

Academy for Diaconia and Social Action in Central and Eastern Europe interdiac

Introduction

A little over a year ago, interdiac was officially established as an Academy focussed especially on the learning and development needs of diaconal organisations and Christian non-governmental organisations in central and Eastern Europe. In a very short time interdiac has built up a network structure with members in ten countries of the region and has begun delivering training. The first six month study module, which has students from six countries ended in January 2010 and a series of linked international workshops will start in summer 2010. In this article we will give some background to interdiac and also outline the key priorities and strategies for the next period.

Background to interdiac

The context of Central and Eastern European countries is marked by many new challenges caused by the restructuring, or in some cases the collapse of relatively stable state social systems. Traditional industries and agriculture have closed or been drastically changed, causing a high level of unemployment and social exclusion. However, the impact of the culture of the 'previous system' is still to be felt, especially in the newly independent states. The process of building civil society and the creation of decentralised social services is still under way.

Church-related and other non-profit organizations in Central and Eastern European countries are pioneers in the development and promotion of civil society. But still there is a lack of effective civil

participation in many contexts. Well-developed interpersonal competence and the professional knowledge of staff and volunteers from the fields of social services and community development are the most important tools there are.

However, a common experience for all diaconia organisations is that there has been a wasteful provision of short-term courses with no follow up. Therefore the value of training is often lost to the learner and the organisations they come from. There is also a lack of training which opens up international opportunities for learning, based on diaconal values, within the region itself.

On the basis of this situation, the need for diaconal social and community work education in the context of Central and Eastern European countries and geared to the specific needs and aspirations of those in the region has been identified.

The development of interdiac

On the basis of its experience with international work, Silesian Diaconia in the Czech Republic took the first steps towards the development of the new Academy. After consultation with partners in the region it organised a survey of training needs which led to the proposal to found the new Academy. The very first step was to bring together the actors in the region and to clarify and deepen not only the learning needs but also the development needs and trajectories for diaconia in the next period. It is a core principle of interdiac that learning should be close to 'real situations' and the 'real needs' and start with the motivation of the learner. This has devel-

oped through taking the diaconal organisations as key partners and stakeholders in the Academy. The Academy was registered as a non profit organisation under Czech law and it has members from countries that form a Council which guides and actively participates in the shaping of the Academy. The Academy has two founding partners – Silesian Diaconia and Helsinki Deaconess Institute (Finland). The later is committed to the partnership as it wants to learn from the region and share common interests in such topics as community development and civil society development. The Diaconia University of Applied Sciences in Finland (DIAK) provides support for the pedagogy.

The development process builds on the original research and consultation with the (nowadays) members. On the past year, the basic curriculum profile for a Bachelor study programme has been elaborated and the first study module developed and delivered based on this profile.

As well as the founders and partner organisations and DIAK, interdiac has been supported by the Lutheran World Federation and the Martin Luther Bund as well as the European Union and the International Vysehrad Fund, among others.

Three Main 'Pillars', three basic commitments

The activities of interdiac are based on three important pillars which have been identified in consultation with the partners:

- The promotion of high quality education and training for diaconia and social action especially in central and eastern Europe and especially, to

develop degree level education focussed on the needs of the region, but in a European and global context;

- To support networking, the exchange of experience and lifelong learning;
- To support research and development for diaconia and social action.

Furthermore, the partners have also articulated and agreed the following three basic commitment:

- Safeguarding and promoting the human dignity of each person, considering the client as a subject (not the object) of social, diaconal or community development work
- Developing skills and strategies to support the participation and empowerment of excluded and marginalised people.
- Influencing social change, working for a multicultural society and fight against social exclusion.

Developing the Academy

In the past eighteen months, the Academy has been, first of all, developing the network of members who are ready to become partners in the initiative. Their participation has been structured according to the interdiac constitution, which recognises the importance of 'ownership' of the Academy being spread across the diversity of the region. Members come from Latvia in the north to Serbia in the south and from Czech Republic in the west to Armenia in the east. The membership is open to those organisations in the region that subscribe to the aims of interdiac and who are ready to enter into a formal agreement with it. The confessional spread is wide – Lutheran, Reformed, Orthodox.

The Academy has its 'seat' in Český Tešín and there is established not only an office base, but also a learning resource room and room for contact teaching and workshops.

The team building up the academy concentrated on building the curriculum concepts based on the priorities of the partners in the last year. It has also been necessary to check the various legislative conditions of social and diaconal work in the different countries. A second priority has been to developing a pilot module which would test out the methodology and contents of learning. A resource bank of teachers and supervisors etc has been built up by the partners and three workshops for training trainers have been held to support the curriculum and module development. Negotiations are underway to get the proposed degree programme accredited and the Academy is recognised already by the Czech social ministry. Links have been built with other organisations and potential partners and the network is growing all the time!

Educational Programme 2009 – 2010

The first six month study module (Diaconia, Participation and Social Inclusion) ended in January 2010. The programme uses 'blended learning' and includes contact teaching (four sessions in Český Tešín) and placement/community based learning. This element could be organised in the participant's own country (as the Serbian participants did) or in Silesia (as the Georgian participants did). In cooperation with DIAK, the module was accredited according to the European Credit Transfer System and the students will receive their Diploma at the international seminar planned for March 2010 (see below). DIAK provided the technology and consultancy for the e-learning

element as well as training and support. Teachers came via the different member organisations in five countries and they all had participated in the Training the Trainer workshops held previously. The newly appointed interdiac programme support worker worked with the supervisors and the students between the contact teaching sessions, on the basis of a previously prepared manual. The whole programme was coordinated by one responsible teacher from Latvia and one from Finland.

As well as the pilot module, short intensive course based on the DIAK CABLE project was organised in summer 2009, with the interdiac partner in Odessa and this was attended by 15 participants from different countries. This was foreseen as pilot for the series of linked 'mobile' workshops which interdiac will begin running in 2010. The first will be in Georgia and Serbia.

Other interdiac actions

As well as the study module, interdiac is organising an international seminar in spring 2010, to develop analysis and strategy on social in/exclusion. This will bring together interdiac partners, the students who completed the study module and others interested in the field and will also be a 'launch' for the future activities. As well as contributions from interdiac partners, there will be other expert participants from UNDP, the Council of Europe and the European Anti-Poverty Network.

This conference is intended also a launch pad for other interdiac activities. Funding is being sought for a three year research and development project to further elaborate the contextual challenges, diaconal strategies and learning process relevant to the region. In terms of the networking, this will be an important

element in building the collegial approach of interdiac. Plans are also well advanced for the creation of a handbook which can be used in interdiac and other learning programmes. In this as in other aspects of the programme the experience of DIAK running its international degree programme in English is a valuable background resource.

Conclusion

In a short period of time, interdiac has gone from being a 'concept' to a very lively basis for developing many activities in the

region. The Academy seeks to be a reliable partner for those within the region who wish to see Diaconia develop as well as for those from outside the region who are interested to collaborate. The Board is developing relationships with other relevant international bodies and is open to further initiatives in line with the basic objectives.

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