

Can placements abroad promote intercultural learning?

That a stay in another country, especially when undertaken in the formative years, can provide an understanding for other peoples and cultures and thus help prevent national chauvinism and ultimately international crises and war, is probably no new thought. But it was one that gained particular currency after the two world wars of last century, and especially in the aftermath of World War II, where a large number of exchange organisations were set up to provide opportunities and funding for young people to go abroad for transnational experiences of various kinds. In the last decade or so, "transnational mobility" has become a household byword in vocational education and training (VET), and a number of national and European action programmes have been set up that fund and otherwise promote mobility in the shape of work placements abroad for particularly young people in a VET-context. There is a more or less tacit assumption that these stays - as well as preparing the participant for a labour market characterised by globalisation and constant change - also promote intercultural learning and understanding. In the following I will argue that this is not necessarily the case, and that placements abroad can be a risky platform for intercultural learning.

The term "intercultural learning" was first coined by AFS (the abbreviation stands for American Field Service), which was one of the first organisations that used international exchange as a pedagogical method for intercultural understanding. The organisation was set up by ex-American servicemen after WWI to provide opportunities (predominantly) for school stays abroad for young people. AFS is now one of the largest organisations of its kind, and operates all over the world. Its mission statement on the website reads

"AFS provides... intercultural learning opportunities to help people develop the knowledge, skills and understanding to create a more just and peaceful world"

AIESEC (Association Internationale pour l'Echange des Etudiants en Commerce) is a large organisation organising exchanges of students within the various fields of commerce, which was set up under the aegis of UNESCO in the late 40's. In a similar fashion, it declares its philosophy on its website thus

"Behind everything we do is our mission: to contribute to the development of our countries and their people with an overriding commitment to international understanding and cooperation"

A further example is provided by the Franco-German Youth Office, which was set up as a bi-national organisation in 1963 to improve relations between the two countries. Article 2 of the Treaty establishing the FGYO states its aims as assigned by the two governments:

- ❖ development of closer links between the young populations of both countries;
- ❖ deepening of mutual understanding;
- ❖ encouragement, promotion and implementation of contacts and exchanges of young people¹

Significant in this context is the term "exchange", which is usually employed as a designator for what these organisations do, whereas the similar activities undertaken squarely within a framework of VET are known as "mobility projects". "Exchange" does not necessarily mean that every project has in it a return visit, an element of reciprocity at physical level. Many projects go in one direction only. "Exchange" however, signifies that something goes in both directions - in this context intercultural understanding - and moreover something that is of equal value, where both sender and receiver benefits. This is a connotation that is not included in the term "mobility", which basically denotes an ability to move in an individual. In other words a "skill" or a "competency" (depending on the point of view of the observer). Already in the choice of words, we may have come across a significant difference. There is often confusion between the terms "skill", "competence" and "qualification". To avoid confusion, I tend to stick to the simple definition - "skills" are what people have, "competences" are what companies require, and "qualifications" are what schools give.

Traditionally, these "intercultural encounters" have assumed two forms. One consists of individual school stays, where a student/pupil has gone abroad to spend a longer period of time (usually one academic year)² at an educational establishment abroad. This happens in upper secondary education, when the participant is in the age bracket 16-18, and the stay is as a rule not recognised as part of their course. A large number of organisations exist that offer to organise these school stays. USA is the most popular target country, even though it is possible to undertake such a stay in any continent.

The second consists of group stays, usually of a short duration (a couple of days and up to 3 weeks) that are typically undertaken in the context of youth

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organisations (i.e. outside of the formal educational system). These are the type of encounters that are eligible for funding under the European Commission's "Youth" programme, and constitute the majority of the activities funded by the Franco-German Youth Office. In this type of encounter, the participants usually meet a similar group from the target country, and they carry out some kind of activity with their peers from here (e.g. a play, a sports event, a musical performance etc.). A special category here are the so-called work camps, where young people from a large number of countries jointly carry out a piece of work that otherwise would not be undertaken, like clearing a trail through an inaccessible tract of forest, thereby opening it for recreational purposes, building a playground in a deprived area, etc. The tasks undertaken are of a character where no vocational qualifications are required.

In the course of the years since "youth exchange" became a popular way of combating cultural differences, a large volume of research and development work has been undertaken on the basis of field studies, and a special "exchange pedagogy" (or, in its more inclusive German version "Begegnungspädagogik") has been developed over the years. In an article⁵ written on the occasion on the 35 years' anniversary of the FGYO, Dieter Reichel comments on the initial failure of the measures to have any noticeable impact on the relations between young people from the two countries:

"But what can we do in order to live together in peace? The first answer given in the (ongoing) process of reflection and development of intercultural learning pedagogy was: simply get young people from both countries together, and this takes care of the rest. This view soon turned out to be too naive. It goes without saying that there was much sympathy on both sides, and many lasting friendships were formed. Yet, many intercultural encounters were deemed "quite nice", but had no impact. The organisers even found that prejudices or pre-prejudices young people had about each other were strengthened in the negative sense. Why were the programmers not more successful? The most simple answer is that the organisers fervent desire to do something for Franco-German friendship had made them focus on the common interests of people and cultures. This strategy was based on the insight that conflicts are caused by differences in culture and ideology, in everyday life, but also regarding claims to power and possession. The differences were obviously concealed to such an extent that it was impossible to learn how to handle them, i.e. to accept them and to concede that others might have a different view. Participants had no chance to get on the difficult path of learning how to live with these differences instead of going round the bend." ⁶

In a small, but instructive, evaluation study of a three week work placement of German apprentices in Ireland, the authors⁷ likewise criticize the so-called "contact"- (or "To know them is to love them") hypothesis for not being able to deliver in terms of intercultural understanding. Basing themselves on the work of the Israeli psychologist Yehuda Amir⁸ and others, they enumerate a further seven preconditions that are to be present for an intercultural learning process to be successful. These are

- equality in terms of status, i.e. similar socio-economic status of the participants
- Convergence of aims, i.e. common aims and interests in the participants;
- Appropriate attitudes prior to implementation, i.e. no overly negative attitudes towards people from the other culture;
- Appropriate contact intensity and length, i.e. the contacts should last for a certain period and must not be superficial in nature;
- Low cultural barriers, i.e. no insuperable cultural barriers;
- Social and institutional back-up, i.e. the existence of an integrative institutional framework and a climate of mutual back-up;
- Appropriate preparation; i.e. linguistic and cultural preparation of participants⁹.

These preconditions for intercultural learning have since they were launched by Amir (and others) become commonly accepted, and are corroborated by a large number of empirical studies. We will therefore not question their validity, but accept them at their face value. One explanatory remark, however. The project concerning German apprentices in Ireland is not an exchange in the literal sense of the word - the project that forms the empirical basis for the study only comprises German apprentices going to the Republic of Ireland. It should therefore be stressed, as indeed Yehuda Amir does in his work, that the above conditions apply to both cultures involved - i.e. that the term "participants" refers to both sides involved in the project, both the German apprentices and the Irish employees in the companies hosting the placement.

The evaluation of Stahl and Kalchschmid is interesting in that it takes a work placement project as its medium and tries to establish whether the assumption that this kind of encounter produces "intercultural understanding" is true or false. This is a new approach. Even though some of the activities/exchanges undertaken by the "traditional" exchange organisations have a vocational element, this is not the predominant mode. Exceptions are the activities of the organisations AIESEC (see above) and IAESTE, which organise long-term work placements for students in higher education (i.e. in the upper echelons of the concept "youth"). The International Association for the Exchange of Students of Technical Experience is an organisation similar to AIESEC, but with a target group of students in higher technical education. It was also set up under the aegis of UNESCO in the late 1940's. Other organisations have moved with the times and developed vocational exchanges as funding possibilities for these became available. This goes e.g. for AFS, which organises work placements abroad with funding from the Leonardo programme, and the FGYO, which is funding, and indeed also organising, placement projects as well - such as within the programme "Stages pour jeunes en situation précaire" set up by the FGYO with additional funding from the European Social Fund.

It can always be debated whether youth exchange really does result in increased intercultural understanding. Detractors can cite several examples from recent European history, where

population groups with different cultural orientations have suddenly turned upon each other with disastrous consequences, despite a long history of peaceful coexistence. Given the fact that the practice has continued and indeed grown and developed over the last 50 years, however, one can at least conclude that a sufficient number of policy-makers, investors, parents and others have enough faith in the beneficial effects of the activity to keep it alive and thriving.

What could be interesting to discuss further, however, is the issue whether all forms of "exchange" or "mobility" are equally well suited to yield returns in terms of increased intercultural understanding. From the "commandments" of Stahl and Kalchschmid, certain general rules of thumb may be inferred, e.g. concerning length and intensity that would be valid for any transnational project. Furthermore, it would follow naturally from the first condition that exchanges (or mobility projects) involving peer groups in both cultures (countries) would normally be most likely to succeed. Looking at practices of exchange organisations and programmes of both the types outlined above, it would appear that this is also the case in the vast majority of the projects implemented. When referring specifically to placements, it may be useful to go back to the work of Amir, who has also identified a number of conditions which are deemed generally un conducive to the emergence of intercultural understanding. Some can be inferred by negating the positive statements. It must thus be assumed that inequality in terms of status will generally prove less conducive than its opposite. As further unfavourable factors Amir mentions:⁸ "...when the contact is unpleasant, involuntary, tension laden...when the prestige or status of one group is lowered as a result of the contact situation...when members of a group or the group as a whole are in a state of frustration...".

Let us for a moment examine what happens in a typical placement situation, where a young person (apprentice, worker) is spending a period of time in a company abroad. Firstly, the participant will not be with a peer group. He or she will participate in a community of practice centred around a specific task, but there will be significant differences in term of age and power/status, and consequently also in aims. The host company may appoint a mentor to help with the overall integration into the work processes, but generally there will not be trained staff available to monitor the intercultural learning process on an ongoing basis. The setting will not be specifically constructed to promote intercultural learning, and there will be a significant pressure to comply with the requirements of the production, which can lead to stress and tension in peak periods. Or, potentially worse, the participant is not involved in the production process at all, but left to fend for himself in a corner with some trivial tasks, or restricted to peering over the shoulders of busy colleagues. At the workplace, there is often, due to the pressure, a tradition for "instant evaluation"⁹ - i.e. immediate response if things are not done according to expectations, and work processes held up or interrupted. Delivered across cultural divides and language barriers, this will often strike harder than intended, leading to frustration and anger. All this should be coupled with the fact that the participant a priori is in a vulnerable position, being younger, less experienced and away from his usual sources of help and support. Moreover, he or she is at a disadvantage both

culturally and linguistically. In comparison with another type of exchange, which also has a "vocational" component, namely the work camps mentioned earlier, the differences are striking. Here the participant is together with a lot of young people in a similar situation, often from many different countries (equality of status, convergence of aims), there is staff available trained in intercultural encounters, and the emphasis is on process rather than product, eliminating a powerful incentive for stress and frustration.

The conclusion of the evaluation of Stahl and Kalchschmid is interesting. Participation in transnational placement projects can contribute to increased intercultural understanding, they maintain, but it is by no means evident, and the process may go both ways. Even though some prejudices were done away with as a result of the stay, others were strengthened and new ones actually emerged. Stahl and Kalchschmid see the solution in a more thorough linguistic and cultural preparation process, which will help bring out the potential for intercultural learning better¹⁰. That there is a potential for intercultural learning in this type of activity seems to me beyond doubt. Amir mentions as a favourable condition for intercultural learning "...when the members of both groups in the particular contact situation interact in functionally important activities"¹¹. This is where placements have a particular advantage, that is difficult to replicate in other circumstances, where the tasks are often artificially constructed to suit the learning process, and not the other way round. I would doubt, however, that preparation and other measures alone will put them on par with other forms of exchanges. There seems to me an inherent structural weakness in placement projects when used for this purpose, and if the production of "intercultural understanding" is the main success criteria for this type of activity, we may be investing resources unwisely. Because of the "structural weaknesses" mentioned above, the risk for negative consequences remains high, even if one could make up for the lack of a research and development tradition for this in VET, and indeed also for the absence of a coherent pedagogy. And the risk of failure is especially high once we go outside the group of well-functioning and adaptable young people with a sound basis of qualifications and involve so-called "disadvantaged groups", as many programme preambles exhort us to do. I would argue that intercultural learning must be an (albeit valuable) by-product of transnational placements - one which should be nurtured and esteemed, but not in itself sufficient reason for the investments currently made in this activity.

¹ Quoted from "Intercultural Reconstruction - European Yearbook on Youth Policy and Research" Vol. 2/1999, p. 294. Berlin 1999

² See e.g. Sylvia Engler "Zin Schuljahr im Ausland" (Campus Verlag Regensburg 1996) for an overview of how many organisations offer these stays in Germany alone.

³ The Franco-German Youth Organisation: Reflections on 35 years of Experience, in "Intercultural Reconstruction - European Yearbook on Youth Policy and Research" Vol. 2/1999, p. 245-252. Berlin 1999

⁴ Ibid, p. 267-268

⁵ Günther Stahl and Anja Kalchschmid: "Evaluierung eines kurzzeitigen Auslandsaufenthaltes von Auszubildenden", in "Personal" no. 1, p. 23-27, 2000

⁶ Yehuda Amir "Contact Hypothesis in Ethnic Relations" in Psychological Bulletin, vol. 71, no. 5, p. 513-542, Washington 1969

⁷ Stahl and Kalchschmid, p. 22

⁸ Amir, p. 334

⁹ For a more detailed description of this, see e.g. "Mestebene - Living with Social Exclusion" by Steinar Kvale and Klaus Nöcker, Copenhagen 2000 p. 252

¹⁰ Stahl and Kalchschmid, p. 27.

¹¹ Amir, p. 334.

Other References:

IPS website: www.ips.org

AIESEC website: www.aiesec.org/about/main.asp

