SHORT-TERM PLACEMENTS FOR LONG-TERM IMPACT

The typical Irish vocational student lives at home and attends a college in one of Ireland’s smaller towns or cities, where work placement opportunities in many fields can be scarce. How to train the Irish workforce to meet international demand and equip Irish students for an increasingly multicultural society? Short-term work placements abroad have proven a powerful - if unlikely - solution.
Each year since 2014, more than 700 vocational education and training (VET) students from Ireland have travelled to other countries in Europe for training placements. They are funded by Erasmus+, as part of its goal to enhance the international dimension of education and training. Looking at participants' responses in post-placement surveys, it seems that this purpose is being fulfilled.

Among 1275 participants who travelled for training placements between 2014 and 2016, 95% agreed or strongly agreed that they were better able to cooperate with people of different backgrounds and cultures, that they had better learned how to see the value of different cultures, and that they were more open-minded and curious. Over 93% were more tolerant of other persons' values and behaviour, while 97% were more able to adapt and act in new situations—an essential skill for operating in an international environment.

However, what's perhaps most remarkable about these results is this: 92% of these participants spent fewer than four weeks abroad.

BEYOND BOUNDARIES
Rather than travelling for academic study, these students took part in work-based training placements in local enterprises or organisations connected with their vocational area. In many cases, the placements were in environments that simply wouldn't have been available in their home regions—or even in their home country.

Many Irish vocational colleges are based in our smaller towns and cities, which can make it difficult to source suitable placements for students from particular courses. A project coordinator from Cavan Institute in the Irish Midlands commented that their animal management students had "received opportunities to work in settings that were difficult to gain in Ireland, such as small zoos and marine aquatic centres", and that "the multimedia students had very positive experiences with their placements, which are not readily available in the Cavan region."

In cases like these, travelling beyond the physical boundaries of Ireland allowed vocational students to also go beyond the boundaries of the Irish vocational system. It gave them access to a unique experience—and led them to realise that many other kinds of opportunities might be available to them. As one student succinctly put it, "Erasmus+ helped me realise I could live and study abroad, which is a big benefit for me, as it was a big question I had for my future."

Many participants highlighted that the work placement was not only their first significant experience living abroad, but their first experience living away from home.

A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE
So how can a question that big be resolved in under a month? In a time when people in Europe routinely book cheap flights not only for holidays but also to independently of family. Indeed, many participants highlighted that they lived with their parents—meaning the time spent on work placement was not only their first significant experience living
abroad, but also their first experience living away from home.

For students like these, an international experience can be profoundly transformative. They begin to realise that they are capable of surviving – or even thriving – away from their homes and support networks, and meeting and working alongside new people. This in turn builds confidence and self-esteem, and helps to expand career horizons.

A student from a small college of around 500 students remarked, “What I will take away from this experience is that it’s possible to work abroad, and I don’t have to be afraid of trying new things and experiencing the different cultures around the world. I would love to study a new language.” There’s plenty of evidence from both students and project coordinators that this reaction is not unique. Many participants reported that they had gone on to work in other countries because of their placements; some even went back to work with their original host employers.

INTERNATIONALISING THE COMMUNITY

When groups of students begin to develop new international perspectives like this, the impact goes beyond the individuals themselves and expands to take in the vocation system that they came from.

**If you’ve never left home before, two weeks abroad is huge – no matter where you go**

The project coordinators I spoke to for this study reported effects ranging from redesigning their curricula to better meet the needs of international employers, to sending vocational staff for job shadowing and training to learn from and exchange practices with colleagues in Europe. According to one project coordinator in Coláiste Dhulaigh College of Further Education, Dublin, the experience of the students reverberated across the whole organisation:

“The involvement in mobility has helped the college to be more aware of cultural diversity and to embrace the students with different ethnic backgrounds and to treat them equally and with respect. Not only does this impact positively on the increased diversity in our student population, integrating members of other cultural backgrounds more into our college community, but it also carries internationalisation outside the college into the wider community, thus fostering intercultural awareness, mutual understanding and respect for each other within Irish society as a whole.”

In this instance, international work experience became a powerful catalyst for reflection on intercultural relations, not only among participants but also within their sending organisations. Supporting students to take part in exchange programmes like Erasmus+ is a real opportunity for organisations to strengthen not only international connections but also intercultural relationships, and help to build a society that is more aware and respectful of diversity.

If this seems a lot to lay at the door of a short stay abroad, hear in mind the words of one of the researchers on the recent Widening Participation in UK Outward Student Mobility project from Universities UK International: “If you’ve never left home before, two weeks abroad is huge – no matter where you go.”

—CHARIS HUGHES