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"LIFE eQuality?" – teenagers' inspiring research into quality of life

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Abstract

Driving sustainable mountain regions seems impossible without knowing what the young generation finds important about quality of life at present and for the future. "LIFE eQuality?" is a joint project by the Institute of Geography at Innsbruck University and the students and teachers of schools in Bavaria, the Engadin, Northern and Southern Tyrol. The co-operation concentrates on research in the field of quality of life performed by teenagers themselves. The article at hand focuses on the core ideas and concepts of the project, and offers a glimpse into some preliminary results and the main "products" to be expected in the final phase of the project.

Keywords: quality of life, young generation, sustainability, participation, future, Alpine regions

1 Project

1.1 Idea

Scientific discussion on quality of life (QOL) is soon facing its 100th anniversary. Researchers from fields as far apart as medicine, law, regional planning, architecture, sociology, and, last but not least, geography have added findings so far (cf. Keller 2010). Yet, data on teenagers and their perspectives is still lacking widely, a neglect which ought to be remedied. Particularly, as it are the attitudes, wishes and motivations of the young generation that will coin our living environment in the (Alpine) future. "LIFE eQuality?" – Teenagers' Research into Quality of Life – A Comparative Interregional Study" aims at finding out more.

"LIFE eQuality?" is a joint project by the Institute of Geography at Innsbruck University and the students and teachers of four participating schools in Bavaria (Gymnasium Weilheim), the Engadin (Academia Engiadina, Samedan), Northern Tyrol (Reithmann Gymnasium, Innsbruck) and Southern Tyrol (Handesoberschule Heinrich Kunter, Bozen/Bolzano). The two-year co-operation from 2010 to 2012 focuses on research in the field of QOL performed by the teenagers themselves. Teachers and scientists assist, moderate and evaluate the research process of the 16- to 18-year olds. All partners involved in the process constitute a "community of learners" (Hoban 2002) and hence contribute actively to a sustainable protection of QOL in and for our society. The project is part of the Sparkling Science-Programme, funded by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research, encouraging scientists to work side by side with young people.

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1.2 Concept

The main points of the concept are all melted in the project title. As a first thing to mention would obviously be the idea of QOL as such, even though it is somewhat hidden in „LIFE eQuality?" (cf. Figure 1). The letters in "LIFE" are highlighted as the approach starts and ends directly in today's lives of the young generation and spreads in different directions and into the future from here. The words "equal"/"equality" can also be detected, as the project tries to figure out differences in QOL in teenagers' lives in four Alpine regions, and might also come up showing discrepancies between the ideas and concepts of female and male participants. The elevated "e" in the title emphasizes the role of e-learning in the research process. A specifically designed learning management system (LMS) is used to support communication and collaboration across the four regions. The question mark at the end should not be ignored either: Many questions are raised by the teenagers in the course of the project, and more results are expected right from these questions than from any answers given.

Figure 1: Project Logo.

A rough overview on the overall project schedule can be deducted from Figure 2, without going any more into detail here.

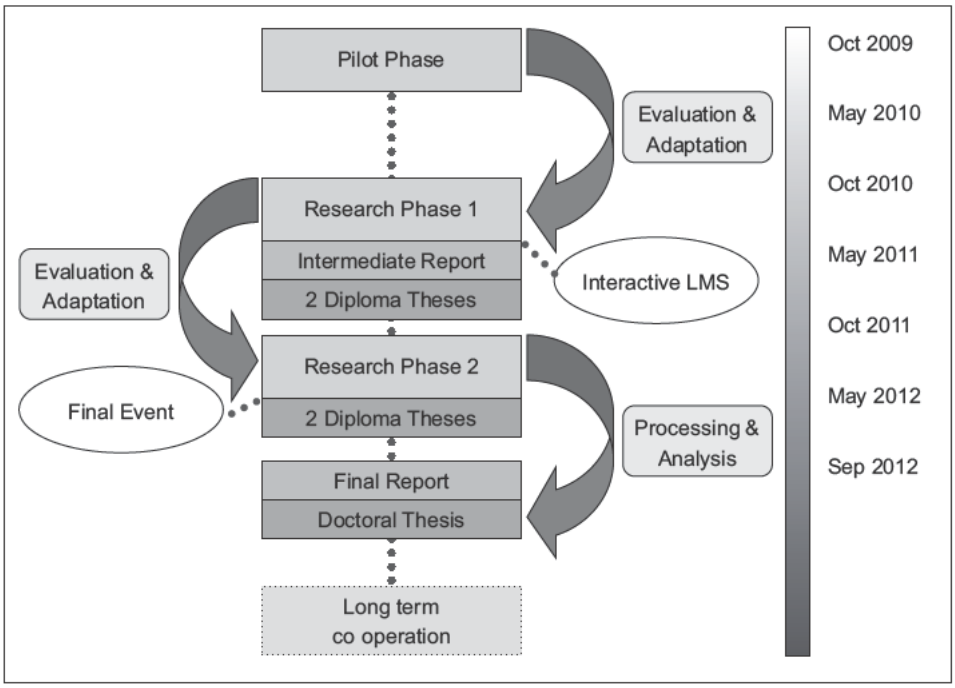

Figure 2: Overview on overall project schedule of „LIFE eQuality?"

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1.3 Instruction & construction

One core assumption of the project is that school surroundings do not usually offer enough time, space, and resources for obtaining significant results for "the world outside". A research project of the dimension of „LIFE ᵉQuality?" should take this fact very seriously and try and act accordingly. Speaking in terms of didactics, it is thus most important to create an atmosphere that opens up thinking space and invests enough time for complex thinking processes to happen. The moderate constructivist approach to teaching is strongly based on this learner friendly environment, and was thus chosen by the project team.

Experiences in a pre-test carried out in the school year 2009/2010 (cf. Keller & Schober 2011) suggest, however, that teenagers can easily be out of their depth, if thrown into open learning environments, and seem to need at least some initial guidance. A look at Figure 3, which gives a rough overview on the schedule in the first school year, shows how the project tries to find a solution to this problem. All initial steps (phase I) are presented as rather classical lessons held by the participating researchers. Some core ideas of QOL concepts and models are thus transported to the students mainly in the form of ex-cathedra teaching, before the young people are exposed to "free research" in the consequent phases of the project.

From the work done by the students in the initial phase (especially by encoding the results of the ample pre-tests carried out with all participants at the very start), nine categories of main interest in QOL could be analysed: traffic, spare time, economy, work, population, education and culture, health, environmental problems, nature and landscape (cf. Figure 3, phase II). Consequently, nine work groups were set up, and filled according to the individual interests of the students, leading to teams mostly consisting of members of all four regions.

Their main job – carrying out autonomous research into their topic – was kicked off by ample webquests prepared for each group by the project team. In this second phase, the teenagers were completely free in their way of finding one main research question (within their field of research) and an appropriate research instrument. All they had to bear in mind during this process were three filters: youth, region, and future. A research question could be defined only, if all of these aspects were reflected.

As soon as the main research questions had been developed, more intensive research was carried out into the specified topics, sub-questions were formulated, and ways of collecting data discussed in phase three (phase III in Figure 3). The teenagers mainly chose the method of carrying out surveys among other young people, some went to execute expert interviews. The resulting data was processed and analysed at the end of this stage.

A synthesis of the intermediate research results and a closer look at new perceptions and reconsiderations of QOL concepts of young people brings the first project year to an end (phase IV in Figure 3).

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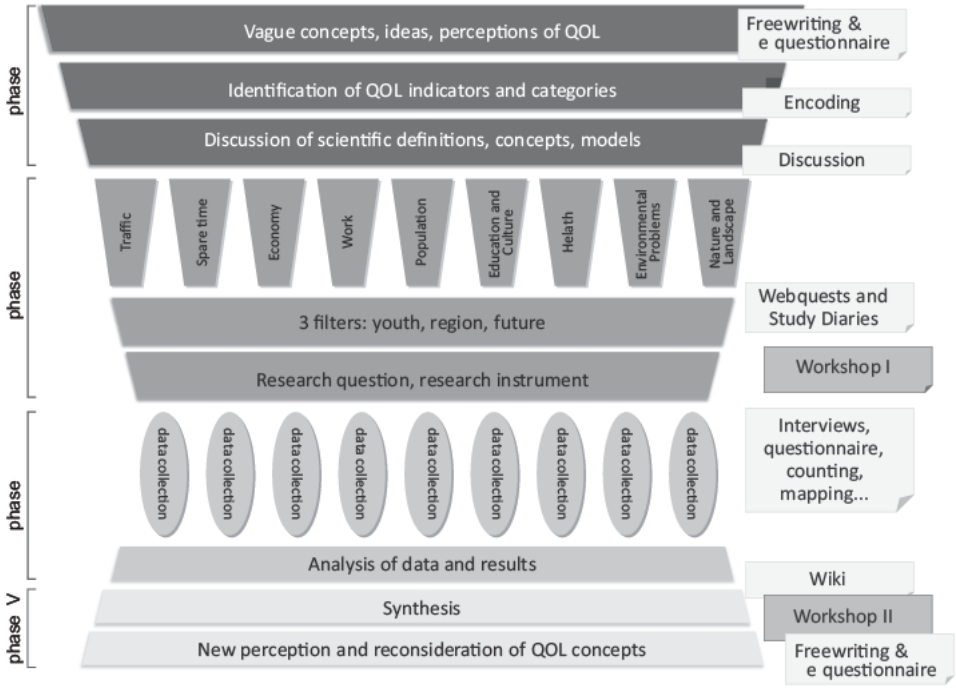

Figure 3: Overview on project schedule of „LIFE 'Quality?" in the first school year.

1.4 Communication

Working with project schools in four different Alpine regions, situated at a maximum distance of 200 km to each other, it is absolutely vital to organize communication processes well.

While the researchers at Innsbruck University were placed in the centre of the overall research area and could thus easily visit all schools regularly, get-togethers of all participating students (90 in the first year) were difficult and expensive to arrange. The development of an LMS (cf. Figure 4) was thus a necessary consequence and of high importance to the potential success of "LIFE eQuality?" (cf. Schober & Keller 2011).

Yet, this online platform did not only proof fundamental for any communication processes among the work group members (and also between the researchers and the work groups), it was also a fantastic tool to save and organize the vast majority of comments given and of work results achieved (see chapter: project "products"). For the young people involved, working online seemed a fairly natural environment. It ought to be stated, however, that despite 60% of the students claiming they had used learning management systems before, they did not proof as proficient in the various techniques (e.g. organization of efficient communication threads in forums) as one might have assumed before. To put it in a nutshell, instead of "Digital Natives" (Prensky 2001), students rather had to be identified as "Digital Naives".

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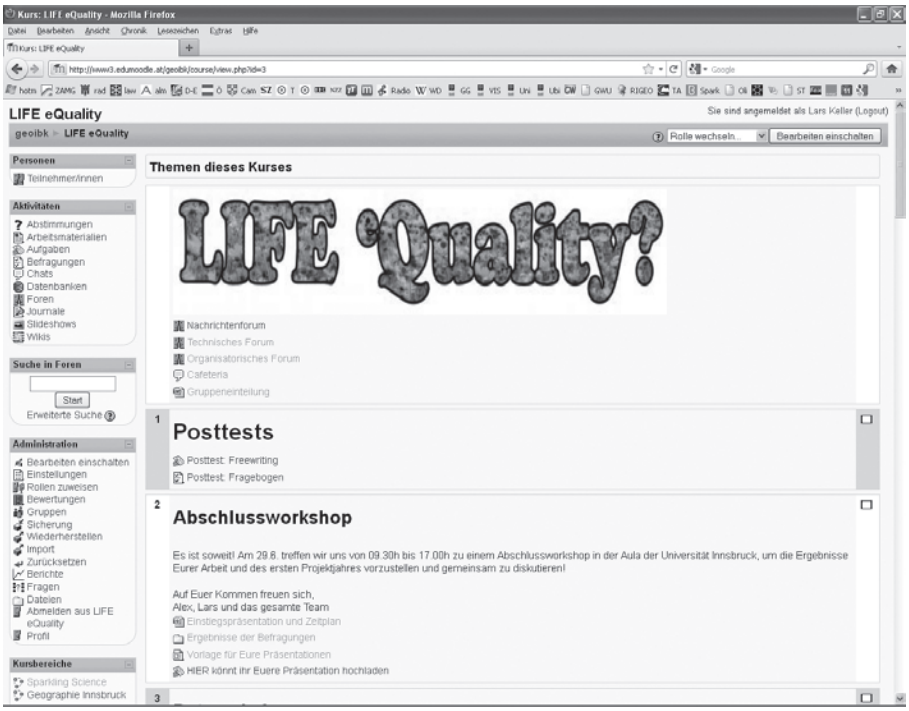

Figure 4: Learning Management System developed for „LIFE eQuality?“

Two workshops at the University of Innsbruck rounded off the communication processes. One took place in March 2011, the second in June 2011, both leading to tangible milestones of the project (cf. Figure 3).

2 Results

There are a couple of reasons why the results of this project can only be described as preliminary at the current stage:

- The project is scheduled from September 2010 to September 2012.
- The schedule allows for the implementation of a hermeneutic circle, so all experiences and results of year one will be put to extensive evaluation, and, consequently, the research process will be adapted and redesigned for the second school year.
- Project year one is not yet over, so not all of this year's tests have been carried out so far.
- There will be no time for a vast scientific investigation into the results, before the actual research phases at the schools will be concluded (in May/June 2012).

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Yet, the variety of the results to be expected, and also some exciting trends can already be detected at the time being, and have quite some potential to raise interest in the scientific community.

2.1 Project "Products"

Among the material outcome of the project will be a large database on QOL of young people, containing for example:

- numerous types of QOL definitions by the teenagers themselves at different stages of the school year(s) (e.g. freewriting/questionnaires/before and after the discussion of scientific models etc.),
- various video and audio files from lessons and the workshops,
- the questions and contents of the different surveys of the nine work groups,
- the results of the surveys carried out by the teenagers themselves (1,546 in school year one/different views as opposed to be carried out by adults),
- the study journals of the students, teachers, and scientists (had to be filled in after each unit),
- a WIKI on QOL of young people,
- or the results of the pre- and post-tests among the participating students.

At the end of the second school year, there will be a wide range of possibilities to make use of this data, which is in fact expected to represent chance and risk at the same time. Pulling together the overall results from many different kinds of underlying materials is intended to be executed via the so called "Grounded Theory" (Glaser & Strauss 2010), a method applicable for qualitative (and quantitative) data analysis. The aim is clear though: Knowing more about the current subjective and objective QOL of young people, and subsequently deduce a theoretical model. Eventually, stakeholders in society and policy alike will be enabled to fall back to this valuable source of knowledge, which should positively influence future decisions and sustainable development in Alpine regions.

2.2 Questions asked

As a logic consequence of what has just been stated, the main question to be asked in the project must be: How can we get really close to and understand the ideas and concepts of QOL of and among young people, and determine what seems to be "important" to them, now and for the future? As mentioned above, many results are expected from the questions asked by the teenagers themselves. So, as opposed to the more common research scheme of deciding early on what is important and what is not, and consequently investigating into a clearly defined and delimited area of interest, the idea of this project is poles apart. Analyses in this case need a much broader approach and also a lot of flexibility in the research process.

A glance at a (very short) selection of some of the questions raised by the teenagers in the third phase of the school year 2010/2011 will illustrate the chances of this innovative approach. Looking at the "health"-group, for instance, who would

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have thought that teenagers actually chose to concentrate on the topic of "sleep". Apparently, there seems to be a number of factors disturbing students' sleep, among them school stress, electronic devices, and interpersonal relationships. Most interesting questions were asked by the work group "traffic" as well, as the team focused on public transport to and from school. Teenagers were asked, for example, about how satisfied they were about the punctuality, the tidiness, and the technological state of their means of transport just as well as about bus fares or the chances of finding a place to sit. The task group concerned with aspects of "work", as a further example, gave attention to teenagers' side jobs: The range of these questions went from the extent of working times and wages to satisfaction and influence of these jobs on school success. Most inspiring also the ideas of the "environment group" who reduced the ample matter to the topic of air quality, trying to find proof for their hypothesis that many people who live in or come to the Alps automatically assume to experience very high air quality, whereas the reality in narrow Alpine valleys can be quite the contrary. The "landscape and nature"-group (Who would have expected such a group to establish among youngsters at all?) asked questions about present perceptions and visions for the future among the young generation. At the very end of their questionnaires, having asked about aspects of "nature" in many items before, they wanted to know explicitly from their respondents: "What does the term "nature" mean for you?" – a very smart move, which would indirectly answer their question on how much young people really knew about their natural environment after all.

It ought to be emphasized once again that all the article at hand can deliver is to give a short insight into the project and draw first conclusions, whereas profound results can only be expected at a later stage. At the end of the scientific process, however, instead of clear answers, many new questions will have been raised, which will have come directly from the young generation. These questions are supposed to influence future studies about QOL of teenagers strongly and maybe much more than any answers given in the process of "LIFE ᶜQuality?".

2.3 (Change of) concepts of QOL

One other target of the project is to investigate into teenagers' change of concepts when dealing with QOL, and, more specific, to find out how sustainable their ideas of QOL are. Research methods in the abstract phenomenon of "conceptual change" (cf. Reinfried 2007) are rather complex (Side note: The research into conceptual change started about 30 years ago when constructivism began to filter in learning theories.), and it will take some time to deliver reliable results for the project at hand. Yet, some assumptions – marked as bullet points one and two below – seem worth discussing already:

1. The longer young people work in the field of QOL, the clearer it gets for them that the concept of QOL contains much more than just economical aspects.
2. The longer young people work in the field of QOL, the more the number of contributions in the sense of "sustainable development" increases.

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As said above, there is no statistical proof on these contentions at present, yet some typical direct "quotations" from the early and late phases of the first school year may help to furnish evidence. All of the following quotations are translated from German and partly shortened.

1. Selection of students' definitions of QOL in the early phase:
   1.1 "QOL is the same as standard of living."
   1.2 "QOL is based on luxury goods."
   1.3 "QOL means fulfilment of basic needs, like water, food, and a roof over your head."
   1.4 "QOL is things we own for a living."
   1.5 "If somebody has got a lot of money, they can have hobbies or meet friends in their spare time, for example."

At this point, it should be stated that there were also many quotations not concentrating on matters of money or reflecting other materialistic views. Yet the number of quotations showing the immaterial side of QOL just seems to have increased considerably after some time into the project.

2. "Typical" students' definitions of QOL in the late phase:
   2.1 "QOL means the possibility of having your needs fulfilled by the environment you live in. This happens by various offers from many fields (spare time / working environment / supply with goods)"
   2.2 "QOL, according to me, is also about happiness. Quality of your life – so certain health standards and general possibilities to move on in your education and personal development"
   2.3 "QOL is the product of all the factors that determine a person's environment."
   2.4 "QOL means everything which is relevant for (everyday) life. Part of it is the natural environment, traffic, options of education, the economy etc."
   2.5 "QOL is when the people in a country are satisfied with the economy and the natural environment, for example, the quality of the air and the water are decisive."

In this context, it is also interesting that the number of entries stressing the importance of education and learning (also in the sense of tertiary education and lifelong learning) increases as well.

2.4 Sustainability

Scientifically speaking, it is without dispute that the link between QOL and sustainability is to be considered as very strong (cf. Häberli et al. 2002; Kuckartz & Rheingans-Heintze 2006; Keller 2009; etc.). A current state of positive circumstances must never be labelled as "high QOL", if, at the same time, it weighs heavily on people of the same generation or future generations and prevents these from living in

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similarly positive circumstances. In this connection, it is vital for a project like "LIFE ᶜQuality?" not to neglect this matter of fact, but to investigate closely how relevant (or at least existent) the ideas of sustainability are for the young generation.

The readers' attention was explicitly drawn to some aspects of the relationship between questions of QOL and sustainability, and the link between potential results of "LIFE ᶜQuality?" and sustainability respectively in the previous chapter. More implicit hints were already given before as well. Yet there is much more data targeting in this direction. Right at the start of the project, for instance, the teenagers were asked to draw "postcards from home" (Ulrich 2006) stressing what they think QOL is about in their regions. A vast majority of students would at least include sub-components from the ecological/environmental pillar of sustainability. In fact, almost everybody drew mountains, trees, lakes, or at least their own garden. Yet, a closer analysis is still due to be completed in this little building block of the project, too. The same goes for a photography competition among the participating students. Although the number of entries wasn't too high, the dominance of "nature" was not only clear, but overwhelming: Woods covered in snow, sunrise/sunset, creeks, gardens, and particularly mountains were among the motives. Figure 5 turned out to be the winner of the competition – the only photograph which showed a person after all. All other images were completely void of people.

There is more direct proof from a variety of texts and interviews on the subject of QOL and sustainability, which is waiting to be analysed in the last phase of the project. Concluding this chapter, however, it should not be forgotten to at least express some concern about the fact that so far virtually no-one has ever mentioned "climate change" or its consequences in the course of "LIFE ᶜQuality?". From a scientific perspective, this seems quite out of the ordinary. It must hence be concluded

Figure 5: The winning picture in the photography competition of „LIFE ᶜQuality?" (Photograph by Linda Schwarz, Bolzano, 2011, showing her brother relaxing on an Alpine meadow, in the background a thick forest, and the Dolomites Mountain Schlern, Southern Tyrol).

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that it will be a tough challenge in the future to raise (young) people's awareness on this issue – as it is probably true for many other topics of sustainable development, too. If scientists get stuck in their own ways of thinking, without holding in regard what ordinary people, especially among the young generation, know (or do not know) and consequently believe in, they can come up with the clearest scientific proof for any phenomenon, but will not succeed in effectuating change in society. Thinking about the adaption strategies necessary to cope with global warming on a regional scale, the impact of such a lack of knowledge and awareness among the young generation becomes quite clear

3 Outlook & conclusion

Going proverbial, QOL research with and into young people is still in its infancy. From what can be said on the project "LIFE eQuality?", however, the discussion and examination of ideas and concepts of the young generation seems promising.

Project phase two in the school year 2011/2012 will see various changes and adaptations as a consequence of the experiences made in the first year, and will deliver inspiring results. In two of the schools involved, there will be additional classes where a small number of students will work intensively on individual QOL topics. In all other participating classes, the main objectives remain the same, but the research process will be assisted by teachers with a whole year of experience behind them, which should also lead to improvements. The overall results will be presented to the interested public by the participating students themselves at the final event in the main lecture hall ("Aula") of Innsbruck University in summer 2012. On the scientific side, several diploma and one doctoral thesis will document and analyse the research process. Publications are performed from the perspective of QOL research as well as for didactical studies.

From what has been learned so far, the research process in "LIFE eQuality?" – and consequently its results – depend on many unknown variables. Working with teenage research partners at schools in four Alpine areas requires a lot of flexibility, and many a time leads to surprising swings and turns. At the same time, the project is regarded as a huge chance to get an insight into the minds of today's young generation and find out what QOL really means to them, now and in the future.

Stakeholders should bear in mind that, without this information, their decisions might well be not the ones leading to a better future for the generations to come. Furthermore, they should understand that any decision made today, leaves its greatest impact on the youngest, physically and psychologically. This is why "LIFE eQuality?" hopes to be of service to the society, delivering information previously unknown, thus inspiring Alpine future, and driving sustainable mountain regions.

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