Community Engagement for Building Bridges between cultures, disciplines and generations –
a summary report

Three days, five international speakers

The second international zlw-colloquium took place from the 13th to the 15th of July 2016. The topic for the colloquium was “Community Engagement”. Universities as a part of societies are increasingly confronted with global and social challenges which reach far beyond the usual scope of education and research. This includes the dissolving of borders; the consequences of migration, segregation, immigration, and many more. One possibility of universities to contribute to the solving of such challenges is presently debated as community engagement of universities.

The zlw-team chose to hold the lectures, workshops, and discussions at the “Gebrüder Schmid-House,” in order to encourage the general public to attend. Most of the participants were students, academic staff from our university, as well as staff from other universities. All had the same opportunities to play an active part in the colloquium and to discuss the ways in which university engagement with community relates to the three major learning needs of our society: intercultural, intergenerational and interdisciplinary learning.

Real examples framed by empirical findings and theory

The main goal of the International Colloquium was to learn from each other through short presentations followed by discussions. The presenters brought their good practices, empirical findings, and theoretical frames and helped participants to translate their ideas into their daily routines.

Another main objective was to enable informed discussion about current political and social discourses. Dr. Leslie Tramontini shared her expertise about her work at the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies at the Philipps-Universität Marburg. She and her team decided in 2015 to establish a community engagement project by committing themselves to the better integration of refugees and migrants. Students at the center help newly-arrived immigrants with important issues key to their successful transition such as understanding health insurance, cultural norms and traditions, the educational system, as well as help with vocational training possibilities — often in the mother tongue of the refugees. These examples triggered discussions on how the University of Stuttgart could operate or develop its engagement in intercultural cooperation programs between students.

Another form of community engagement, termed “Lifelong Learning City-Region,” is well established at Pécs in Hungary, and was introduced by Dr. Balázs Németh. A wider network of stakeholders, like the University of Pécs and other local cultural institutions, provide environmental education and trainings for young people with learning difficulties. There are additional collaborative initiatives which support a cultural renewal and partnership amongst different generations. Participants discussed the possibility of similar partnerships in Stuttgart: Could such a program be established with the help of the University? How might such an initiative work?
In 2015, the city of Cork won the “UNESCO Learning City Award” and will host the next UNESCO Learning City Conference in 2017. Dr. Séamus Ó Tuama, from University College Cork (UCC), talked about the city’s week-long festival, which offers participants the opportunity to participate in hundreds of different workshops, lessons, discussions, and learning opportunities, from cooking classes to aromatherapy, or IT to dancing lessons. These opportunities were offered by both UCC and members of the community. Could Stuttgart also establish a Lifelong Learning Festival, open for all kind of persons no matter their ages or backgrounds? Which stakeholders do we have to cultivate in order to engage in similar activities?

In another lecture, Prof. Dr. Hans-Rolf Vetter from the University of the Bundeswehr in Munich (UniBwM) talked about the problems of motherhood in our society. Based on empirical data, Prof. Vetter explained the conflicts mothers face today, when they try to balance work, self and family. Because these problems require perspectives of more than one discipline (e.g. politics, social care, etc.), there has to be a cooperative approach to solve these and give mothers a better chance to take part in life-long learning processes and on all societal positions.

What characterizes most community engagement activities is the cooperation of multiple disciplines. Dr. Michael Reder (Connecticut College, USA) introduced the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U)’s “essential learning outcomes,” which focus not only on intellectual and practical skills or competencies, but also on personal and social responsibility. Colleges and Universities that commit to this model make sure that students of all disciplines will be able to think as global citizens.

Outcomes of the second International Colloquium

The second international zlw-colloquium facilitated discussions amongst people from different cultural, generational, and disciplinary backgrounds, and produced interesting ideas not only during the colloquium but also in the evenings during the social programs. For the zlw it provided a platform for actively doing community engagement by sharing academic knowledge and good practice with people from diverse backgrounds in the region and by thinking about new ways to engage in the city of Stuttgart and the region as a whole.

One of the greatest achievements was the diversity of the participants. Students, guest students, university staff, and external people brought in their different viewpoints and helped to improve everyone’s own engagement as well the prospective work of the zlw.