

International Learning Opportunities:

**Benefits of
participation for
Individuals**

Introduction

This paper has been prepared to support the argument for, in the absence of the UK's participation in Erasmus+, the development of a new programme to ensure that participation in International Learning Opportunities is not lost and reciprocal mobility for youth work communities including young people, young leaders, practitioners, managers and policy advisors continue.

The decision of the UK Government not to continue with its participation in the new Erasmus programme after more than three decades has in effect left an enormous gap in mobility opportunities. Whilst the new Turing Scheme is an attempt to narrow some of that gap, its lack of reciprocity, limited budget (as contrasted against even the last Erasmus+ budget) and accessibility to only those in further and higher education, means that the many that have been availing of Erasmus+ over the years and would continue to do so, and those that might have done so in the future for the first time, those opportunities will no longer be available.

Irrespective of the 'rights' and 'wrongs' of BREXIT, there are many within the non-formal education community that have been truly shocked by the UK's decision, and genuinely do not understand the rationale nor the thinking behind it. That aside, there is a strong belief that this should not be a reason alone for not continuing in International Youth Work, and many have come together to make the arguments for a separate process that would ensure culture of international learning opportunities established over the last three decades and more is not lost.

BREXIT has inadvertently magnified the need for greater involvement; such has been the divisive nature of the debate with, for example, a rise in hate-crime and hate speech. This alone signifies the need to ensure young people and youth workers are as open to engagement with individuals from diverse backgrounds and communities beyond our immediate borders.

The decision not to take part in Erasmus+ also comes at a time when it is abundantly clear from the growing evidence base, including local, regional, national and international data, that the benefits from continued international reciprocal mobility far outweigh any arguments against it.

Almost inevitably and without fail, young people upon return from an international programme, will ask, when is the next one, can we do it again? A reference of course to the desire to take part in another programme, which can be the gateway to building a new, or different relationship which was perhaps unimaginable before participation in a mobility programme, now becomes eminently achievable, such has been the life changing impact, or at least how the once-firmly closed door has been wedged open to new possibilities.

For those managing the purse strings, this ultimately is a much more efficient way to achieve the same long-term goal we all share, i.e., the personal and social development of young people. It's not unheard of for young people to undergo personal transformations in an intensive exchange setting. The change or the opening that a practitioner has been pursuing in a young person can be facilitated in a youth exchange setting that might otherwise take a couple of years to achieve in the normal 'club' setting, due in the main to the intensive environment that underpins international and inter-cultural mobility activity.

For many young leaders, they become inspired to greater levels of involvement in a wide range of activity whilst practitioners value the opportunities for networking, the development of projects, the sharing of practice and the discovery of new tools and methodologies that they can use in their own practice.

This paper references various research over the last decade or more that has catalogued the many benefits of international learning opportunities. It also endeavours to explain in more granular detail how those benefits come about, and the processes involved. It endeavours to demonstrate how young people (in particular) can be transformed through the experiences they gain from international experience, most of which are evidenced within Erasmus+ but not limited to this.

The benefits for practitioners get less attention but there is no doubt to the impact that participation in international programmes can bring, not least of all with regard to the skills and knowledge necessary for the evolution of practice, or the design, development and delivery of programmes, the networking possibilities and tools and methodologies that practitioners have the opportunity to sample and embrace.

What is clear for now is that the UK is out of the Erasmus Programme, and this is to the regret of almost (if not entirely) all that know the programme and the impact that it has made down through the years, and the even now, what is becoming clearer, the gap in opportunities that has emerged following the launch of the new Erasmus programme in March of this year.

It seems that the UK Government's position is unlikely to alter any time soon and therefore the challenge to the wider youth work and non-formal education family in the UK is to at least make the arguments for, if not re-entering the programme, ensuring that the many opportunities afforded to our sector over the years is not lost.

Even with our not being in the EU, a greater level of interculturalism can be achieved by our engaging with our peers and neighbours in Europe, not necessarily because it is our preference but due to our geographical position, and our continued involvement in the Council of Europe, it makes sense to do so.

The need for a designated policy-led commitment to participation in International Youth Work with proven benefits for young people, young leaders, practitioners, policy advisors and the wider youth work community is without doubt advantageous.

The need to respond accordingly, and co-create a process that embraces and supports the continuation of international learning opportunities among young people, young leaders, youth work practitioners and the broad youth work community, has never been clearer.

Fergal Barr
April 2021

The benefits – A catalogue of evidence

Titley (2007), asserts that international programmes support *workers in developing awareness of cultural issues and the dynamics of cultural identities, and in developing competences for planning and implementing youth activities with an intercultural dimension*¹ whilst Cotton (2009) argues that benefits include *'Understanding the global community and seeing the world differently'* as well as *'Cultural awareness or understanding difference.'*²

Wolfgang Ilg describes how, *'young people experience themselves in a new setting, make friends in a group, and get in touch with adolescents from a totally different background. They fall in love with a peer from another country, see how similar and yet different life for youngsters in Europe can be, and learn that a sense of community and caring can bridge cultural and economic gaps.'*³

Young people from rural backgrounds *'discover new cultures, new people, new places, etc. An international youth activity can be a 'window on the world' where young people have new experiences outside their own communities. They learn that their way of doing things is just one of many. Knowing that things can be done differently (e.g. in different countries) can stimulate young people's creativity, encouraging them to find new solutions to old challenges. It can also increase their empathy, helping them to try and look at things from different perspectives.'*⁴

A British Council evaluation of the EU Youth in Action programme in 2010 found *"Young people love this programme, because it provides them with serious but exciting activities combined with fun and friendship, it gives them challenges and responsibilities outside their comfort zones, and it raises their aspirations by taking them out of their normal environment and exposing them to something new"*.⁵

An interim evaluation of the 'Youth in Action' Programme by UK National Agency Ecorys in 2011 also found that *'YiA has a sustainable impact on participants and youth workers in terms of participating in events after their participation in the Programme.'*⁶

SALTO has produced evidence that putting ex-offenders in *'new and different environment[s] forces you to find new solutions for the challenges you meet. In the beginning maybe a frightening experience. But then you discover that you find those new solutions, you find other ways to deal with what comes on your way...and, what's more important, it works, you can do it!'*⁷

Similarly, The Youth Council for Northern Ireland also found that participation in non-formal education programmes has long term benefits for practitioners including opportunities to *'enhance and share peace building skills, including a greater understanding of concepts such as conflict resolution/transformation and reconciliation, peace building structures, strategies and*

¹ Titley G (2007) 'Plastic, Political and Contingent': Culture and Intercultural Learning in Directorate of Youth and Sport Activities. In: Ramberg I. (2007). Intercultural Learning in European Youth: Work Which Ways Forward. Council of Europe (p61)

² Cotton N (2009) *Global Youth Work in the UK: Research Report* Here and There Consultancy (p22)

³ *Learning Mobility and Non-Formal Learning in European Contexts – Policies, Approaches and Examples, Evaluation of international youth exchanges*, Ilg W.,

⁴ <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/inclusion/inclusionresources/inclusiongroups/inclusionrural/InclusionRuralBenefits/>

⁵ This is ... Youth in Action. A report based on an evaluation of the EU Youth in Action Programme in the UK (2010), British Council, London

⁶ Ecorys (2011) *Youth in Action Interim Evaluation*, Ecorys (p14)

⁷ <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/inclusion/inclusionresources/inclusiongroups/inclusionoffenders/InclusionOffendersBenefits/>

*methodologies.*⁸ (See Appendix 1 for a visual outline of Multiple Beneficiaries from International Learning Opportunities)

Further to this the Youth Council for Northern Ireland, described International Youth Work as making a *'significant contribution to the personal and social development of young people and there is evidence that anticipated learning outcomes are delivered in a relatively short period of time [in]....environments where identity, nationality, culture and religions are not necessarily seen as divisive. This produces a basis from which to explore and appreciate diversity.'*⁹

Well before the Welsh Government recently announced its own replacement scheme for Erasmus, the Northern Ireland Government had not only recognised the importance of International Learning Opportunities but demonstrated a willingness to become involved. In 2016 (through the NI Assembly Commission) it had planned to *'work with the National Assembly for Wales and the Flemish Parliament to make a joint application to Erasmus+ to deliver a trans-national youth project.'*¹⁰

In fact, involvement can be traced back even further. In 2013, a report submitted to the Northern Ireland Assembly, recommended that *'consideration should be given to encouraging Assembly Members to apply for any future programme in 2014'*¹¹ following the launch of *Erasmus for local and regional elected representatives* by the European Commission in 2012. The NI Assembly did indeed follow up on this when in 2014, it was awarded almost €50k from the UK National Agency to deliver its Structured Dialogue Project, *Connections*.

In the same year, an independent evaluation of Inside Out's *The LID (Leadership through Intercultural Dialogue) Programme*, found that it made *'significant contributing factor to enhanced cultural diversity, interculturalism and good relations....the two foremost strengths of the programme identified were 'Enhanced Interculturalism' and 'Bringing People Together'*¹² A follow-up conference in 2015 involving 47 people from across a range of sectors¹³ concluded:

- (i) International experience can build confidence in individuals to communicate and collaborate broadly without (or with less) fear of difference;
- (ii) people who have participated in international experiences reflect that they are more open, more engaging, more actively seeking to work with others, embracing the value of diversity; and
- (iii) International experience brings a new, often fresh, perspective on issues that can reach an impasse when persistently viewed from the same standpoint/s.

A survey¹⁴ of over 300 practitioners in 2014 (including European practitioners)¹⁵ found that the main benefits to young people included an increase in confidence and self-esteem (66.31%), learning about [their] own culture or other cultures (60.28%), an increase in tolerance and acceptance of 'others' (56.38%) and greater self-awareness (36.17%).

The opportunity to share, compare and contrast practice (61.82%) and critically reflect on own practice and consider the impact of that practice (52.73%) in addition to increased knowledge of youth

⁸ Youth Council for Northern Ireland (2013) *Outward and Forward Looking Youth work*, YCNI (p9)

⁹ Youth Council for Northern Ireland (2014) *Impact of International Youth Work: A Youth Council for Northern Ireland perspective* YCNI (p6)

¹⁰ Under measure 3.2 of its Good Relations Action Plan www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/corporate/commission/good-relations-action-plan-2016-21/goodrelationsactionplan2016-21.pdf

¹¹ NI Assembly Report of the European Project Manager, June 2013 (p12)

¹² The LID Programme, An independent evaluation of the programme's outcomes, impact and successes. Riggs C., 2012

¹³ <https://www.docdroid.net/dxXJf1r/lid-conference-report-2015-pdf#page=19>

¹⁴ Carried out by The Inside Our Programme as part of an exercise into 'Mapping the Benefits of International Youth Work'

¹⁵ 87% of which were either working directly or indirectly with young people; at least one-quarter had been involved in a minimum of 16 international youth work programmes; 70% of respondents had experienced at least 3 programmes

work contexts in other countries (45.09%) and enhanced ability to interact with *others* from a diverse range of backgrounds (38.91%) were the top four benefits for practitioners.

A study of Youth in Action also found that participation in YiA activities led to *'considerable development of competences for citizenship...positive impact on behaviour...significant effects on organisations in the direction of improved quality of support...[and] positive impacts on personal development of participants'*¹⁶

Building upon the conclusions reached with the evaluation of The LID Programme in 2014, and as if to reinforce the importance of *'Enhanced Interculturalism'* and *'Bringing People Together'* particularly in light of recent (and at the time of writing on-going civil disturbances in Northern Ireland), the growing recognition of the importance of Interculturalism in conflict transformation is underpinned by Cattle when he talks *'about changing mindsets by creating new opportunities across cultures to support intercultural activity'*.¹⁷

Published In 2017, *Studying the impact of international youth work: Towards developing an evaluation tool for youth centres*¹⁸, lends further weight to the benefits of involvement in International Youth Work. The report involved Youth Centres in three countries – Finland, Estonia and Slovenia – and one of its main conclusions found:

'The results of the pilot survey identified considerable growth in the investigated competences recognised by the respondents. There were altogether 102 respondents from three countries. On average 75–95 % of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they recognised growth in intercultural (includes for example openness and tolerance), personal (to set and achieve life goals) and social (cooperation to achieve common goals) competences.'

In 2018, the Education Authority in Northern Ireland carried out a review of International Youth Work among its registered groups. The review included outcomes from two international study visits in February 2017 and a survey among 164 respondents and concluded *'International youth work rated particularly effective in meeting all the [six capability] outcomes.'*¹⁹

A draft report from the RAY (Research based Analysis of Youth in Action) also published in 2018 sought to examine how Erasmus+: Youth in Action contributes to the development of citizenship competence. Using a mixed-method approach involving more than 2000 participants, the study summarised *'...that E+/YiA projects do exhibit effects on their participants in certain areas related to active citizenship and participation....[including]...eye-opening and awareness-raising processes; a better understanding of societal and political processes and interrelations; a deepening and/or updating of existing knowledge, skills, attitudes and values; [and] stimuli and motivation to participate in civil society and democratic life.'*

It went on to say that involvement in Erasmus+ has led *'to eye-opening and awareness-raising processes; a better understanding of societal and political processes and interrelations; a deepening and/or updating of existing knowledge, skills, attitudes and values; [and] stimuli and motivation to participate in civil society and democratic life.'*²⁰

¹⁶ Ohana Y., (2016) Youth in Action Findings and Implications for Practice (p4)

¹⁷ <http://tedcattle.co.uk/publications/about-interculturalism/> [Accessed: 23 February 2015]

¹⁸ Anu Gretschel (Ed.), Tina Cupar, Merle Linno, Tomi Kiilakoski, Noora Hästbacka & Antti Korhonen

¹⁹ Enhanced personal capabilities; Development of positive relations with others; Development of thinking and life skills; Increased participation; Active citizenship; Improved health and well-being

²⁰ Long-Term Effects of Erasmus+: Youth in Action, Draft Interim Transnational Analysis (2018)

Completed in October 2019, it concluded that *'An increased knowledge relevant for participation and active citizenship resulting from project participation can be observed, in particular on how to engage in civil society as well as environmental protection and sustainable development...Development of participation and citizenship skills resulting from the project participation can also be observed, in particular communication, negotiation and cooperation skills, which are relevant for participation and active citizenship.'*²¹

Conclusion

Finding and collating evidence of research into the main benefits of International Youth Work is less challenging than trying to summarise the many benefits that are to be gained from participating in international learning opportunities, so numerous are they.

Everything from a change in opinion and growth in confidence to a better understanding of someone from another country or greater insight into the political arguments of a particular policy are among the countless benefits that can be had. In short, they can probably be summarised as follows:

The Person - Maturity: Individuals grow in stature meaning they are more able to assume greater levels of responsibility and are better equipped as citizens to engage in communities and wider society

Skills - Capacity Building: Individuals enhance their existing skill set and develop a range of new skills that enables them to deal with and adapt to a wider range of settings, scenarios and challenges

Behaviour - Approach: Individuals are more able to interact with those different to themselves therefore developing their inter-cultural competence

Knowledge - Understanding: Individuals have much greater awareness and understanding of culture and thus less inclined to be prejudicial and judgemental in outlook

Attitude - Common Ground: Individuals become more compassionate, humane and empathetic towards others by acknowledging their right to exist and recognising the contribution they make or can make as a human being

Perspective - Meaningful Engagement: Individuals benefit from more in-depth discourse with 'others' whereby having to explain their own unique story requires greater levels of patience, care and attention, which in turn nurtures a stronger emotional intelligence and intellect

Efficiency – Value for money: Individuals benefit from a 'fast-tracking' of their development through the intensive (and sometimes immersive) experience that Erasmus offers. Milestones or 'awakenings' that might normally be achieved over a number of years can be reached or exposed in the international and inter-cultural setting in a much shorter time-frame, particularly where they are sharing part of that journey with their peers

²¹ https://www.researchyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/RAY-LTE_Policy-Report_20191002.pdf

Why we know International Youth Work has the potential to be transformative

The environment, interactions, pressures and dynamic are entirely different from that of any young person's 'normal' setting. For example, the challenges, ideas and opinions of others they have to contend with, extends and broaden a young person's capacity to at least begin to tolerate in the first instance, and accept in the second, difference, that they may not have had to countenance before.

Moreover, when a young person begins to think more critically about their own values and beliefs when contrasted with those, they have met for only the first time, they begin to rethink their own narrative they have historically articulated in their native environment.

They do so because they are no longer merely in the company of their own peers, often having to share meeting space, mealtimes, accommodation, small groups, activities and one-to-one scenarios with 'others' in the most intensive of environments. Hearing diverse views can also open up space for them to share ideas that previously would have been a step too far among their peers.

Such impact can also be captured, and measured with much greater effect, because it's captured in real time using a wide range of tailored methodologies in-situ and for that particular moment. For example, behaviour comes into much sharper focus in a diverse range of activities over a shorter and more intensive period. The result is that there's no escape or hiding place as you just can't get up and leave and go home.

You have to look into the 'whites' of people's eyes and have to be more accountable for your views and actions because you have to explain them there and then, often against the unhindered critique of others. And this accountability and learning can be recorded, evidenced, monitored, evaluated and supported whilst young people are still in that environment as opposed to the next time they come into the club or group session.

The nature of interaction is also 'full-on' so it 'forces' individuals to adapt and overcome, thus maturing more quickly, and growing in stature more readily. Friendships and romance often blossom ensuring that those with previously deeply held convictions are more open to reflection and change, if only to make an impression on another person, whilst support is on-hand throughout the period of the programme from committed staff which, is often not available when the club doors shut, or the group session ends.

Often young people find common ground with others for the issues they face on a daily basis and the environment they occupy for that period because it creates space, time and support not previously nor readily available 'at home.'

Momentum is created and captured and can be built upon almost instantly rather than the 'slow-burn' that is often the case in regular youth work, providing an in-roads to a young person who previously might have been 'out of reach.'

Our lack of diversity 'at home,' (certainly in many traditional working class urban areas within the UK) whilst offering us security also detracts from our capacity to engage with and embrace others that are different to ourselves and thus limits our ability to change. The more diverse a community, people or nation the greater its capacity to contend with change; the more diverse the community, people or nation the greater its ability to accept, understand and transform itself.

Change and Transformation comes about because of having to deal with difference. For example, every time a young person from the UK engages with their international peers, s/he has to 'slow down'

when speaking in order to be understood, literally. He or she also has to pronounce his or her words more clearly and has to be more patient so that people can understand more of what is said, how it is said and make sense of the tone that is used, even if just to 'get' the nuance that we (in the UK) use so often to communicate a message.

Individuals are 'forced' to consider (more thoroughly) and reflect in a more in-depth manner as to how they normally do things and decide whether it is appropriate, culturally sensitive or even relevant. They must assume less and question more; they must make more allowances, sacrifice and compromise more, and have to think more and perhaps, talk less. They need to check things more often and critique things more carefully. That small simple act is an act of solidarity, an act based on care and compassion, a willingness to alter behaviour for the benefit of someone else, an act of empathy which is a signal of 'I hear you and I stand with you.'

Personal change only happens when we have experiences that confront us with new situations. In addition, personal change only happens if we let it happen – it is much easier to sit in the status quo and not allow ourselves to be confronted by different realities – this doesn't require much effort.

We can go with what we know, rest easy and not extend ourselves because it's the easier option; it means we don't have to think more than is necessary; we don't have to make decisions, we don't have to confront our world view because it's much more comfortable to leave it as it is.

Many of the characteristics required for nurturing reconciliation for example, i.e., clarifying '*personal attitudes, values and beliefs; recognise, understand and respect difference; [and] develop[ing] respect for others*'²² are often exhibited in youth work. Youth Work has often been to the fore of building relationships between diverse communities. This isn't solely restricted to communities, such as in Northern Ireland, where differences in nationality, religion and identity are prominent, but also in communities that are defined by these and more, e.g., colour of skin, gender, sexual preferences, ideologies, class and so on.

By providing opportunities for members of the wider Youth Work Community to engage with and learn about diversity outside of their normal environment, you 'allow' or enable individuals to change more quickly and more freely. Individuals can reflect on their identity with 'others' who do not pose an immediate threat, nor do they have to fear 'losing face' that comes more readily by being in close proximity to your immediate 'neighbours' and in a sense, coming to build a degree of solidarity with them, their story and their issues.

The diverse and unique nature of non-formal education and the interactive methodologies it advocates, e.g., Training Programmes, Youth Exchanges, Seminars, Planning Meetings, Study Visits, etc, and more recently, the ESC, increases the capacity of individuals to reconcile because it engages them in an intercultural dialogue, which as research suggests '*offers much hope to peace and harmony among nations.*'²³

It is clear that the international setting can contribute to both the personal and social development of young people as well as reconciliation between divided communities. To confront and challenge the validity and veracity of our values, beliefs, perceptions and ideals, is to begin to unpick our identity, to chip away at the things that make us 'us' - to question or begin to 'disown' those things we have held dear and stood up for over the years is to appear to be 'weak', that you can't be trusted or (as is the case in some situations) you are a 'turncoat' or you've 'sold out'.

²² Curriculum Development Unit, (2003), *Youth Work: A Model for Effective Practice*, Department of Education, Antrim (p12)

²³ Holmes P (2014). *Intercultural dialogue: challenges to theory, practice and research*. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 14:1, 1-6 (p1)

We often grow up and exist within a culture where staying loyal to whatever, be that friends, beliefs or otherwise is a mark of integrity, strength, clarity and unquestionable desire. To alter this reality is to put all that you know at risk – however, it is the only way to transform our society.

International Learning Opportunities has proven itself to be one of the most effective ways of doing that, if not indeed the most effective way.

Appendix 1

Multiple Beneficiaries from International Learning Opportunities

