage that Spain's long-term economic crisis and high unemployment is causing to the country's young generation in particular. His unsuccessful job search made him dependent on his family and led him to become severely depressed. He began to see changes in his social environment that worried him greatly. *"The only ones who stand a chance are those who perform best and are most courageous"*, he says. *"You have to behave like a shark, or else you lose."* But Albert didn't want to be a shark. He began to volunteer with the Red Cross and help people who were even worse off than he was. This is how he found out about the existence of international exchange projects and finally settled on one that took him to Germany. The positive experiences he made there gave him fresh hope, he says. He was able to open his mind to new ideas and differing opinions. Albert now hopes to join the European Voluntary Service in Germany, and to get a second chance to make things work.

Ambassadors of their own future

During the final round of talks, Malika Kacimi from the Youth Experimental Fund of the French Ministry in charge of Youth, and Karine Brard-Guillet from France's National Council of "Missions Locales" encouraged the young people to join forces and contribute towards the political debate. This is, they said, the only way that the difficult situation faced by young Europeans can be resolved in the long term and in a manner that meets their needs. Nathalie Schirtz, head of the Transitions Department at Luxembourg's



National Youth Service, directed an appeal to the young people: *"Be ambassadors for your peers and for youth exchange programmes! Tell other young people about your positive experiences!"* Peer-to-peer propaganda, this is what many of the participants of the youth conference have already begun. For instance, the Youth for Employment project led to the setup of a Facebook page where the young participants have listed information about mobility projects across Europe. As Monika, a participant in the project, explains: *"There are already lots of good programmes that assist young people. If the European Commission can't get the job done, we simply need to take over and inform our peers. Maybe we could even start a campaign!"*

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