

Mobility as a Learning Tool

Introduction

Mobility refers to any activity where students engage in a coordinated structured learning activity outside of the classroom environment and away from their area of residence / study. It usually refers to transnational activity but in certain cases may take place within the student's home country. However learning mobility is normally transnational, physical and for a broad range of learning purposes, be it in organised programmes or on the learners own initiative.

It is a crucial part of mobility that it serves a learning purpose, this is regardless of the mobility type. The mobility period can vary significantly but should be sufficient to serve the learning purpose and this purpose should be recognised and agreed by the parties concerned. The mobility can be organised either in a framework of an existing program (e.g. Erasmus+), or takes place upon the initiative of the learner or individual college.

Learning mobility normally involves physical travel but in some cases virtual mobility can be useful in promoting and complementing the physical mobility. The experience is of course a different one but virtual mobility could play an important role in the internationalisation strategy of an institution.

Mobility activities may also be applied to staff at all levels within an institution. As with student mobility the learning objectives of the mobility need to be clearly defined and understood. Staff mobility may include activities such as attending training courses, job shadowing and teacher exchange or work placement. In all cases the staff involved should have the opportunity to share their learning experience within their home institute and in so doing act as a multiplier for new ideas and best practice.

At a college level mobility activities can play a vital role in the internationalisation strategy of the institution. Progressive colleges should be outward looking, willing to take on areas of best practice from other institutions, show an awareness of labour market and educational needs not just in their home country but in neighbouring countries and seek to establish

partnership networks to further these educational goals. Colleges within the EU need to be cognizant of EU educational policy and the shifts in national policy that will result from this.

Student Mobility

The first step in planning any student mobility must be to establish the learning aims. This in itself will dictate the type of mobility and the duration. At this early stage it is important to ask some basic questions:

- Why do we want to organise a mobility activity?
- What duration of mobility would be necessary to achieve our aims?
- Can the practical logistics of the mobility be met eg? Financial cost, time constraints?
- Do we have / need partners in this activity?
- Will the participant have a mentor / trainer?
- How can we ensure the quality of the mobility?
- What monitoring / evaluation procedures can we put in place?

A clear answer to all of these questions is a prerequisite for a successful mobility. The importance of preparation for the mobility candidate is also a key ingredient in achieving the mobility aims. Potential obstacles to a successful mobility should be identified and steps taken to minimize the impact of these obstacles. In the case of transnational mobility obstacles may include cultural differences, language difficulties, separation from friends and family etc. Of course in many instances overcoming these same challenges may represent the aim of the mobility.

At this point it might be prudent to explore some of the aims of mobility. These aims may include:

Fieldwork

Work Placement

Vocational Training

Cultural Learning

Language Learning

Achieving greater independence

Improving self confidence

Improving communications skills

Increasing awareness of Job and training opportunities abroad



A question that needs to be addressed prior to any mobility activity is to what extent the aims of the activities above can be met. Which ones are deemed key to the success of a particular mobility? What duration of mobility will be necessary to meet these aims? And of course these questions must be asked based on the learning needs of the student, their current abilities and level of experience. For

example sending a student to a country where a different language is spoken will be likely to improve a students language skills but the degree of improvement is likely to rest on the current language ability of the student, the duration of the mobility, the level of immersion into the target language and away from the mother tongue and the level of commitment of the student. Likewise with vocational training, a student who can bring substantial skills to the mobility experience, who shows a high degree of commitment to the learning process and who is open to embracing new methods or techniques employed in the partner country will gain most significantly from the time spent abroad.

Generally improvements in language ability, vocational skills and cultural learning are measurable. But other potential benefits are not easy to measure but may be clearly evident from the student after a period abroad. Teachers often report that students show a greater degree of enthusiasm for the vocational subject, an improvement in self confidence, greater levels of independence and improved communication skills. There can also be improvements in Information Technology skills as students often use modern communications media to keep in contact with family and friends while they are abroad.

Staff Mobility

As is the case for students there is a need to establish the aims of staff mobility. These can include:

Accompanying and support activities for student mobility

Preparatory visits, mobility management activities etc.

Teacher training – training courses, seminars

Teacher placement or exchange – Job Shadowing, learning new teaching methods etc.

Management mobility – sharing of best practice

Staff mobility can be of key importance to student learning outcomes as staff can and should act as multipliers for the learning achieved during a mobility period. However the institutional attitude and approach to staff mobility is critical in gaining the maximum benefit from the staff member's experience. Staff members who engage in mobility activities need to



be supported by their institution both in the preparatory activities necessary to make any learning experience a success, through the mobility itself and crucially through the dissemination of the learning following the mobility phase. All too often staff who engage in mobility activities are left to carry out the planning and preparation in their own free time, obstacles are placed in the way of the actual mobility such as difficulties in covering their classes and other work while they are away and little thought is given to the dissemination activities that could be of benefit to the institute as a whole.

Successful staff mobility will bring new teaching and learning strategies to the sending institution, can lead to curricular change, a broader approach to subject delivery, increased awareness of the needs of industry and the wider community, an awareness of cultural differences in some subject areas and above all a fostering of an open minded approach to curricular content and subject delivery. At its best teacher mobility becomes an integral and indispensable part of the teachers Continued Professional Development. Or putting it another way, it is wise for every educational institution to embrace the concept that Lifelong learning is as much a key strategy for the teachers as for the students under their care.

Internationalisation strategy of an institution.



The dominant culture of an educational institution can act as a catalyst to learning or a barrier to it. The culture of most educational institutions develops over a long period of time and often without clear planning or leadership. Changing the culture of an institution can be a slow process, but in examining the culture of an educational institute consideration should be given to an Internationalisation strategy. Educational institutes do not operate in isolation, while there is no denying the value of education for its own sake, the needs of the student to be educated to fulfil a meaningful role within society is of major importance. An educational institute should strive to be outward looking as part of its culture, to be

conscious of the needs of the labour market both nationally and at a European level, to be aware of developments within curricular policy, delivery strategies, educational credit transfer systems and other developments at a European Union level.

The European Union ECVET strategy is a good example of developments. A knowledge of the European qualifications levels, how credit transfers work within this system, the uses of memorandum of understanding between institutions, the need for quality assurance strategies, an understanding of competence based education systems and an understanding of how a students learning experience can be enriched by taking some of their modules in another country.

In essence a learning institute that engages with student and teacher mobility will already have taken large strides towards an Internationalisation strategy. It is also wise to remember that incoming mobility is a vital component of an institutions Internationalisation strategy as incoming students and teachers bring their experiences with them, can interact with large segments of the student and teacher population within the host institute and their very presence can create an atmosphere of belonging to a larger multicultural educational family.

Strategies and tools for successful mobility

As we have already stated a successful mobility activity is founded on careful planning. Once the initial aims of the mobility are identified the process of planning for the mobility activity

should begin. The planning will involve the selection of participants, the selection of a host partner, agreement as to the activity to be undertaken, strategy for the preparation of mobility candidates, agreement on practical aspects of the mobility such as travel arrangements, insurance, accommodation, and procedures for monitoring, mentoring and evaluation of the mobility activity.



The selection of a partner is a very significant step and of course very much depends on the aim of the mobility and the type of participating student. In most cases a partner who has experience in working with students at a similar level and of a matching vocational area will produce the best results as a partner of this type will already possess a high level

of understanding of the needs of the students, their existing competences and the strategies that might be employed to help them progress further along the learning pathway. The presence of a dedicated coordinator within the partner institute is also of key importance as this will lead to clear lines of communication and a high level of understanding between the institutes as to what the needs of the students may be. In many cases student needs can go beyond the narrow confines of vocational learning as for some students there may be limited or no previous experience of living in another country. Indeed in some cases the student may be away from family for the first time and the experience of having to look after themselves may be a key element of the mobility experience. It is important that the host institute has a clear picture of the students who will be coming to them both in terms of their vocational ability but also in terms of their likely personal needs.

The choice of participant is also very important. It is always the case in education that you need to start from the position the student is currently at and help them to progress on from there. There is nothing to be gained by setting unrealistic expectations for a student. In some cases there may be significant vocational learning during mobility but for some students the improvement in self confidence, awareness that they can survive in another country, or improved awareness of cultural difference can all be legitimate learning goals. Of course the commitment of the student to the mobility activity is very important and the

earlier the student can engage with the process the better. The use of a formal application and selection procedure is desirable as it creates an early engagement with the student and also creates a sense of achievement in being selected to participate in the mobility activity and from the institutions point of view the expectation that this sense of achievement will lead to a high degree of student commitment to the mobility. Where students travel as a group the balance within the group is also of key importance. The old adage that one bad apple can spoil the barrel is certainly true of student groups on mobility activity.

Preparation for mobility falls into three distinct categories. The first of these can broadly be described as cultural preparation. This involves making the student aware of what to expect while they are abroad. It may include such basic practical information as the currency used in another country, how to buy travel tickets, attitudes to punctuality and absence from work, which side of the road to drive on etc. In fact anything that may be helpful in allowing the student to integrate successfully into the life of their host area. Cultural preparation should also allow the student to examine more complex aspects of culture, it should make them aware of any interesting facts about their host area, for example important local historical events, interesting buildings, contribution of the area to art or music, in fact anything that can lead to a higher level of learning during the mobility. Cultural preparation can be carried out through formal classes but also by encouraging the student to undertake their own research, perhaps meeting with visiting students from the region in question or talking to students of their own institute who may have travelled to the host area in the past.

The second category is language preparation. Clearly the degree to which language learning can be achieved prior to mobility will depend on the student's previous knowledge of the language, the time available and the commitment of the individual student to engage with the process. In an ideal situation the student would already have a good working knowledge of the language of their host. In this instance the period abroad would act as a catalyst towards achieving a high level of fluency. The language preparation could concentrate on vocationally orientated language learning, where the student will be introduced to complex technical terms from their vocational area and can strive to add these terms to the vocabulary that they already possess. However in many cases the student's prior knowledge of the language of their host is limited or non-existent. In this instance the first priority is to give the student the necessary skills to cope with their language limitation. They should be taught a vocabulary which allows them to be polite and respectful to their host, that can assist them to order food from a basic menu and which will allow them to recognise basic signs or safety information. For example the words for "stop", "exit", "danger" etc. are important in every vocational area.

Vocational preparation is perhaps the most neglected in the period leading up to mobility. Of course the student is already engaged in learning within their chosen vocational area and so a large amount of preparation is taking place, but in order to help the student towards gaining the most from their mobility experience it would be useful if vocational preparation specifically geared towards the mobility work placement or training could be given. This of course requires a prior knowledge of what activities the student will carry out during the mobility but this information should be apparent from the training agreements and from contact with the host institute. A good foundation can provide a solid base upon which the students vocational learning abroad can be built. It is also important that the student learning is valued and that the student is given the opportunity when they return to class to share the learning experience with others. This has the dual benefit of allowing the student to act as a multiplier for the learning acquired and also helps to reinforce the learning for the student themselves.

When arranging mobility activity with a partner institute it is important that there is clarity as to what role each partner should play. This is essential both for the fostering of a good relationship between the partner institutes and a guarantee of quality for the mobility participants. The use of tools such as training agreements or memorandum of understanding can be very useful in this task. A training



agreement should outline clearly the tasks that the host partner will undertake in respect of the specific student and applies whether the student is training inside of their institute or has been allocated to a work placement. The agreement should outline the tasks the student will be required to do, how these task will be mentored and how any necessary evaluation will take place. In circumstances where the student may be completing one or more modules of their study abroad and where the host institute is responsible for the provision of and marking of assessment material then a more detailed agreement is necessary. This usually is presented as a memorandum of understanding between the institutes. In this case there is a need to ensure that quality standards and levels of study are clearly understood between the partners so that a module of study completed at the partner institute can be accepted as being of the same standard as one being offered at the sending institute. Cooperation at this level requires very good lines of communication

between the partners and a mobility flow of teaching and management staff between the institutions is very desirable in order to ensure that quality standards and curricular levels are well understood.

In all cases of mobility a well defined system of mentoring, monitoring and evaluation of the students is essential for a successful learning outcome. Within the partner institute it is likely that such a system already exists for their own students and it is usually not difficult to incorporate visiting students into the existing system. Where students are on work placement a system will often need to be put in place. This should involve the mentoring of the student by an experienced staff member in the same vocational area, a monitoring of the student progress by the employer and a regular process of communication between the employer and the host institute to ensure that the placement period is achieving its goals and to take timely action where things are not progressing as expected.

Of course the duration of the mobility will have a significant impact on the amount of preparation that it is practical to provide. A short mobility of perhaps a few days may simply require a clear statement of aims, a small amount of vocational preparation and a work-plan and evaluation mechanism for the students, where as a mobility of a number of months would require extensive planning and preparation, memorandum of understanding between the partners, mentoring, monitoring and evaluation strategies and dissemination strategies.

Dissemination

Once mobility is completed it is wise to look at the dissemination strategies that may be employed in respect of that mobility. Dissemination serves a number of functions including:

Promotion of the Internationalisation strategy of an institution

Creating a positive image of the institute in the media

Encouraging other students or teachers to participate in mobility

Promote the use of those who have participated on mobility as multipliers for the skills and knowledge acquired

Promote a sense of achievement for students and teachers who have participated on mobility

Reaffirm the value gained from funding of mobility activity

Dissemination can be formal or informal, internal to the institute or public. At its simplest it may involve creating a forum for students and teachers who have been on mobility to share their experiences with their colleagues. It may mean informing all staff and students of an institute as to the benefits of mobility activity, or it may mean publically promoting the mobility activities of an institute through the local newspapers, through the use of posters, through local television or radio or to other educational providers in the region of the sending or host partner.



Through the whole process sight should never be lost of the fact that mobility activity and the Internationalisation strategy of an institution is present first and foremost to serve the educational needs of the student. To ensure that they can gain the very best vocational skills, that they have an awareness of the opportunities available to them in other countries and that they acquire an open mind when confronted by others in their vocational area who come from areas where there is a different language and culture.

Case Study 1

A group of four students are to travel to the Netherlands on a Leonardo da Vinci funded mobility project. The students will stay three weeks with our partner institute and during that time will take part in fifteen days of work placement related to their vocational area of study, animal care. The initial activity in preparing for this mobility is in two parts. Firstly students are informed of the opportunity available and application forms are made available to them, once the applications have been submitted a selection process is initiated to choose the students most suitable to participate on the mobility. Attendance, academic record, language skills, willingness to learn and take direction, team working skills are amongst the criteria used in the selection process. Secondly, and in parallel to the selection process, agreement is reached with the host institution regarding the dates of mobility, type of work placement, mentoring and monitoring provision and accommodation

arrangements. As these students will use their period abroad as part of their overall course certification an evaluation procedure and quality control is also agreed. This is formalised through a memorandum of understanding between the partners.

Having completed student selection the participating students begin a series of Cultural preparation and language classes. As the students have not studied Dutch in the past the language classes concentrate on basic phrases and vocabulary. Some vocationally orientated language learning is also included with a particular emphasis on issues related to the safety of the students and the animals they will be working with. During this period the coordinator in the college makes final travel, accommodation and insurance arrangements for the group.

In this instance the students were accompanied to The Netherlands by a teacher. This teacher checked to make sure that the accommodation was of a good standard and visited each of the employers to get a first hand experience of the students work placements. The students arrived on a Saturday and had time on that day and also on the Sunday to settle in and enjoy their new surroundings. They all began work on Monday. No problems were encountered with this group of students but if issues had appeared a process was in place between the host institute and our college to deal with them. Issues that have arisen in the past with other mobility groups have included, homesickness, lack of punctuality, students being unhappy with the work they were asked to do, minor injuries at work, communication / language difficulties, issues with food etc. It is important that procedures to deal with these are in place. Students work with a mentor and an evaluation of their progress took place at the end of each week. A more formal evaluation was completed on their final day in the workplace when formal evaluation documents were completed by the employer.

Upon their return home each student produced a report about their experience and this helps to inform the college about good and bad features of the mobility with the aim of improving future student experience. Students reported significant improvement in their vocational skills, improvements in self-confidence, better language skills and a willingness to seek further work abroad in the future. Many students also reported good social activity and friendships that will last well beyond the projects duration.

Case Study 2

A group of 12 students participated on a Comenius bilateral project to Kusadasi, Turkey. The students were mainly drawn from our Tourism and Travel course and the main aim of the project was to make students aware of the benefits and practicalities involved in Cultural tourism. The mobility was to last for 12 days and there would be two accompanying teachers for the projects duration. The selection process for this mobility was carried out in a similar manner to case study 1, the student's ability to work as part of a team taking on a slightly greater significance in the selection criteria.



In this instance the students were to play a lead role in the project management so they were involved from a very early stage in communicating with students in Turkey in order to schedule a work-plan and general itinerary. This communication was mainly by email but was also carried out using Facebook and WhatsApp. Students were fully aware of the objectives of the project and were to arrange the

mobility schedule so that these objectives could be achieved. Teachers in both countries played a monitoring role in this process.

During the mobility phase students continued to play a lead role in the organisation of activities. They were responsible for the collection of data, for making presentations, for organising guided tours (and acting as guides for the visiting group), organising meals and other practical arrangements. In this way students were given "ownership" of the mobility activity. A similar pattern was followed when the Turkish students came on mobility to Ireland.

As part of their work-plan students were to integrate project evaluation and steps were to be taken if necessary to keep the project work on schedule. Because students have such a level of ownership of the mobility activity issues around discipline, sharing of workload, meeting targets etc. do not arise.

Upon completion of the mobility students had not only gained additional knowledge in the Tourism vocational area but also in areas of management. As they worked closely with the Turkish students close friendships were formed and through these students experienced a much greater understanding of the culture of their host region. The enthusiasm generated by the project also had positive effects once the students returned to normal classes.

Student and Teacher comments after a mobility activity

“It was the best three weeks of my life” (Student following a Leonardo Da Vinci project)

“I met so many people and made friends. It really helped me to improve my German language, I am so much more confident speaking it now” (Student following a Leonardo Da Vinci project)

“Can I go again” (Student following a Leonardo Da Vinci project)

“I was work shadowing in Sweden and was so surprised at the different methods they use there to deliver my vocational subject” (Teacher following a Leonardo Da Vinci project)

“I loved the culture of the place, there was so much to see and do” (Student following a Comenius Bilateral project)

“I did a complete training course in plastic welding and am now properly certified in this. This is a great addition to my CV” (Student following a Leonardo Da Vinci project)

“Working for a newspaper office in Germany really gave me a great insight into the work of a professional photojournalist” (Student following a Leonardo Da Vinci project)

“The teachers here were so welcoming, I was able to spend a lot of time in their classes and they were very generous in sharing curricular information” (Teacher following a Grundtvig project)

“There was so much I didn’t know about Turkey, I only thought of it in terms of my previous holiday experience, but I have learned so much on this trip” (Student following a Youth project)

“I was offered a full time job by my work placement employer and plan go back once I finish my course” (Student following a Leonardo Da Vinci project)

“My language skills were poor and the mobility trip really made me aware of this. I have just signed up for Spanish classes and will return to Spain again once I have a better grasp of the language” (Student following a Leonardo Da Vinci project)

“It was great to work with teachers from other countries on so interesting a project” (Teacher following a Grundtvig project)