

**DISCOVERING THE REAL WORLD:
THE STUDY AND WORK EXPERIENCE ABROAD**

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Historically universities tended to be like monasteries. In fact some started their early history as such. And explicitly or implicitly many Higher Education (HE) institutions still maintain some of the features of these old monasteries. Ideology is an important feature. It might no longer be a belief in God, but certainly the belief in Truth and the duty to seek true knowledge and strive toward a better world have remained, in some form or another, the mission of most universities. The idea also that a university is not a company with an employer and employees, but a community of kindred spirits, living in relative poverty, has stayed with us. And this community feels strongly related to all university communities in the world. Again, universities have kept this essence of internationalism which is typical for monasteries and religious orders. They even kept the notion of hospitality. Universities welcome, for many centuries now, visiting scholars from universities far away as our sisters or brothers. Outside religions and universities this type of international hospitality and professional comradeship is rare.

When it comes to religious orders, the original form of worship is by taking refuge from society. One contemplates in silence, away from a corrupted mankind, in spiritual freedom, isolated physically by high walls, or located in the peaceful countryside, protected by a greenbelt of tranquility. Again, some higher educational institutions, especially the older one, are still very much like those early monasteries. Their institutions are built in quadrangles, with thick impressive walls. Education tends to be exclusively for young people, who will either join the brotherhood of educators or join the top-layers of society, as often many members of their families did before them. The teaching programme is more about cultivation, not necessarily intellectually demanding but rather a solid foundation for future success. The research here tends to be fundamental, seeking knowledge for the sake of knowledge, in absolute freedom.

But as with monasteries, a second group emerged which feels itself very much part of society, and which seeks a better society by action and direct involvement rather than contemplation and prayer. Such a higher educational institution wants to be open to society, wants to interact with society, wants to be immediately useful, wants to be relevant to all, not just a small, elitist group. It does not seek to exclude but on the contrary include as many as possible in their education. It tends to believe in a social, caring society, with success based on merit alone. The teaching is much more practice oriented, profession-based, with career preparation in mind, taught by people with not just an academic but often also professional background. The research is much more applied in nature, seeking the cutting edge of societal developments. Service to society is an explicit part of the mission of this type of HE institutions.

I do not argue that one type of institution is better than the other. I also accept that in reality the distinction might not always be as clear as I present here. Institutions evolve. Some universities might have started or even still feel or want to be institutions of the first type but have been driven within the national HE systems to become institutions of the second type. Others once may have been founded explicitly by the local community as a second type institution, but have become much more selective and much more independent for the sake of academic freedom. It is obvious that the great majority of universities are a hybrid and that I only present the ideal-types.

When it comes to internationalisation of higher education, it is useful to bear the two different types in mind. For the first type, internationalisation is something obvious, when it comes to scholarly activities. But it will refer mainly to staff mobility, up to a certain extent to teaching content, and possibly to student recruitment.

Internationalisation for the second group of institutions is much more a reaction to the changes in society. International mobility is a means to prepare students for a successful career in an internationalised society. It is an important element in the educational philosophy which seeks to prepare the students by exposing them, in a controlled manner, to real life. In this sense there is a direct relationship between internationalisation and what the Americans call co-op education. Building into the university education a placement within a company or organisation, supervised and assessed for credits towards the degree, is now also in European higher education quickly becoming recognised as a useful and important element. And importantly, this recognition now becomes apparent for any field of study, not just business.

Of course, this form of co-op education fits in nicely with the second type of HE institutions. It also suits the idea that university students are not exclusively preparing themselves for educational or academic careers but that the very big majority will enter a professional career. Co-op education, as in fact study abroad, supports their position in the labour market substantially. Of course, especially transnational industrial placements also is highly attractive as part of the European integration process with greater mobility of the next professional generations of Europe.

And things are happening in Europe when it comes to industrial placements as part of the educational, especially higher educational curricula. The best indication of this is the growing awareness and involvement of the **European Commission** in transnational mobility and industrial placements.

When, a good year ago, I was invited to participate in the expert round table of the European Commission about the - then - Green Paper titled **Education, training, research: The obstacles to transnational mobility**, I was very much encouraged to see the importance the European Commission was willing to attach to work experience places in another (European) country. I appreciated the realism that this is in practice not as easy as the theory suggests. In the words of European Commissioner Edith Cresson: "It is, to say the least, paradoxical that people and ideas circulate less freely within today's Europe than capital and goods". Also the **European Parliament** recognise that such mobility "is vital in order to provide better qualified people who have experience of studying, living and working in other Member States". A similar message comes from the social partners, especially large companies, for instance in words of the **European Round Table for Industrialists**. The needs of the labour market and the ongoing process of technological and structural change require geographical mobility and sufficiently broad-based education.

But let me ask a key question: how urgent really is the issue to remove all the barriers? It is good we commit ourselves to do so, but we do not need to wait with transnational work placements until the optimal legal-administrative circumstances have been created. In fact, some programmes, such as **Leonardo**, have proven to be able to stimulate this type of mobility, despite all the obstacles which undeniably still exist. It reminds me of the very early days, mid-eighties, when we embarked on the **pre-Erasmus** student mobility schemes. You would visit a partner institution, or even a department within your own institution, to discuss student exchanges. What happened was a lengthy discussion which made it very clear why such schemes would not work. Curricula were not suitable, credit transfer impossible, grading systems incompatible. accommodation unavailable to visiting students, language issues too big to handle, etc. etc. But... there was considerable pressure from students to go on mobility

schemes. Once the opportunity, at least in theory of international exchanges became known. It was impossible to stop that trend. And universities were very much aware that, despite all practical problems, international mobility was essential as part of the preparation of students to function effectively in a world which is subject to a process of globalization. So we just did it. And all the problems which we predicted did occur, some even today still occur. But we could no longer imagine European higher education without student mobility. So when a few months later, I was asked to express my view, in the form of a modest contribution, on quality transnational placement at the **Dutch Presidency Conference** in Maastricht, which had '**European Union as a Knowledge Union**' as its underlying theme, I decided to be positive and not to focus on obstacles but on what is possible, despite all complications.

I acknowledged that the key issue is that such mobility should have a steer from supply side, in other words, from companies or organisations which are willing to accept trainees. We should seek involvement beyond multinationals. Especially also smaller companies can offer a very realistic, fruitful, sometimes even more suitable experience to a foreign trainee. During the meetings I attended in Brussels and Maastricht. I was impressed by the support given by so-called multinationals to this type of schemes, but also noticed an apparent absence of interest of smaller business. After all, if a small or medium sized firm would be willing to host a trainee, why would it be going through the trouble of hosting a foreign trainee?

So what can be done? How can we get small business to commit themselves as well? How can we make it attractive for such business and organisations to participate?

One simple matter is that in my opinion we should never expect companies to do more than offer the placement itself. All the other related workload, such as preparation, briefing, accommodation, social programmes, monitoring, problem shooting etc, should be done elsewhere. We also need to ensure an optimal **matching** of a certain type of trainee with a placement. In this matching process as many risks and uncertainties should be excluded. I argue that at local level the only institutions which are able to offer an effective support to such foreign trainees, are educational institutions with their extensive experience with exchange programmes. They, and to be honest only they, can deal effectively with issues such as accommodation, language preparation, insurances, social integration, pre-departure orientation, monitoring and reporting etc. Furthermore, the crucial issue of 'matching' requires involvement of **international networks** of such educational institutions - many of such networks now exist in Europe as we all know - and to organise international placement schemes together.

Another very big advantage of such an organisational approach would be that many of the legal administrative problems cease to exist. A large number of these problems result from the fact that the trainee does not have a clear **legal status**. In my proposal he or she will have a clear status: that of student, even though not always a degree student. It might be a very temporary student status, for the duration of the training period.

Of course, the current **Socrates** scheme does offer the option of placements. Though this is valuable, I suggest that we should recognise that there is, or should be, more. The current exchange scheme has a limited audience (FE/HE students). One should want to look beyond that group, though of course we do want to include them. Also, in the current arrangements, the matching process is not always very well organised or at least quite labour intensive. But most importantly, as said before, I do recognise that the success of transnational mobility and working experience depends heavily on stimulating supply. In other words, finding trainees is not the biggest issue, it should be first of all about finding a proper range of placement opportunities. In the present schemes the HE institutions, which obviously are committed to their own students, work from the tail rather than the head.

In addition to the international networks of (educational) institutions, it is necessary, therefore, to establish **local, functional partnerships** of business (possibly via the Chamber of Commerce), authorities and educational institutions. Without such local organisation the international dimension will never function effectively. Think global (or at least European), act local.

Then - as with anything else in Europe - there is the issue of cultural diversity. Industrial placements might be quite accepted in Germanic countries (at least for vocational education), and reasonably well accepted in the UK, but much less so in Romanic countries. Yet a very recent visit to the **University of Burgundy**, in Dijon, France, made it clear that even in France times are changing. This University now accredits work experience placements of its students as an optional part of degree programmes, any degree programmes, including history or philosophy. And though other French universities might not go that far yet, things do seem to be moving in this direction.

The success of transnational mobility and work experience does not just depend on legal - administrative changes, it depends above all on accepting the basic formal partnership of governmental authorities, business community and educational institutions locally and internationally. To return to the starting point of this contribution, HE institutions, which feel more inclined towards the 'second type' will consider this as an opportunity well in accordance with their mission.