



# Effects of mobility and how to measure them

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*“Learning mobility, meaning transnational mobility for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge, skills and competences, is one of the fundamental ways in which young people can strengthen their future employability, as well as their intercultural awareness, personal development, creativity and active citizenship. Europeans who are mobile as young learners are more likely to be mobile as workers later in life.”*

Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 (“Youth on the Move”) <sup>1</sup>



Learning mobility is a key instrument in European youth policies, because participation, as indicated in the quotation above, is associated with several sets of desirable learning outcomes. Whether and to what extent this happens in actual projects and programmes is for evaluations and evaluative research to ascertain, but it is complex. Basically, the effects of learning mobility can be organised into three categories, each of which comes with a particular set of challenges with regard to measurement.



Not just about “checking boxes”

quality is before, during & after the learning mobility experience

- ▶ **Knowledge skills and competences of a cognitive nature** are in many instances directly visible and hence measurable. This goes for foreign language proficiency or vocational skills. We can run a test or make an assessment, compare with accepted scales or curricula of training programmes, and the results can in many instances be recognised as (part of) a formal qualification.
- ▶ **More complex learning outcomes**, described in terms like “intercultural awareness”, “personal development”, “creativity”, etc. are much more slippery. Definitions are imprecise and methods of measurement rely on elaborate tests and/or intersubjective assessments (triangulation) that are difficult to calibrate in relation to formal contexts.
- ▶ Finally, some outcomes are essentially of an **affective** nature (that is, linked to attitudes, convictions and emotions), and they can only be ascertained or measured by observing the behavioural patterns of participants over a period of time after the stay abroad. In the quotation above, this goes for “employability”, “active citizenship” and cross-border labour mobility.

1. [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32011H0707\(01\)](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32011H0707(01))

## Effects of mobility and how to measure them

### Measuring the effects of learning mobility

Organisers of mobility projects are naturally interested in knowing whether or not they have reached their stipulated learning objectives. So are external funding providers, and grant money therefore usually comes with a requirement that an evaluation be carried out in connection with the activity. However, with learning outcomes belonging to the two last of the above categories, it is a very substantial challenge to measure directly whether and to what degree you have actually been successful. This requires sophisticated and time-consuming methods on a scale that is usually light years beyond the resources of the average project. In a more realistic perspective, we must therefore resort to indirect measuring methods and use indicators to inform us about phenomena that are very hard to access directly.

Indicators are factors that we can measure and observe, and which are related to other, less accessible factors which we wish to conclude something about. It is an important task of research to identify such indicators and to determine their validity and reliability: do they have a connection with the phenomena that we want to examine, and to what extent do our measurements represent a true picture of them? For mobility used as a pedagogical tool, we find these indicators in the learning process and by focusing on factors which are conducive to the desired developments. As an example, we can take the learning objective “strengthening intercultural awareness”. A stay abroad might be just as likely to produce negative as positive effects, but we know from research that certain factors are conducive to intercultural learning. Already back in 1969, the Israeli psychologist Amir formulated the “contact hypothesis”, which proposes a set of indicators by which we can estimate the likelihood of positive, intercultural learning outcomes in a given project. According to Amir,<sup>2</sup> in order to ensure the best possible environment, there must be:

- ▶ *equality in terms of status* – both parties in the encounter must share a roughly similar socioeconomic status to allow them to identify with one another;
- ▶ *convergence of aims* – both parties must have at least a degree of shared aims and interests to ensure that contacts between them develop;
- ▶ *appropriate attitudes prior to implementation* – there are no overly negative attitudes towards people from the other culture beforehand;
- ▶ *appropriate contact intensity and length* – the contact should last for a certain period and must not be superficial in nature;
- ▶ *low cultural barriers* – cultural barriers are not so high at the beginning of the actual encounter that interaction is made impossible;
- ▶ *social and institutional back-up* – the encounter is organised in the framework of an integrative institutional framework and a climate of mutual support exists;
- ▶ *appropriate preparation* – participants are given adequate linguistic and cultural preparation before the encounter.

Similar sets of indicators exist – or can be elaborated – for other types of learning outcomes. Mobility projects focusing on improving participants’ “employability”, for instance, would share some of these indicators, but replace or substantially reformulate others. It is the task of researchers, together with practitioners, to develop such sets of indicators to cover different outcomes. To be useful, however, this work must be have a solid knowledge base.

### What we know and what we don’t know about mobility

Over the years, we have developed a body of research which makes a strong case for learning mobility as a powerful pedagogical instrument. However, we still have important work ahead of us in the development of our knowledge of its effects, how they are achieved and how to measure them. As it is, too much of our knowledge relies mainly on anecdotal rather than systematic evidence. Two issues in particular require the attention of researchers.

One is the scarcity of so-called longitudinal research – that is, studies that follow a group of participants over a longer stretch of time (for example, 10 years) and try to establish a connection between the experience of a stay abroad and later developments in the lives of these individuals. Most evaluations of mobility projects are undertaken more or less immediately after participants have returned to their home country, and it can be very difficult to assess the true significance of the experience in such a short time span. Participants may state during debriefing sessions that they are more likely to go abroad and work later as a result of their sojourn, but the effectiveness of the experience as a tool for the promotion of the “free movement of labour” can only be properly assessed if a significant amount of them actually go abroad to work at some stage in their career trajectory.

Another major problem is the lack of diversified information on mobility with regard to variables like target groups, project types and learning objectives. Roughly speaking, we know what works for some groups and in some situations, but it may not be the same for another group of participants, another type of project, or with a different set of learning objectives. The “young people with fewer opportunities” constitute a case in point. Despite efforts to the contrary, they are still underrepresented in learning mobility activities – indeed, some initiatives which were initially created for young people with fewer opportunities have become “colonised” by more resourceful groups,<sup>3</sup> making it doubtful to what extent these experiences are actually applicable to those with fewer advantages. This is an area where we still have many lacunae in our knowledge, and where further research is most welcome.



Illustration by Siiri Taimla

3. For example, volunteering abroad, see Committee of Regions, “The Mobility of Young Volunteers”, a study undertaken by the Public Policy and Management Institute, 2009.