

Sharing Experiences of the Early Years of the Human Development Program

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A rock pile ceases to be a rock pile the
moment a single man contemplates it, bearing
within him the image of a cathedral.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

It has been a year now that 16 young people coming from four different continents started their learning journey together at the International YMCA University (IYU) in Kassel. They all met during their first residency of the Bachelor of Arts program in Human Development (HuD)¹ in Hintersee, in midst of the beautiful Bavarian Alps. With this “sharing of experiences” I would like to outline some of the features of the program, its philosophy, objectives and instructional design. Moreover I would like to talk about some of the experiences we had thus far.

¹ *The International YMCA University of Applied Sciences in Kassel was founded in 2009 and provides Bachelor and Master programs resting on the three pillars of Theology, Social Work and Management. It delivers these programs both face to face and online utilizing newest E-Learning technology. So far HuD is the only program offered in English (for more information please visit <http://www.cvjm-hochschule.de/index.php?id=785&L=0> . The university is officially accredited by the Wissenschaftsrat (accrediting body) and certified by the German government.*

Human Development and Youth Empowerment

Envisioning to develop an applied Bachelor-program that is relevant for YMCAs around the world in their endeavors to empower youth to face the challenges of the 21st century and using the capacity of a global movement, we sought for the input of as many international partners as possible. Our goal was to develop a program that is in line with the core YMCA principles of youth justice and that rests on the foundation of the Christian faith. Our key questions were simple: With regards to (1) *Learning Outcomes*: If you were to have the ideal youth leader, what should this person be able to do and know? (2) *Values*: Why do you deem this as important? (3) *Course Content*: How do you think could somebody acquire these skills and knowledge and what would they have to learn? Based on our findings we developed the curriculum of the program, a detailed module handbook, focusing on inter-cultural communication competence as the common theme throughout.

In order to align our efforts with current socio-political debates of development in the international arena, we chose the title *Human Development* for the program, which fits perfectly well to the YMCA World Alliance's agenda of Youth Empowerment. The United Nations define the term as follows:

Human Development is a process of enlarging people's choices. In principle these choices can be infinite and change in time. But at all levels of development the three

essential ones are for people to lead a long and healthy life, to acquire knowledge and to have access to resources needed for a decent standard of living.²

Looking at development, the program distinguishes between two dimensions of development which are inherently interrelated: holistic personal development and socio-political development. Therefore the module handbook also reflects both streams and wants to connect them in theory and practice.

Throughout the shared learning experiences students and instructors coming from developed, newly industrialized and developing countries also assess critical questions like: Who defines development and who sets the goals of development with what kind of purpose? What makes people happy and what is needed to find meaning? Is it possible to find a shared definition of a global common good?

Objectives and Learning Outcomes – the “What” of Learning

As mentioned above, aspects of personal development correlates with community or societal development. Therefore the curriculum sets out with teaching comprehensive communication competence and learning about oneself. Coaching capacity, conflict analysis and management as well as academic writing and applied research methods stand also at the beginning of HuD. Personal and global ethical questions are tackled with the help of theology, philosophy and current political theories. Issues of international law, human rights and the different understandings of justice are also looked at. Analytical skills (for example to analyses critical

² UNDP: defining and measuring human development.

http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/hdr_1990_en_chap1.pdf, 23.09.13, pg. 10

policies) focus on philosophical concepts like semiotics and deconstruction. Leadership skills, aspects of community development and management skills like project and resource management or strategy development are also on the agenda. People learn how to facilitate groups, how to speak in public and how to write convincing proposals. We seek to find instructors coming from diverse cultural backgrounds to be able to incorporate theories and concepts reflecting a diverse world. We also seek to lean on well-established and proven to be successful YMCA best-practices inviting for example instructor working for the Y USA or the Africa Alliance of YMCAs. Towards the end of the program students have to combine what they learned during an applied research project which leads to their bachelor thesis.

All of this happens in continuous cross-cultural dialogue where people have to not only be able to listen carefully to each other and to respect otherness, rather they have to be able to understand and represent themselves in an authentic manner. Resting on the YMCA principle to develop the whole person (body, mind and spirit), the program's objective is to focus not only on academics, but also on sports, the arts and spirituality.

Instructional Design – the “How” of Learning

Newest E-learning technology allows for international programs to invite people all over the world to study in a “virtual classroom” and yet to stay where they are. Although we entered this new educational field utilizing the internet, we find it very important that people also meet “face to face”. Therefore the B.A. in Human Development is designed in the blended-learning format. In its full-time version of 180 ETCS (European Transfer Credit System) it runs over a period of three years. Each year a two-week long residency allows students and instructors to encounter each other directly learning skills which require direct contact, e.g. mediation, coaching, public

speaking or facilitation. These residencies take place on three continents: Europe (Germany), Africa (Kenya) and Asia (India).

The learning management system we chose is called Moodle (see <https://moodle.org/?lang=en>). It rests on a social-constructivist philosophy which means that students are not only learning with, but also from, each other and their experiences coming from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Instructors offer learning scenarios that are applied in nature enlarging the student's knowledge base by connecting the student's prior knowledge with new theories and ideas.

Sharing some of our Experiences thus far

A great challenge which is continuously accompanying us is the diverse nature of the YMCA movement. This diversity seems to be particularly obvious when it comes to the role of the "C" (Christian). Therefore the B.A. in Human Development, wanting to be relevant for the global movement, finds itself in a tension between too much and too little focus on the "C". Dealing with this tension is not only something we have to manage at the IYU internally and in the presentation of the program externally, it is also one of the major learning outcomes of the students taking it. We try to teach people that genuine dialogue starts with a position that is clear, yet self-critical knowing that the encounter may change and transform that position.

The accreditation process of the program with the *Wissenschaftsrat* (the accrediting body of the German government) was a positive, but also rigorous process. The program is unique in Germany and the international focus of the program is very much appreciated. However, because of its distinctive make-up a lot of documents had to be formulated to explain what we seek to

achieve. Most of them had to be presented in German and English. However this thorough process ensures the high quality of university programs in Germany.

Due to the extraordinary nature of the program in Germany as well as at the educational market worldwide, we encountered a number of stumbling blocks during the first couple of months. Although Germany seeks to invite its universities to “internationalize”, transferability of transcripts and school credentials is still difficult. It was very sad to find out only after we enrolled students from Africa, South America, Russia and Asia that all of the foreign transcripts needed to be approved by the Ministry of Science and the Arts of the province of Hessen. Now we are a lot more careful having the applicant’s documents officially checked before we even start the admission process.

The first residency at a beautiful lake was a very deep bonding experience for students as well as instructors. The combination of time in class, sharing meals together, climbing mountains, learning about German history and peddling on the lake made it easier to connect despite the great mix of different cultures and personal stories. Students learned about coaching and they were asked to continuously coach each other throughout the program trying to make sure to help each other not feeling too isolated working together in the virtual world after. From an instructional point of view this worked very well; what students have to say is reflected in the testimonials below.

Although the IYU is fully recognized by the German government, the German YMCA is the sole carrier of the university and therefore also in charge of the financial burden. We are not funded at all and therefore have to charge tuition fees. HuD seems to be particularly attractive from students coming from developing countries and it is very difficult for them to pay these

fees. However, some sources could be found to support these students with bursaries. Yet, the administration of these funds is very complex and rather work-intensive.

We also realize that a lot of students of the first cohort find it difficult to take the program full-time while taking care of a family and working at the same time. Although the flexibility of a program utilizing E-Learning models is great, the work load is still immense having to take several courses simultaneously. However because of its modularized structure, the program allows for individualized study plans. That is what we are currently developing together with our students to make sure that their and their family's needs are met.

For the future we hope that this program will be attractive for young people coming from all over the world seeking to develop themselves personally and professionally in order to be able to develop a world of peace, justice and a strong sense of responsibility for God's creation.

A few testimonials of HuD students:

I am very thankful to be involved in this study program. As a trained YMCA Youth Leader and a mother of two girls, HuD offers me the possibility to study ones more and develop further. I am excited about the content of the program since it seems to be a perfect addition to what I have learned so far. I love the internationality of students and instructors, sharing our knowledge and experiences with each other and standing together as a Christian family worldwide. We had a wonderful time at our first residency in the Bavarian Alps! Since the study program just started, some things are still under "construction"; however, it teaches me as a well-structured German to stay flexible. (*Daniela Klein*)

I am grateful and happy to be part of the HuD program. My husband and I moved a couple of times over the past year; without this special program I wouldn't be able to study and educate myself about topics I feel really passionate about. I can also earn a degree which wouldn't be possible, as studying on campus means a certain dependency on a specific place which didn't go along with our many moves as family. I absolutely enjoy the program because of its diversity; HuD is diverse in many ways because of its participants which are from all different places, but also because the courses are a broad selection of need-based subjects that are relevant for today's (global) issues. This program has opened my eyes to many things, I have learned and developed academically, but also personally I have been shaped and equipped to define my own beliefs, opinions and to step up for those as well as others. It also taught me how to deal with different cultural understandings and ideas, that my "Western" opinion might not always be right and how to stay calm in stress situations. As well as staying calm and always assume the best in confusions about Moodle, deadlines and other miscommunication is always the best option and how to accept and acknowledge my personal limits. Overall it has been a stretching, very positive learning experience so far and I am looking forward to the rest of those three years. (*Debra Pretschner*)

I just started with the studies this semester and I only have few impressions about it. But so far I can say that I am grateful for the possibility to study HuD at the YMCA University because it offers a variety of topics and subjects to discuss, different approaches to work on them and a great diversity of students and teachers who work together. Therefore I am challenged to express and to justify my own opinion but also

to be enriched by other people's opinion and points of view what helps reflecting myself and my cultural heritage. (*Ruth Weihofen*)

Coming from a non-YMCA background, I still found this study program, and I am very glad about it. I like the inter-nationality of this program that gives a rich, and wide perspective on many topics we discuss. Facing some challenges belong to it, and result in learning experience. I am thankful to be part of this program. (*Philipp Mantler*)

Enrolling in HuD really had my understanding deepen to lots of issues about nature, humans and the environment. Living in a residency and studying with 12 different nationals was so interesting, especially to see the diverse cultures from the various nationals yet how we managed to live together as one family. The experience gave another opportunity to seek the nature of oneness (Unity). The rich culture display of the various nationals (students and instructors) in terms of their way of living, thoughts and care for each other was really fascinating. The kind of residency (accommodation) chosen for the first phase also gave the opportunity for good reflection on the various learning models, discussions and also relaxation of mind. i.e. nice lake, great mountain, greenly vegetation and less people. To the online experience itself, it has been a very interesting one because it is the first time I engaged myself to such a forum of study so the whole process was very new and challenging. Notwithstanding, through the patient support of instructors and students, I was able to make my way through the whole process amidst the challenges I was having in terms of friendliness to the models used, internet linkage and series of power cuts from a country struggling with power crisis. In conclusion, this whole

process of the online learning and course has been one of the best things to happen to me in the last decade. It has given me a sense of reflection on issues, open my mind to different cultures and make me more assertive and responsible. The course is really a practical course and I am honored to say that I have been able to resolve some few issues in my church and family and also make great strides in my area of work. (*Joel Arthur*)