The notion of quality in placements abroad

By Søren Kristensen

Introduction
The creation and development of the European Voluntary Service (EVS) is part of a significant trend within Europe, where placements abroad have been increasingly used as a didactic tool in a context of formal, non-formal and informal education and training. The programmes of the European Commission are an important factor in this. Besides the Youth programme (of which the EVS is an action), two other large EU programmes – Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci – are grant-aiding placement activities abroad. In addition to this, other European programmes (e.g. the 6th framework programme for research) contain provisions for mobility of specific groups of people (in this case: researchers), just as placements abroad is also an issue for many activities financed under the Social or the Regional Fund. These European programmes and initiatives are complemented and supplemented by similar programmes and initiatives at bi-national, national and regional level in Europe, as well as "spontaneous" activities undertaken by individuals. Even though we lack adequate statistical information, it is clear that the number of people undertaking placements abroad in Europe for an educational purpose is very big indeed. It is gradually becoming equally clear, however, that merely sending people abroad on placements will not necessarily bring about the benefits that we normally associate with this activity – especially when we target so called "disadvantaged groups". *Quality* and *quality assurance* is therefore a pivotal concern in this context – how do we distinguish "good" from "not so good" (or even bad) mobility projects, and how can we ensure that the conditions for the acquisition of both cognitive and conative learning issues are optimal in a given project?

Our expectations of mobility
Basically, we perceive an artifact as being "of quality" when it lives up to our expectation of it. But what precisely is it that we expect from placements abroad? An analysis of policy papers and other documents concerning mobility[1] in recent times (i.e. from app. 1945 to the present time) identifies four different trends (or discourses) in the thinking on the issue of placements abroad undertaken for an educational purpose:

- The first discourse can be called the discourse of *intercultural understanding*. It has its roots in the time immediately after the Second World War, where sending young people abroad to other countries for a period of time was seen as a way of creating an understanding between the new generations of previously warring countries that would make them impervious to nationalistic propaganda and prevent new conflicts from breaking out. A prominent bi-national example of this are the exchange activities of the Franco-German Youth Office (OFAJ/DFJW), a bi-national organisation set up in 1963 with the express purpose of working from increased understanding between the two countries through the means of youth exchange.

- The second discourse is linked to the idea of *free movement of workers* within Europe as expressed in the original Treaty of Rome establishing the European Economic Communities in 1957. It was seen as essential for the economy of Europe that workers could move freely across borders to alleviate skills shortages and escape situations of unemployment. Mobility of young people is seen as way of preparing the labour force for a future where careers are pursued across borders. The first mobility programme of the European Economic Communities - the so called "Young Workers Exchange Programme" - was created with Article 51 of the Treaty of Rome and put into operation in 1964 (i.e. over 20 years before the much more known Erasmus programme) with exactly this rationale.

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[1] The following bases itself on the analyses undertaken by Kristensen (2004)

- The third discourse arises from the notion of *internationalisation of education and training in Europe,* and of *Europe as a single market.* Citizens of Europe should be equipped with the skills to operate within the context of a internationalised economy; i.e. they should possess foreign language proficiency and intercultural competence[2], which they can acquire through participation in mobility activities. An exponent of this line of thought is the Petra programme of the European Economic Communities 1987 – 1995 (Petra = Partnerships in Education and TRAining).

- The fourth discourse is set in a context of educational reform, and sees transnational mobility *as a method for the acquisition of so called "key skills" and improvement of employability.* Key skills (also known as "transversal skills", "key skills" or "new basic skills") are needed in the "knowledge economy" which is brought about by globalisation and the rapid rate of technological development. Participation in a mobility project – so runs this discourse - will enable individuals to cope with change, and should therefore be included in the curricula of education and training. This is a new line of thinking that has become especially prevalent since the time of the Lisbon Declaration (2000).

There is, of course, a distinct temporal (vertical) progression in the four discourses, but it must be underlined that it is not a matter of one taking over after the other with the passing of time. Rather, they are all four "live" and are used as the rationale for mobility activities today. Neither are they mutually exclusive – in fact, in many documents they are seen to appear side by side as equally valid justifications for mobility. In the Work Programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe[3] (objective 3.4) it is thus stated that "Mobility helps to promote the feeling of belonging to Europe, the development of European awareness, and the emergence of European citizenship. It allows young people to improve their personal skills and employability, and offers trainers the chance to broaden their experience and enhance their skills". There is also a *horizontal* aspect to these four discourses, however, in the sense that their relative importance not only varies with time, but also with the educational setting in which the activity is set, and the target group it caters for.

Even though these four discourses are not mutually exclusive and share what we may call short-term cognitive learning goals[4], they nevertheless have different impacts on concrete activities. Firstly, the normative standpoint they each represent ("why we *really* do this") often means that certain aspects of practice are emphasized at the expense of others. Secondly, there is a degree of compartmentalisation between the discourses that often prevents the transfer of experience from practitioners operating within the ideology of different discourses. In order to understand the historical development of transnational placement activities in Europe, an insight into the differences between these discourses is therefore indispensable. In an overall context of quality and quality assurance, however, all we can do is to take note of their existence as co-ordinate elements in an overall perception of what transnational mobility (placements abroad) should do. Perceived "quality in mobility", then, is when activities are seen as bringing about intercultural understanding, European labour market mobility, international skills in the labour force, and a capacity for dealing with change. But to what extent is this perception of quality backed up ("explained") by research?

Our knowledge base on mobility
In the framework of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) a survey was undertaken in the years 2000-2002 on the use of transnational mobility (with an emphasis on placements) in the context of VET. The survey covered all the present 15 Member States of the

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[2] Intercultural competence has been defined for the purposes of this study as "the ability to interact constructively with persons with another cultural background on the basis of a perception cultural differences and similarities" – i.e. a practical, operational skill. It is thus different from "international understanding", which denotes an idealistic attitude.
[3] Official Journal of the European Communities C50 of 23 February, p. 1
[4] They are all concerned with the acquiring foreign language proficiency, knowledge about other cultures/countries and issues of personal development. Where they differ is in the long-term goals – why it ultimately is important that we learn those skills.

European Union, plus Norway and Iceland[5]. Part of this survey (which was carried out by national experts in each Member State) was concerned with scientific studies and evaluations of mobility activities, and aimed at creating an overview of research (and in particular evaluative research) of transnational mobility. To complement the national studies, a similar survey of evaluative research undertaken at European level was carried out by CEDEFOP. Even though the survey mainly was concerned with placements and VET, an effort was made to look into similar work in the field of youth and higher education with a view to identify findings here that could serve as inspiration for the VET-field. The findings of these surveys did not testify to a very great deal of evaluative activity being carried out. In particular evaluations based on scientific criteria are few and far between, and what we have is mostly so called summative evaluations carried out to ensure accountability in programme administration and/or to legitimate programme activities. There is thus very little research-based evidence to underpin the discourses with facts[6], and to a certain extent it seems justified to say that our conception of what transnational mobility can do is closer to wishful thinking than to knowledge.

This lack of knowledge is also mirrored in our understanding of how learning in mobility takes place. If we *a priori* assume that participation in a transnational mobility project does bring about the outcomes we have described, how is it precisely that this happens? Could we possibly emulate these conditions in other contexts (e.g. at home) and thereby bring about this learning in a more cost-effective way? With the exception of the youth field, there is actually not any detailed notion of how it is that we learn in transnational mobility projects. A very indicative metaphor is sometimes used – namely that of mobility as a "magic box". Participants in mobility projects enter the magic box and come out again transformed, but no-one really knows what it is that has happened inside the box to effect this transformation. In tandem with this metaphor of the "magic box" goes a preoccupation with numbers as the most important success criteria for mobility programmes. In programme evaluations and reports, quantity has over the years been foregrounded as almost the sole indicator for the achievements of mobility programmes (see e.g. Deloitte and Touche, 2001). But numbers can in themselves not serve as justification for the programmes. The important thing cannot be that 1,000, 10,000 or 100,000 people went abroad as part of programme activities and spent a period of time on a placement, in an educational establishment or with peer groups in youth organisations. The important thing must necessarily be what they brought home with them in terms of learning that can enable them to function better in working life, in society and in their personal life.

If we want to obtain a deeper understanding of how learning in a transnational placement project takes place, we have relatively little material to go by[7]. Evaluations and research projects looking at the learning element in transnational mobility projects are very rare, and there is not a "community of practice" of researchers in Europe, which can ensure that results from one study are taken into account and further developed in the next[8]. The isolated studies and evaluations therefore often seem to be "reinventing the wheel" rather than taking the field a step further. What we do have, however, are many so called "examples of good (or even best) practice" – examples of projects or programmes, selected at European or national level, which are seen as successful and held forward for emulation by others. Generally, however, these "examples of good practice" are selected according to an unspecified perception of their success rather than on the basis of transparent and transferable criteria. What they can tell us about, therefore, is what worked for a particular group at a particular moment in time and

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[5] The individual national surveys have not been published. Results of the analysis of these are included in Kristensen (2004).

[6] A very extensive longitudinal study of former Erasmus students carried out by Teichler and Maiworm (1994) actually seems to indicate that student who have been abroad during their studies are not pursuing their career abroad afterwards in numbers that are significantly higher than those whose study period did not include a mobility experience. A smaller, qualitative study (Stahl and Kalchschmid, 2000) of a group of German apprentices going abroad on a 3-week placement does similarly not show any significant gains in terms of intercultural understanding.

[7] Excepting, again the youth field,, where extensive research and development activities have taken place. However, these activities ("youth exchanges") are not carried out as placements, but as different kinds of encounters.

[8] See Kristensen, 2004

under particular circumstances; but not whether the project/programme contains elements that can be seen as generally conducive towards better outcomes in terms of learning in mobility projects[9].

If we want to get a clearer understanding of how learning in mobility projects take place, the inductive approach – trying to formulate general rules or guidelines from the study of empirical material – is therefore not going to be very productive, unless we have the resources to undertake the necessary field research as part of the study. We must therefore adopt a deductive approach – going from the general to the particular. In this case it means applying selected theories of learning to the phenomenon of educational mobility, and trying to deduce rationally from this what the elements are that are conducive towards the kind of learning that we assume take place. Using this approach must necessarily make the undertaking somewhat speculative, and a more correct scientific procedure would involve combining the inductive and deductive approaches in a fruitful interplay. The present study is mainly explorative in nature, however, and ideally the theorization in the following should be validated by appropriate empirical work before it can lay claim to broader acceptance.

Learning and transnational mobility projects
There are, of course, certain types of learning in mobility, which we do not need any help from high theory to explain. This goes for kind of educational mobility that takes place in the cases where the necessary learning facilities are simply not available in the participant's home country. If a particular course or skill is only taught abroad, then a period of study or placement in the country in question is the only way to get to this learning opportunity, and it would seem futile to theorize further on this (unless, of course, one is interested in the "added value"). It would also seem evident that when the object is learning about a particular country (language and culture) a stay abroad is the most effective way of doing so – even though there certainly are elements which can respectively maximise and minimise the effectiveness of this kind of learning in connection with the stay.

If we look beyond these issues, however, the first question we must ask concerns the differences in learning environment: *what are the elements that we find in a stay abroad that we cannot emulate in the home environment?* Two immediately spring to mind:

The first is *geographical distance*. Participants in transnational mobility projects are generally a long way from home, from their family and friends and their usual surroundings. Of course, this can also happen within most countries in Europe – a person going from Flensburg to Munich in Germany has actually travelled a greater distance than if he had gone to Copenhagen in Denmark. Similarly, transnational mobility needs not necessarily involve great distances – if that same person had opted to go to Sønderborg in Denmark, he or she could comfortably go home in the evenings or the weekends, if he or she so wishes. *Generally*, however, participation in a transnational mobility project involves covering a considerable distance.

The second is *culture*. Stays abroad take place in the context of another national culture, and generally (but not always) involve having to communicate in a foreign language. But what exactly does "culture" mean? It is an elusive concept, and there are many definitions; but here we will use the one developed by the Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede, who sees culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from the other" (Hofstede, 1997: 180). Hofstede's definition is a very broad one, and does not necessarily involve crossing borders. There may be different cultures within the same national parameter, and we may thus also talk about organisational cultures, vocational cultures, or youth cultures (see Hebdige 1979) etc. Not all of these are, of course, as marked as the national cultures, and they are therefore sometimes termed "subcultures" in relation to this. Transnational mobility, however, by the very definition of the term, involves moving from one national culture to the other and back again.

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[9] See Annex 1 of the study

The next question we must ask, once we have isolated the elements that distinguish transnational mobility from other learning contexts, concerns the relationship between these and the concept of learning. In other words: *what kind of learning is it that the combination of distance and culture in an educational context can give rise to?*

To answer this question, I will in the first instance focus on the concept of culture, or rather on the relationship between culture and learning. The way in which we acquire a culture is a process of learning, known by anthropologists as "enculturation". A popular textbook on cultural anthropology thus states that "every person begins immediately, through a process of conscious and unconscious learning and interaction with others, to internalise, or incorporate, a cultural tradition through a process of enculturation" (Kottak, 1994: 40). This insight has been introduced into general learning theory by Lave and Wenger (1999) with the formula "legitimate peripheral participation", which denotes the process whereby a person acquires a "culture" (e.g. a professional or vocational culture) by starting on the periphery and then gradually moving closer towards the centre of that culture as he or she "learns the trade" and is accepted by the "community of practice" here. What that person acquires, however, is not only a matter of technical skills – it is also a specific mindset (or, in Hofstede's term, a mental programming); a way of looking at the world (or a specific aspect of it): in other words: a culture[10]. Because this has to do with the way in which people form their identity, this process is also sometimes called "formative learning" or "socialisation". This denotes the process whereby people gradually gravitate from the rim of the circle towards the centre and a position as full-fledged member of the particular community of practice (or "culture"). In terms of vocational cultures, this is the way in which a person comes to see him- or herself as e.g. a carpenter (as opposed to other trades). In terms of national cultures, this is the way in which a person gradually comes to see him- or herself self as "French" (as opposed to other nationalities).

The concept of enculturation or legitimate peripheral participation is ultimately a static form of learning. If we could remain isolated in small communities of practice that had little or no contact with the outside world, this might suffice for a lifetime. Once we get in contact with other communities of practice and other ways of doing things (either through mobility or through technological developments), however, our conception of normality is challenged. Sometimes this challenge is relatively limited in scope, or happens over a long period of time, and we may manage to incorporate it successfully into our own culture, in a process known as "acculturation"[11]. At other times, however - and this is, according to Giddens (2000) increasingly the case in modernity - the challenge is so abrupt and so fundamental that we need to change the parameters of our worldview in order to survive in this new situation. This process is a learning process, which by Mezirow – to distinguish it from the formative learning in the enculturation process - has been called "transformative learning", which he defines as "…the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true and justified to guide action" (Mezirow, 2000: 7-8). The way in which this learning happens has been described by Jarvis (1999: 38-39) as an experience of *disjuncture* (Mezirow: a disorienting dilemma) that gives rise to *reflection,* which in turn is transformed into *learning*; i.e. "a lasting capacity change" (cf. Illeris)[12]. Transformative learning, then, can be described as the way in which we learn to cope with change. The

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[10] In their book "Situated learning" (1999) Lave and Wenger have illustrated this by including case studies not only of e.g. the traditional apprenticeship of tailors and meat-cutters, but also of e.g. how persons are integrated into Alcoholics Anonymous and given a new identity as teetotallers.

[11] "Acculturation is the exchange of cultural features that results when groups come into continuous firsthand contact; the original cultural patterns of either or both groups may be altered by this…We usually speak of acculturation when the contact is between nations or cultures; elements of the cultures change, but each group remains distinct" (Kottak, 1994: 56).

[12] Another way of describing these two aspects of learning could be Piaget's notion of assimilative and accommodative learning (Piaget, 2001), or the difference between Bateson's steps 0 &1, and 2 & 3 in his theory of learning (Bateson 2000).

actual learning process constitutes, in the words of Mezirow (2000: 8) a "constructive discourse" in which taken-for-granted attitudes are probed and, if necessary, changed through the dialogue with an outside influence.

We may, however, also choose to react differently to these challenges, or changes; namely by encapsulating them as specific to a particular time and or environment, or by rejecting them altogether. As a Dane, when faced with practices from different cultures, I may choose to react by retreating into what is commonly known as national chauvinism, and present a hostile attitude to any new elements coming from the outside. As a carpenter, I may choose to reject new methods of building and construction that are seen to impinge on my vocational culture (e.g. the use of gypsum boards) and refuse to have anything to do with them. This is typically the "gut reaction", since a reorientation of culture and identity may be a painful process; but hardly neither an appropriate nor a constructive one in an era of globalisation[13] and unprecedented technological development. A capacity for transformative learning in the individuals is therefore essential both for the creation of a unified Europe as well as for survival on a turbulent labour market where job profiles may change drastically or disappear altogether almost overnight.

On the basis of this brief (and densely concentrated) excursion into learning theory, I will describe the core of learning in a transnational mobility project as a venture into transformative learning; a meeting with new and different practices to challenge the established "mental programming" and make them "more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective" (Mezirow). Two elements are significant here. Firstly, the fact that most participants in mobility projects are young people; i.e. in the age bracket roughly between 15 – 25. This means that their "mental programming" into a particular culture is not fully completed yet, and it may be assumed that they are more capable of transformation than somebody who with the passing of time has become too deeply entrenched in a particular worldview. Secondly, the element of *distance* comes in; the fact that participants are a long way from home, in an environment where they are not surrounded by the usual crowd of family, friends and colleagues. This can on the one hand be perceived as a weakness, since it means that their usual sources of advice and support are not there. One the other hand, however, it can be seen as an advantage, in that it makes the stay abroad a kind of "free space" (Schön 1987: 37), where they are free to experiment with aspects of their vocational and personal identity – partly because their stay is only a temporal one and partly because they are not being held in place by the expectations of the usual environment. They are to a much larger extent thrown back on their own resources than is the case in their every day life at home. Moreover, the problems they encounter are framed in a different cultural setting, and the usual problem solving tactics may therefore not suffice to cope. Participants are therefore forced to develop their self-reliance and their capacity for innovative thinking if they want to come to grips with these.

Learning in placements abroad
A cardinal point in any stay abroad is certainly the proximity to, and interaction with, the culture of the host country, in particular the mentality of the people living there. It may sound almost superfluous to say so, since one can hardly avoid coming into contact with the native population during a stay abroad (unless, of course, one stays in a "Club Med"-type holiday camp!), but it is nevertheless easy to imagine a situation where this interaction is limited to the extent that it restricts the learning potential severely. Many stays abroad (especially in the field of VET and youth) are organised as group exchanges, and here it can be quite easy for a participant to "hide" in the group and avoid contact with the natives. Such a stay may quite possibly result in the opposite of what was intended (if one of the learning goals was increased intercultural understanding): that the participants come back with their prejudices confirmed rather than dispelled. Interaction with culture and mentality of the host country may, of course, come

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[13] Defined by Giddens (2000: 64) as "…the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away, and vice versa"

about all by itself in a surprisingly short time for participants who are active and extrovert. More timid and shy participants may need assistance in this process, which may be given both in the form of preparation before departure (enabling them to settle into the environment ore quickly) and as tutoring or mentoring[14] during the stay abroad. Preparation before departure is especially important for short-term stays, where it is essential that interaction begin as soon as possible. It should not only encompass linguistic and cultural aspects, but also practical, pedagogical and psychological aspects so that the participants can devote as much of their energy as possible to the integration process. I will call this process *immersion*[15].

The distance from home is, as we have seen, another important learning situation in connection with a stay abroad. This is what creates the "free space" where the participant can experiment with aspects of their personality without being held in their wont place by the expectations of the surroundings, and where they can act relatively free of constraints because the stay is a temporal one. Arguably more important, however, is the fact that participants here – and for some of them for the first time – are thrown back on their own resources, and will have to cope with new and unfamiliar problems by developing their initiative, innovative thinking, and self-reliance. This does not mean leaving them to their own devices – it is necessary to support participants with advice (in the shape of preparation before departure and mentoring during the stay) and logistical assistance and build a "scaffold" around them to ensure that challenges do not become overwhelming. Basicaly, however, participants must assume responsibility for their own situation (including the learning process), and I will therefore call this process *responsibilisation*[16].

It is important for the emergence of transformative learning that the participants enter into a "constructive dialogue" with the "disorienting dilemmas" (Jarvis' *disjuncture*) they encounter. They must in other words relate to the environment they encounter in order for them to open up to and absorb new aspects and elements and thereby enrich their own culture. This will not happen if the culture they encounter is too distant – too exotic or too remote – from what is perceived as their own culture. Besides the geographical implications, this can in an educational context also mean a line of study or (for a placement) a vocation that is seen as having no relation with their wont study or chosen occupation. When this happens, there is a risk that the foreign experience will more or less exist in a parallel world to the "real" world of the participant, to which it is seen as having no relation. I will therefore call the process of securing a compatible match between the two worlds and creating the conditions for a constructive dialogue between these for *relativation*.

An equally vital ingredient in transformative learning is reflection. Reflection comes about as a result of an experience of disjuncture – but so does rejection. Especially in short-term stays (but by no means limited to these) the risk is always there that the participants will be overwhelmed by the experiences and choose to shut them out of their minds rather than engage in a constructive dialogue with them. Part of that risk may be eliminated with an adequate preparation, but the reflection process itself cannot be done in advance of the actual experience. It either happens in tandem with the experience (cf. Schön's notion of "reflection-in-action")[17], or after the experience has taken place (cf. Schön: "post-mortem reflection"). This reflection may come about by itself, but since it is an arduous process, it may also quite easily be sidetracked and forgotten. Part of the pedagogical challenge when working with educational stays abroad must therefore be to create the necessary space and support for this reflection

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[14] "Tutoring" is here used to denote the assistance offered in an educational environment, whereas "mentoring" refers to the same type of assistance offered at a workplace during a placement abroad.

[15] The description of the four learning situations (immersion, responsibilisation, relativation and perspectivation) are taken from Kristensen (2004) I have invented these terms for the purpose and they do not exist in any dictionary of the English language

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[17] Schön 1987: 22-40.

process to happen – both during the stay and after. Because the aim of this reflection is about getting the right perspective on the experiences (or challenges) encountered, I will call this process *perspectivation*.

It is evident from these four learning conditions that the term "transnational mobility project" should not be taken to mean only the time spent abroad. There is a period before departure ("preparation") and a period after (which we may call "debriefing") which is of crucial importance to the learning process as a whole. It is the contention – or hypothesis – of this paper that the learning specific to a transnational mobility projects happens only when these conditions are in place, and is directly proportional in outcome to the extent to which they are fulfilled. I will therefore argue that any quality criteria for transnational mobility projects undertaken with an educational purpose must build on these four learning situations.

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