"Things I would have liked to know before" – How to Enhance the Erasmus Experience

Gisela Holfter & Maria Rieder, Limerick

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In the context of an ERASMUS+ project (CONNECT –Intercultural Learning Network), focus groups were setup at the University of Limerick. Using quantitative and qualitative research methods such as questionnaires and essays, we analyse students' perceptions of their own need for specific preparation, when asked prior and subsequent to Erasmus periods abroad. In our paper we look at aspects such as preparation for the study abroad experience, intercultural learning and student perceptions of training needs as well as other aspects they found important or lacking in their preparation or actual experience abroad in the context of a European training project. In order to do so we will introduce the CONNECT project which we are currently developing with partners in eight European countries. This project is a cross-sectoral project, bringing together practitioners and experts from the university and youth sector. It was initiated to create an innovative intercultural learning scenario, consisting of an e-learning platform and curricula for pre-departure and re-entry orientation, to support Erasmus participants in the higher education sector before, during and after their exchange by integrating methods and concepts from non-formal youth education to formal education. In our article, we will report on initial findings and feedback regarding the face-to-face curricula for pre-departure orientation at Limerick University and give a short overview of perceived student needs and ideas for sustainable mentoring programmes from students who had not participated in the programme but had experienced studying abroad.

1. Introduction

While the idea of studying abroad sounds exciting to the majority of undergraduate students, anyone involved in the Erasmus programme and preparing students for it will know that students often become quite insecure and worried about aspects of their time abroad once it approaches. We can help alleviate their fears and contribute to making their experience more rewarding and successful – which is the main focus of this project. As Jenny Bruen points out, the last two decades have witnessed exponential growth in the numbers of mobile students, making student mobility one of the fasted growing phenomena in higher education. Numbers of mobile students rose by a staggering 77% between 2000 and 2009, to 3.7 million (Bruen 2013: 1342). The Erasmus programme alone supported 230,000 students in 2011. The investement of €14.7 billion for Erasmus+

will provide opportunities for over 4 million Europeans to study, train, gain experience, and volunteer abroad.[1]

This increase in numbers makes it all the more important to research the potential and experienced problems that exist with study abroad programmes and to offer sustainable training programmes that reduce problems and enhance the study abroad experience. One way to do this is our CONNECT project. 'CONNECT – Intercultural Learning Network 4 Europe' is a project funded by Erasmus+ programme under the strand 'Cooperation for Innovation and the Exchange of Good Practices Strategic Partnerships for Youth'. The Centre for Irish-German Studies at the University of Limerick is one of ten European partners in this 3-year Erasmus+ project, which is led by InterCultur Hamburg. Other partners include Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznán, Poland, AFS Interkulturelle Begegnungen e.V. Hamburg, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena, Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences in Helsinki, Finland, Karlshochschule International University in Karlsruhe, Germany, University Fernando Pessoa in Porto, Portugal, University of Urbino, Italy and University of Vic – Central University of Catalonia in Spain.

The idea behind the project is that whereas participants of non-formal youth exchanges (e.g. EVS) are generally provided with pre-and post-placement training, only relatively few university students who take part in the Erasmus programme have the opportunity to attend instructed intercultural learning and reflection sessions before, during and after their stay abroad. The 'CONNECT- Intercultural Learning Network' aims at combining two learning methods, face2face and virtual learning programmes. A central component of the latter is the Experience Map, an application similar to google maps which allows users to produce and access other participants' personal, reflective reports of experiences as well as factual information about city, university and social life including details of academic conventions and specific requirements of each university, stimulating ongoing active peer exchange. The project consortium is comprised of organisations from both formal and non-formal educational sectors. This composition allows the harnessing of a huge amount of experience in both sectors and the development of the learning methods based on scientific evidence. In the following, we want to present the starting point of the project – current experiences of students – as expressed by research studies and our own

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[1]   http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/about_en (accessed 6.06.2017).

results from engaging with students who have been abroad, as well as student feedback from the first round of face2face pre-departure training.

2. Student perceptions

Numerous studies have shown that problems encountered by students abroad include practical issues as well as language problems (cf. Bathke and Kim 2016, Sümer, Poyrazli and Grahame 2008 and Levine 2003). Our study comes to similar conclusions. We collected students' perceptions of specific preparation needs from students who had been abroad and had the benefit of hindsight, students who were abroad and from students who were scheduled to go via two sets of questionnaires. The first one was given to a group consisting of fourth year Irish students who had been abroad as well as international students spending a semester in Limerick (neither of them had benefitted from the CONNECT project). The other questionnaire was given to students in their second year, the pilot group which had participated in the face2face training before going abroad.

The first questionnaire was completed by twenty-three participants, ten of them international students on their placement in Limerick, and thirteen of them returning Irish students. The questionnaire was divided into three sections for 'before going abroad', 'during stay abroad' and 'after your return'.

Overall, students felt well-prepared for their stay abroad before they left, an indication that the Erasmus exchanges in general work well. However, there is room for improvement. Problems encountered before the students left had mainly to do with lack of contact with the host university, finding out what modules they had to take, how the timetable works and arranging accommodation for themselves.

They would also have liked to receive maps of the campus and/or city from the host university. In contrast, most of the participants said they had all the necessary support from their home university that they needed while they were away.

With regard to support from the host universities, an interesting difference was that all the international students stated that communication with the host university (Limerick) was good. However, slightly more than half of the Irish students reported that they missed more detailed information on their host universities, such as registration dates, orientation, contact points and on modules, and found that emailing with the host university got no or unsatisfactory replies.

In terms of sources that students had for information, most received the information they required from other students, from reading student testimonials, from lecturers and from different city, university and international office webpages. Talking to students who were at the same partner universities previously was also mentioned as beneficial. Two fifths of the students said that contacting the international office at home and abroad and their international coordinator helped them most in their preparation and that they received valuable practical information such as checklists and packing lists from there. For more than a quarter of students surveyed, talking to or reading the reports of previous Erasmus students was a source of good advice such as knowing where to stay, keeping an activity and goals journal, practising the language before leaving.

For the CONNECT project, of particular relevance was the response to the information available on the host university and city websites: while sixty percent of the international students were satisfied with the University of Limerick website, more than two thirds of Irish students considered the relevant online information on host universities and cities to be difficult to access due to language problems. The students found that websites in English were either not existing or had not the same amount of information as the host language version,[2] also websites on modules were outdated or non-existent. Also with regard to the host city, only about half of the students were satisfied with the information they found online.

These findings are clear indicators of the value of the online Experience Map that is currently being constructed, with links to official websites of all involved cities and universities and individual reports of experiences, from students for students. This includes topics, such as accommodation, food/restaurants, transport and health care, all gathered in one place and posted in different languages. This corresponds directly to the types of information that students found most important before they went abroad and also during their stay abroad: practical information that can be grouped into three broad areas: university, city and social life/free time. In terms of information about the university, knowing about modules and courses as well as the credit point system was mentioned by some, and others stated that information about enrolment, paper-work and fees was also

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[2]   This finding points towards common expectations of native English speakers such as students in the UK and Ireland, that all information should be available in English. To discuss and reflect upon these expectations in the context of the preparation for Erasmus can be a very useful strategy to highlight the importance of language competency and the need for language learning.

essential. Almost a third of students stated they would have needed more information about the university, such as location, campus structure, facilities and resources, modules and language courses on offer. Also mentioned were information on e-learning platforms used, printing options and costs and how to access their email address, knowing about modules and courses as well as the credit point system. Information and training on academic differences, for instance skills such as essay-writing, plagiarism conventions, were seen as lacking.

Accommodation appeared as the most worrying issue for students, mentioned in several different categories. Information on getting around in the host city (maps, public transport) was also seen as important. Cost of living in the host country and budgeting were perceived as challenging by some students. In terms of further practical information, a concrete date when to arrive and a survival plan for the first week with information about where to shop, how to get where etc. would have been very helpful to students.

In the category of social life/free time, the type of information seen as important was about clubs, societies and expat groups in the host city by a few students; they were also interested in things to do in the city. In this context, skills training about how to be open-minded was mentioned by one student. Further in terms of personal and intercultural issues, several students would have needed help dealing with depression and loneliness or stated they would have needed concrete tips on how to socialise with local people. The language barrier, especially adjusting to the local dialect, was mentioned a few times as potentially causing misunderstandings and preventing students from getting the help they needed. Asked what they wished they had known before they went, students mentioned information on working requirements in the host country, the importance of language practice before going and key contacts in emergency situations. While not immediately addressing language-related problems, we hope that in the future students who have gone through our training cycle will have different experiences thanks to the information provided and skills acquired – and we do emphasise the need for language practice in our training!

The last two questions in our questionnaire focused on whether or not the students had attended/been offered any pre-departure training, whether (if not) they would have wanted such training, and whether (if yes) there was anything that was not really helpful or relevant. Fifteen of twenty-three students had no training, of these only four students said they wouldn't have needed it, a clear minority. The rest found it to be very helpful

or imagined it would be very beneficial. Asked about aspects of the training that could be improved, those who had participated in one stated that very little country specific information was given. Again, we belief the face2face preparation training and the Experience Map can compensate here.

The second questionnaire followed the face2face training for second year students in Limerick prior to their study abroad. Twenty-six of the forty students who took part in the training returned the questionnaire (at a time when the Experience Map was not yet available). The first question asked whether students felt well-prepared for their study abroad period. The only worry that was mentioned at this early stage,[3] was the uncertainty regarding accommodation, exacerbated by the fact that the students (who will not go on ERASMUS until their fifth semester) mostly did not know yet where they were going to study. With only two exceptions, they felt they received sufficient help at this stage from their home university to prepare for it. However, due to the timing of the training they had no contact with their host universities yet. In terms of information that students had looked up there was broad agreement – the two most looked-up pieces of information were about the university (available modules and courses, semester dates, campus facilities) and especially accommodation opportunities. When asked what they felt most anxious about and where they would need particular support from the home and host university, an overwhelming number of students mentioned accommodation. However, potential loneliness and homesickness and being on their own in an unknown environment with a different academic system where a different language they are not fully proficient in is spoken was also a big fear factor. Most students saw the support in the form of student reports and the contact details of other people going to the same place as most helpful. Overall, the support by lecturers, the International Office and the module which included the pre-departure training[4] was mentioned most often. Many also said that

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3 For the students at the University of Limerick there is a compulsory work placement in semester 4, and only after this time, in semester 5, the students have their ERASMUS/Study abroad semester. Accordingly, the training in semester 3 has some challenges, as the study abroad period seems to be very far away for the students as they are currently mainly engaged with interviews for their work placements. However, there is no time between the work placements (some of which can be abroad as well) and the study placement when the training could take place otherwise.

4 The module in question is CU4013 Preparation for External Study and Work Placement, developed by Gisela Holfter. We would like to take this opportunity thank Dr Patricia O'Flaherty and Herveline Roche from the International Office as well as Dr Patrick

being informed at an earlier time of the location of their study abroad and being given a checklist of important dates, documents and things they need to organise beforehand would also make them feel more relaxed about their time abroad. To a large extent, these results tally with the sentiments of the returning students. For us, by far the most surprising feedback was that accommodation was mentioned again and again – for the vast majority of students this clearly was the number one issue. This is further emphasised by the previously discussed results of the students who had been away already.

We expect the Experience Map will address all these practical issues, incorporating student reports to a much larger extent than the small number currently held in individual universities repositories, while also allowing for and encouraging reflection. But intercultural aspects also play an often overlooked role. As global research on second language acquisition shows, "language anxiety stemming from linguistic insecurity is compounded by cultural differences" (Allen and Herron 2003). Pre-departure intercultural training has been found to be beneficial in a number of areas mentioned by our students, and will lead to a clear increase of competence according to the Intercultural Development Inventory (cf. Sample 2013). Accordingly, intercultural training played an important role in our pre-departure face2face training. The following section will provide a detailed account of how the various components of the CONNECT project will further address issues and worries expressed by the students emphasising the important role of intercultural competence training.

3. A Solution offered: CONNECT

There is ample evidence for the fact that the development of intercultural competence is a gradual learning process and, as various models such as the iceberg model (e.g. Weaver 1986: 135) signify, it is especially the implicit and the unseen, the norms, values, basic convictions and beliefs that take time to learn, which happens especially in interactions with members of other cultures. Our own set of not only traits and beliefs, our personality but also our expectations and stereotypes of the other culture all play a role and shape our intercultural interactions and experiences (cf. Sewell and Davidsen 1961).

After a review of the literature on increasingly questioned theories and various progression models of 'culture shock' one may conclude that, while many of them are quite normative when the process is a gradual one that is different for everybody, it may still be helpful to use some of these models to get students to reflect on where they see themselves and then get appropriate support wherever they are in their intercultural learning process. After all, intercultural competence has been famously defined as not only "knowledge of others" but also "knowledge of self" (Byram 1997: 34), and it is "cultural awareness, valuing and understanding […] of both one's own as well as others' cultures" (Deardorff 2006: 247). On the basis of these insights, derived from an extensive study, Deardorff designed a model of intercultural competence which "moves from the individual level of attitudes and personal attributes to the interactive cultural level in regard to the outcomes. The specific skills delineated in this model are skills for acquiring and processing knowledge about other cultures as well as one's own culture" (Deardorff 2006: 255). The model allows for degrees of competence (the more components acquired, the higher the competence), and, though one will probably move from a personal level, Deardorff stresses that the development of competence is a process which should be seen as a circular one in regard to the acquisition of attitudes, knowledge and skills, and internal and external outcomes (Deardorff 2006: 257).

One other concept that is of particular interest in this context is Alice Kolb and David Kolb's 'Experiential Learning Theory' which is based on Dewey's "theory of theory" (1938) and Kurt Lewin's field theory learning (1951), which argues for a process of constructing knowledge that involves "a creative tension among the four learning modes" and is responsive to contextual demands. The four learning modes identified by them are Concrete Experience, Abstract Conceptualisation as well as Reflective Observation and Active Experimentation – all of these can be incorporated particularly well into to the study abroad experience if appropriately supported. Deardorff's and the Kolbs' theories were extremely useful for our design of learning modules of the CONNECT project.

As indicated previously, in order to address the problems and anxieties experienced by students and to increase the positive intercultural learning outcomes for students abroad, CONNECT has developed intercultural learning scenarios specifically adjusted to the target groups and comprising presence and virtual exercises and reflection units. The e-learning platform combines the learning units with information and interactive elements

such as forums and chatrooms within the Experience Map.[5] Altogether, our whole training programme consists of face2face training, prior to departure and after their return, online support modules (for all three phases – pre-departure, during the time abroad and after their return) and furthermore, we have developed mentoring and advisor programmes to enable qualitative intercultural support of exchange participants through training. We also envisage building an alumni community from the mentor and post-Erasmus training programme, further encouraging cross-sectoral engagement.

To summarise, CONNECT contains the following elements:

1. Preparation (face2face): After introducing the students to Erasmus+ and the online platform, the pre-departure training is split into four Blocks:

   1) (Self) Awareness / Perception: In this block, students are introduced to the concept of 'culture'. In the context of becoming aware matters of identity, self-perception and their expectations of the stay abroad, students define their personal learning objectives.

   2) Intercultural acting: This block focuses on aspects of intercultural communication and provides training in the use of intercultural interactional and meta-communicative strategies which can help students to cope with situations of potential uncertainty.

   3) Culture specifics: Knowledge structures, stereotypes and prejudices are the main topic of this module, encouraging students to critically reflect on their knowledge of the target country and population and to be open to acquiring new knowledge.

   4) Narrative and media competence: The final block aims to lead students towards adopting a critical stance in their consumption of media and increase their sensitivity when producing information about their own or other cultures and people, for instance on the Experience Map and the e-learning platform.

2. Support (online): before, after and in particular during the ERASMUS+ stay abroad.

   The online modules comprise a range of intercultural topics, interactive exercises and support.

   In the module to be taken prior to their departure, titled 'Hungry for new experiences & key concepts', students are encouraged to explore the experience map and other sources to find out more about their host city and university. In a second section, they will learn about key concepts in intercultural learning.

   While students are away, they are invited to stay engaged in the online programme and, in three modules, (1) receive support with managing difficult intercultural situations which often characterise the first weeks of students' stay abroad, (2) find advice on how to get the most out of their stay abroad in terms of language and cultural learning, and (3) share and discuss their experiences on both the moodle platform and the Experience Map.

   After returning from their Erasmus stay, the online re-entry module 'Re-entry: Coming home, thinking back and moving forward' will help students sort through their experiences

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[5] Benson et al. (2013: 159) highlight the need to "provide opportunities for students to make sense of the experience by reflecting on their academic gains, and intercultural communication and sociocultural experiences through journals, diaries, blogs, storytelling, etc."

and impressions, gets them to think about how to use their experiences both personally and professionally, and offers advice on how to deal with potential difficulties when settling back in. Any notes taken during the various exercises and tasks in this module will form a central part of the face2face re-entry training.

3. Experience Map (online): mapping tool for the documentation of experiences gained abroad and for exchanging practical information:
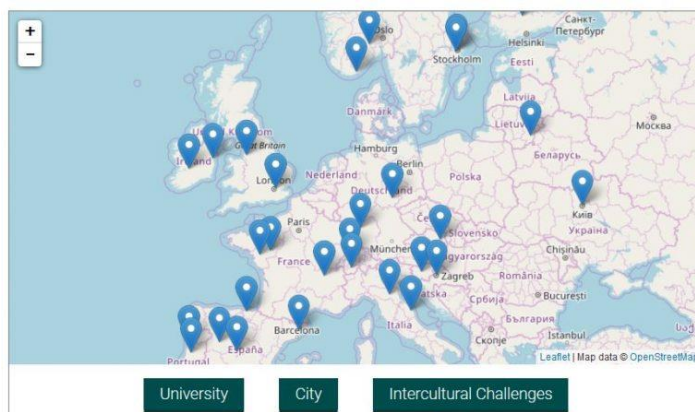
4. Reflection (face2face): evaluation of and reflection on (intercultural) experiences, perspectives (knowledge transfer), networking, mentoring programme. The modules of this part are:

1) Reflection: After sharing experiences and reflecting on their stay abroad, the participants are introduced to the concept of 'Reverse Cultural Shock' and are encouraged to find strategies for smoothly settling back in.

2) Intercultural competence here and now. Here, concepts of cosmopolitanism and internationalisation and what they mean for the students, their university and their country are discussed, as well as questions such as how to enhance interculturality at home and how to make proactive use of their acquired skills in terms of their own employability.

3) Enhancing your CV/Portfolio. Employability is then taken a step further in a practical workshop aimed to raise awareness of the global labour market. After a short presentation on global-mindedness and global skills, the students are asked to select and highlight newly acquired skills on CV and/or their online profiles (LinkedIn etc.).

4) Becoming a mentor: A final session introduces the students to opportunities to stay involved in the CONNECT project.

More details can also be found on the project website: www.weconnecteurope.eu.

In reference to Deardorff's (2006) research which informed her very detailed model of intercultural communication skills, all these components aim to expand the students' intercultural competence skills, including both learning about other cultures and reflecting about their own culture. The pre-departure face2face training not only introduces students to intercultural learning and gets them thinking about their own expectations and existing cultural knowledge, but also, in a practical, culture-specific

session, aims to awaken their curiosity and give them tools that help prepare them for situations of uncertainty.

So how was the first pre-departure training experience? According to the result of the second questionnaire, the training was generally seen as positive. Almost 80% felt that they had learned more about intercultural competence throughout the face2face training and that they were well prepared to meet people from different cultural backgrounds. Particularly positive for the trainers was the feedback that not even a single student disagreed with the statement that what they learned would be useful for their stay abroad. Extra comments made showed this further: "good preparation"; "some idea of what you are going into, preparation"; "chance to improve Erasmus experience, knowledge"; "enlightening, interesting, useful, informative, worthwhile"; "it prepares you in understanding the cultural differences that exist between our culture and another culture" and "cultural difference – various methods how to go about adapting to cultural differences were explained well".

We hope that these positive experiences will be further enhanced by the online support (part 2 of the CONNECT project). This consists of e-learning modules that accompany the students on their journeys towards a more profound comprehension of their own and the foreign culture by providing a space where they can reflect on experiences made and develop their own coping mechanisms. Personal writing produced for these modules can be saved and stored as an e-portfolio.[6]

However, the most important component of the online support is the Experience Map. In order to get as much feedback as possible during the critical construction phase, we invited fourth year students to reflect on draft versions. Initial results from these students critically analysing the provisional Experience Map seem promising. As the students had all been away, they were in a good position to judge the merits of the Experience Map. A few suggestions for improvements were made (and duly passed on to the technical team), but overall, it was seen as an extremely useful tool as these two examples indicate:

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[6] An e-portfolio can be defined as "'the product, created by the learner, a collection of digital artefacts articulating experiences, achievements and learning' (Gray 2008, 6) has a contribution to make in an approach which focuses on personal reflection as it promotes individuality in the selection of media-based artefacts to be included (images, podcasts, video files) and creative choices in presentation styles. As the repository of aggregated reflective documents, it also conveniently acts as a single assessment point." (Penman and Ratz 2015: 52).

An experience map is very beneficial to prospective students wishing to study abroad. It will help them decide whether it is the right decision for them and whether the university and city is a good fit for them. Issues such as finance and facilities available greatly influence their decisions and so in this way having an experience map of their chosen destination will help them decide for sure. As this website could have a great influence on the decision of a study abroad student it is vital that the layout of the website is clear and relatable. The layout should be clear, easy to follow, and in essence it needs to be user-friendly.

The decision on where to spend Erasmus or Study Abroad can be quite a daunting and stressful period for many students during their education. Therefore, the Experience Map on various Erasmus and Study Abroad locations and universities can prove to be an invaluable resource. According to Jackson (227), previous sojourners can act as a positive resource in that they can offer practical and relevant advice to their peers in an honest manner about the culture, university and day-to-day life, and thus aid in diminishing their peers' perspective fears.

While face-to-face interaction may not always be possible as was the case in Jackson's study, the Experience Map offers a comprehensive written document surrounding the town, university and the individual's tips and advice. Therefore, the initial concept surrounding the Experience Map is positive in its intention and objective at first glance, with its underlying objective to reassure and aid students.

As indicated above, in addition to the Experience Map, the pre-departure training and the online modules there is an important concluding part to our CONNECT training programme cycle. We have developed face2face re-entry training modules for students who have returned from their stay abroad and gone through our programme. As previous studies have shown, a support system is needed all year round[7] and students' experiences can be greatly enhanced by retrospectively reflecting about their experiences and by making sense of skills acquired, with a vision of future employability. After all, an important aspect of CONNECT is for students to transfer their acquired intercultural skills into professional arenas. We therefore hope that the re-entry training session will be perceived as an important and empowering component of CONNECT.

4. Conclusion

To summarise – support for students going abroad is needed and wanted. CONNECT provides a comprehensive approach consisting of face2face training, both pre-and post-departure, and online modules as well as the innovative 'Experience Map' that should alleviate many of the practical concerns our students have.

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[7] For instance, McKinlay et al (1996) criticise that most programmes focus on pre-departure support and leave students without support when they return from their stay abroad.

So where does it go from here? Throughout the three-year project period of CONNECT (2015-2018), pilot runs of the developed programmes are carried out within the educational institutions (universities and non-formal educational organisations). Our aim is that across the eight universities 160 students within the Erasmus programme and 20 participants of volunteer programmes will benefit directly from CONNECT. Furthermore, up to 80 people will have the opportunity to take part in the training measures within the advisor and mentoring programmes. The programmes are evaluated and optimised on an ongoing basis and are subject to scientific evaluation of external practitioners and academics in the field towards the end of the project period. We believe, this is a useful contribution to the further success of the Erasmus+ project and we hope it will be of benefit to a constantly growing number of students and institutions.

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