

Learning by leaving

Placements abroad as a didactic tool
in the context of vocational education
and training in Europe



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Søren Kristensen

A great deal of additional information on the European Union is available on the Internet. It can be accessed through the Europa server (<http://europa.eu.int>).

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Preface

'Transnational mobility' has been an item on the work programme of Cedefop since 1997, a fact which reflects its growing importance as a didactic tool in the context of vocational education and training (VET) in Europe. The present study represents an attempt to synthesise and further develop our knowledge of the phenomenon, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

The author of the study, Mr Søren Kristensen, worked at Cedefop as a national seconded expert from November 1999 to October 2002. During that period much of the empirical material for the study was gathered; notably the overview of the situation in the 15 EU Member States plus Norway and Iceland, which has been compiled on the basis of 18 national reports (2 for Belgium) commissioned by Cedefop in the period 2000-02. This material has been supplemented by information gathered from numerous other sources, notably from the European Commission and national governments. Some preliminary findings were discussed at the Agora on mobility in VET which was held in October 2001. The theoretical section and the section on pedagogical implications have been developed by Søren Kristensen as part of his Ph.D. thesis at the Danish University of Education.

The study does not seek to make any ultimate statements on mobility. Rather it should be seen as an attempt to build a foundation for future research and development work in an area which, so far, has not received the attention from the VET research community in Europe that the figures involved and its place on the agenda of European VET-policies would seem to warrant.

Stavros Stavrou
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Project Manager

Executive summary

Placements abroad in the context of vocational education and training have become increasingly widespread in Europe, both as a concrete activity and as an item on policy agendas. This is no new practice but it is one that has experienced an exponential growth over the last decade or so. In spite of this growth, the phenomenon – viewed as an instrument for learning – has never been the subject of any dedicated research project, and has only been treated as a minor aspect of other themes. The aim of this study has been to capture it, to understand its manifestations, and to position it in the landscape of learning theory. The questions that are asked are consequently of a very basic nature:

- what is it?
- what scope does it have?
- why are we doing it?
- how does it work?
- what practical consequences does this insight have for the planning and implementation of placement activities abroad?

The phenomenon is examined from a European angle, and the study encompasses the 15 EU Member States plus Norway and Iceland.

The term ‘placements abroad’ is used rather indiscriminately to cover a wide range of very disparate activities; as a first step it is, therefore, necessary to formulate an operational definition. The definition used here is the following:

‘A shorter or longer period abroad in a public or private company, which has been consciously organised for learning purposes, and which involves an active involvement in concrete work processes. It can be paid or unpaid.’

On the basis of this definition, the study attempts to estimate how placements abroad work in the specified countries. A basic problem here is the absence any concerted statistical data collection, both at European and national level. This is compounded by the lack of a common European definition of the term and, hence, no consensus about which activities to cover in statistics. As a consequence, there is a tendency to focus almost exclusively on the Leonardo da Vinci programme of the European Commission when the phenomenon is discussed. The Leonardo da Vinci programme is indisputably the largest single initiative in the field, and is

relatively well underpinned by statistics. This study is able to demonstrate, however, that the phenomenon goes well beyond the context of this programme, and estimates that approximately 175 000 people annually from the 17 countries of the study participate in placements abroad. This figure also includes 'spontaneous mobility', persons who, at their own initiative and outside of established initiatives and programmes, undertake a placement period abroad. Due to lack of statistics, the inaccuracy of the figure may vary by up to 20 % either way.

In spite of this considerable – and growing – phenomenon, there is no single, clear-cut rationale as to why we are doing it. There are several different explanations for the activity, that appear jointly in major policy papers in the form of a 'catalogue' of all the positive effects placements abroad may bring about at individual, national and European level. From a pedagogical perspective, however, these different perceptions carry specific priorities, which have significant consequences for practice. Using the methodology of discourse analysis, the study identifies four different explanations for – or discourses about – placements abroad:

- (a) the discourse about placements abroad as a means for creating intercultural understanding. Stays abroad may serve to generate a better understanding of people with different cultural backgrounds, and help combat nationalism, racism and xenophobia;
- (b) the discourse about placements as a means for promoting the free movement of workers in Europe. Some of the mental barriers that prevent people from seeking employment abroad may be removed;
- (c) the discourse about placements abroad as an element in the internationalisation of education and training in Europe. National educational systems use placements abroad to plug gaps in their provision. Moreover, people may acquire international skills such as foreign language proficiency and intercultural competence;
- (d) the discourse about placements abroad as a method for improving the employability of people. It is possible to acquire a broad range of key skills, which enable participants to cope with change.

These four discourses all have their roots in specific historical developments in Europe after the Second World War. They are all still used politically as the rationale for programmes and initiatives and practically as the point of departure for concrete planning and implementation of activities. In the study, the four discourses are described in terms of their ideology, the interests they represent, and the implications they have for the practical

organisation of placements abroad. The overall aim of the first part of the study is to arrive at a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, in particular how it is perceived by actors and stakeholders.

The second part of the study tries to explain the phenomenon rationally on the basis of theories of learning (and in particular learning at the workplace) and culture. The point of departure here is the work of Hofstede and his definition of 'culture' as the mental programming that distinguishes one group or category of people from another. Hofstede's definition is developed in a context of national cultures, but it is applicable to other forms of culture as well, in particular in connection with vocational culture. The acquisition of a culture is, according to cultural anthropologists, the result of a learning process – enculturation – and is primarily transmitted via identification and imitation. This enculturation process transposed to Lave and Wenger's concept of learning as legitimate peripheral participation within a framework of communities of practice; where 'communities of practice' is a synonym for vocational culture, and 'legitimate peripheral participation' denotes the enculturation process. This process determines how we see 'reality' (or a corner of it): what is recognised as relevant to the 'trade', how we define our vocational identity. A strong vocational enculturation process means that change and diversity at the workplace is seen primarily as a threat, and not as a potential for development.

In connection with national cultures, this mechanism is fertile soil for the development of nationalism and ethnocentrism – the conscious or subconscious attitude that everything from one's own culture is better than what comes from other cultures. This attitude may ultimately lead to a demonisation of such cultures, expressed as racism, for example, or abused politically in a situation of international tension. This has led to the concept of intercultural learning and the idea of stays abroad as a method for deconstructing prejudices through first-hand experience of another culture. Stadler has described four levels – or modes – of intercultural learning. They span from rejection (zero learning) to a situation where elements of the foreign culture are integrated into the participant's own culture, which thereby changes. Stadler is primarily concerned with intercultural learning in connection with national cultures, but indicates that the concept may also be applied to other situations, which are concerned with learning in a situation of cultural diversity. In a vocational context this phenomenon may be connected to Schön's theory of learning through reflection and reflection-in-action as a conscious and (partly) unconscious way of coping with the diversity which, according to him, characterises real-life work situations (as opposed to the technical rationality that characterises problem solving in an

educational context). Reflection and reflection-in-action may be trained, and to this purpose Schön proposes the incorporation of a *'practicum'* in school-based education and training – a concept that is different to what we already know from alternance-based training, but which may, in a number of ways, be compared to a placement abroad.

These theoretical excursions serve as the basis for the development of a proper theory of learning in placements abroad. Generally, learning here happens through exposing the participant, under semi-structured conditions, to a situation of diversity that is so massive that it cannot be repressed or ignored. The participant is forced to enter into a constructive dialogue with the situation in order to 'survive'. Through this, reflection and reflection-in-action are trained, and a number of personal skills are allowed to develop. Learning in this situation does not happen by itself, however, but is contingent upon four learning situations, which have been called immersion, responsabilisation, relativation and perspectivation. They can be described in the following way:

- (a) immersion: the degree of interaction with culture and mentality of the host country;
- (b) responsabilisation: the possibilities for independent problem solving with regard to culturally conditioned conflicts;
- (c) relativation: the experience of 'disjuncture' with regard to everyday, common work processes, that are executed differently – or known problems, that suddenly present new aspects;
- (d) perspectivation: the possibility for assisted reflection on experiences, both during and (particularly) after the period abroad.

In the last part of the study, a number of concrete didactic guidelines for learning in placements abroad are formulated on the basis of theory and practice. These guidelines relate to situations before, during, and after the placement abroad.

In a concluding section, placements abroad are described as an example of a new, constructivist pedagogy, which is currently struggling to replace the traditional behaviourist pedagogy of the industrial age. Some practical consequences at institutional and systemic level are inferred.

Introduction

Transnational mobility in the shape of placements carried out abroad is an increasingly frequent phenomenon within the context of vocational education and training (VET) in Europe. Over the last decade or so, it has developed rapidly in scope, not least due to the incentives offered by European programmes - notably the Leonardo da Vinci programme, where over 40 % of the total budget of nearly EUR 1.2 billion have been earmarked for 'mobility' over the period 1999-2005. It is estimated that some 220 000 will have participated in a Leonardo-sponsored mobility project by the end of the programme, which may not sound excessive given that it covers 27 countries. However, mobility in the context of VET is not just Leonardo da Vinci, or other dedicated EU-mobility programmes and initiatives (!). Many European countries – both inside and outside the EU – have national and binational mobility programmes that run alongside Leonardo; sometimes providing cofinancing, sometimes funding projects independently from this. Other activities are financed through mechanisms that, in themselves, are not primarily concerned with placements abroad, or not with mobility in the field of VET. Last, but not least, are placements abroad, which are undertaken outside of official programmes and initiatives, called 'spontaneous mobility'. This may be placements in other countries for apprentices and workers organised and paid for by companies or (young) people who at their own initiative and largely financed by themselves, their parents, or through wages, go abroad for a period of time in order to learn on a placement.

Stays abroad for learning purposes – also in the shape of placements – are not a recent invention, but have a long tradition. Specifically within the field of VET, however, the phenomenon has expanded tremendously over a period spanning less than fifteen years, involving considerable numbers of people and sizeable budgets. Also, it has become an important item on the agenda for VET policies, both at national and (especially) at European level. Despite this popularity, we do not know very much about the phenomenon. Little dedicated research has been carried out in the field, and a number of very basic questions still remain unanswered.

(!) 'Initiatives' is used as a term to denote enduring frameworks for placement activities that are set up under a programme or under a fund.

We can thus ask:

- what exactly is it? How do we define a placement abroad – which activities do we include, and which must be categorised under other forms of ‘transnational mobility’?
- how big is it? How many people participate in placement activities in Europe every year, and what funds are involved?
- what is it good for? What is it that we can achieve through placements abroad, and how exactly does this happen?

It is the aim of the present study to throw some light on the phenomenon of placements abroad, and to try and trace at least the outlines of the answers to the above questions. The geographical scope of the study comprises the 15 EU Member States plus Norway and Iceland.

Structure and methodology

The study is structured in two parts, the first part dealing with the empirical material. As a necessary first step here, we will try to develop a definition of the term ‘placement abroad’ to mark it off from other forms of stays abroad and to establish some conceptual clarity. Second, we will look at the evidence we have concerning the numbers involved, and try to assess the quantitative aspects of the issue. Third, we will look at how placements abroad are understood by actors and stakeholders and try to delineate different ways of thinking about the phenomenon. The methodology employed here is discourse analysis, and the source material is various documents (policy papers, project reports and studies) which deal with, or touch on, the subject of placements abroad. In connection with each of the discourses identified, we will discuss its relevance and suitability in accounting for the phenomenon.

In the second part, we will look at the findings of the empirical study in the light of relevant theory from the fields of learning and culture, and try to explain in greater detail what it is that a period of placement abroad can do for a participant, and how this happens. The aim is to arrive at a theory of learning in the context of placements abroad. Finally, we will try to work out the practical pedagogical implications of this.

Definitions and terminology

The general practice of going abroad to learn has been denoted by different terms in different contexts over the years, notably ‘exchange’ or ‘transnational mobility’. Both these terms are, however, linked to specific discourses: the origin and meaning of these are explained in the study. For

the specific practice of sending people abroad on placements in public and private enterprise, the more neutral term of 'placements abroad' has been preferred, and an exact definition worked out as part of the study.

The field that we propose to study is 'placements abroad in the context of VET'. The expression 'in the context of' has been preferred because we are not only interested in studying placements abroad as a part of formal VET-courses and curricula, but also in non-formal and informal contexts. The definition of the words formal, informal and non-formal is given by the European Commission's *A memorandum on lifelong learning*:

'Formal learning: learning typically provided by an education or training institution, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and leading to certification. Formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective. Informal learning: learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases is non-intentional. Non-formal learning: learning that is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. It is, however, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective' (2).

An example of a placement abroad as informal learning could be a self-organised work holiday abroad by a student.

A central term in the study is learning. Placements abroad in the context of VET are carried out so that participants may learn; but what precisely do we mean by the word 'learning'? We may learn in many situations in life, as described above, and also in different ways, and for different reasons. Some learning is based on reflection: that we experience a new situation, or new aspects to a known situation, and that we learn to cope with this by reflecting on the experience, and subsequently transforming our reflection into knowledge or skills. Other learning is basically unreflected – we acquire attitudes, skills and beliefs through identifying with and imitating others in our surroundings, without really thinking about what we learn, or that we learn. The type of learning that happens (or may happen) in connection with a placement abroad is a specific type of learning that in a sense draws on both. From the outset, we will adopt a very broad definition of learning as 'all

(2) Commission of the European Communities, 2000.

processes that lead to a lasting capacity change, be they of a motoric (related to movement), cognitive (related to perception), or psychodynamic (related to emotions, motivation, and attitude) character' (Illeris, 2000, p. 17).

A similar problem occurs with the outcome of learning. Here the words 'skills', 'competences' and 'qualifications' are used, sometimes interchangeably and sometimes invested with a particular meaning that distinguishes them from one another in important ways that may completely distort the meaning of a text if not properly construed by the reader. In this study, it is necessary to introduce some kind of differentiation to allow us to bring out certain important aspects. The differentiation used is a simple one, however. The word 'skill' is used to denote what people actually have (no matter where they have acquired it from); 'competences' are what enterprises require, and 'qualifications' what schools (and other awarding bodies) give. This definition lacks in subtlety, but has the advantage of simplicity.

Another central term is practice. Again, this is a term that may have many different meanings. To throw in a little confusion, we have here used it here in two senses, both of which are standard usage to be found in any quality dictionary. The first is as 'the systematic exercise of any profession, art or craft' (as in 'the practice of organising placements abroad'). Practice at this level may be broken down into many sub-practices (e.g. the practice of preparing participants for placements, etc.). The second is as 'actual performance, doing, or execution, as opposed to theory or intention' (as in 'placements abroad in theory and practice'). Whether it is one or the other will be apparent from the context.

Finally, the words pedagogical and didactic have been used as relative terms denoting the same area, but with an interrelationship identical to that of the words strategic and tactical.

CHAPTER 1

The use of placements abroad in the context of VET in Europe – the empirical basis

In this part of the study we will try to define the phenomenon of placements abroad and describe its quantitative and qualitative aspects. The quantitative description attempts to give an instant picture of the phenomenon of placements abroad in the context of VET in Europe at the time of writing (spring 2003). It assesses the quantitative scope and identifies significant trends in policies and practices at national and European level. The instant picture aspect should be kept in mind since the trend is rapid development and expansion. The aim has not been to capture the phenomenon in all its forms and modes, as this would have required far greater data collection than the scope of the present study would allow for ⁽³⁾. The main focus has been on tracing the scope and assessing its importance in the European VET landscape, and on providing information that can underpin conclusions in other parts of the study. The main source of qualitative data concerning the situation in individual countries is a series of surveys that were undertaken by national experts for Cedefop in 2000-02. The qualitative data have been mainly acquired through discourse analysis of relevant documents from policy and practice, done to gain an understanding of the rationale behind the policies manifesting themselves in concrete programmes and initiatives.

1.1. Defining the term

Many different practices use the term ‘placement’ as a denominator for their activities, and some form of definition is necessary to distinguish between these, and to mark it off from ordinary employment abroad as well as other forms of ‘transnational mobility’ ⁽⁴⁾.

⁽³⁾ In many cases the information is not only difficult to access, but simply not available; and whole new structures as well as commonly agreed definitions would have to be set up Europe-wide in order to gather the information needed for an accurate representation.

⁽⁴⁾ The term ‘transnational mobility’ is used in documents by the European Commission to describe all kinds of stays abroad, and in particular those linked to the programmes in education, training and youth. Through its use in European Commission contexts, the term has gained widespread currency.

The focus of this study is placements as a didactic tool, i.e. as an instrument of learning. A central criterion here must be the one of intent. We learn in many different contexts in life, much of which is not consciously organised as a learning situation, and this learning is often just as valuable (if not more) as the learning we have acquired in a structured learning environment. Pedagogy, however, deals with learning at a conscious level; we are providing learning situations and are concerned with how we can improve these to achieve the best possible outcome.

There is a connotation of the word 'placement' itself; it implies that somebody has been placed by someone in a context for a specific purpose (which in this case is learning). This is most visible where there is a conspicuous organiser present – someone who has made the necessary arrangements for a placement, defined the intended learning outcome, and thought out the necessary pedagogic implications. Placements may also be self-organised – i.e. set up by the participant. When a student organises a work stay in another country during holidays or a study break, this may or may not qualify as a placement according to the criterion of intent.

If the purpose is to acquire vocational skills and/or improve language and intercultural skills in general, we should see it as a placement, and count it as such, rather than a holiday job. We may inscribe it in an educational context through accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), if we can be convinced that the person in question has sought out learning situations during the stay rather than just focused on having a good time or earning as much money as possible. Other activities in this borderline category are au pair placements and voluntary work in charitable institutions and organisations, e.g. as financed under the European Voluntary Service ⁽⁵⁾. The practice of some companies to send employees abroad in foreign subsidiaries for a period of time in order to acquire specific competences may also be considered under this label. We should, however, distinguish it from employment abroad in general, which is another matter. The line is blurred, and different definitions may collide here. Any labour market activity where the participant draws some kind of wages or salary is juridically considered as employment. But payment is not necessarily a way of distinguishing between placements and proper jobs; placements may be paid or unpaid, even though the learning role of participants is often signified by the fact that they receive no – or a considerably reduced – payment.

⁽⁵⁾ The European Voluntary Service (EVS) is a part of the youth programme that finances long-term stays in charitable institutions and non-governmental organisations abroad for young people between 18 and 25. The programme started in 1996.

Apart from intent, we have used other criteria to define what a work placement is, in order to differentiate it from other activities. A placement:

- (a) is carried out in an authentic work environment. The placement period is not an artificially created situation, where the central feature is the learning of the participant. The most important thing here is continuing production, and learning is placed second or third or even lower down on the scale of priorities;
- (b) implies involvement in concrete work processes. The participants are not merely onlookers to the activities, but are given an active role;
- (c) is for a limited time. Placements are planned and carried out as a period abroad that is set in a (national) learning context – i.e. surrounded by this on both sides. They are not open-ended. Duration, however, may vary considerably, from two weeks to two years.

To this we may add another features, which we should term characteristics rather than criteria, since they need not always be applicable. A placement thus as a rule:

- (a) demands professional experience as the ‘entry ticket’. Workplaces where it is possible to become integrated in work processes immediately without any prior training or experience are few and far between. Therefore participation in most placement projects is contingent upon either a wholly or partly completed training course or solid practical experience ⁽⁶⁾;
- (b) is not under the supervision of trained pedagogical staff. Contrary to a school environment or youth exchanges, there are usually no pedagogically trained staff (teachers) or experienced youth leaders around to offer guidance and practical support during the placement period. Mentors may be appointed, but the supervision of the participants is only a secondary task for them;
- (c) does not take place among peer groups. In school stays or youth exchanges, the participants will often be surrounded by people in the same age bracket and societal position who are in a similar life situation. At the workplace, however, there is a broad spectrum of colleagues, who are largely in a different position from the participant and have different dreams, expectations and interests.

⁽⁶⁾ Possible exceptions here are the European volunteers’ scheme and au pair placements, which may be said to represent borderline cases.

The observation of these criteria and characteristics will exclude a number of activities from the definition, for example the ‘work camps’ organised to improve intercultural understanding. Here, young people from many countries are gathered for a period of time to accomplish a task of a practical nature: building a playground, restoring a building to be used by the local community, blazing a trail through a mountain region to open it for tourism, etc. But the work situation is an artificially created one, there are trained supervisors present, and the group is composed of young people in the same age bracket. Also study visits do not qualify here. Even though they may take place in authentic work environments, the participants are not involved in the work processes, but are merely engaged as onlookers.

Taking all these criteria into account, we arrive at the following definition of the term ‘placement abroad’, which is the one that will be used throughout this study:

‘A shorter or longer period spent abroad in a public or private enterprise, which has been consciously organised for learning purposes, which implies active involvement in concrete work processes, and which can be paid or unpaid’.

1.2. Placements abroad – some historical highlights

The phenomenon is often associated with past and present programmes of the European Commission. These have grant-aided placements abroad, represent the largest single programmes and initiatives, and provide the best statistical material. Currently, the Leonardo da Vinci programme is much in evidence in discussions on mobility in VET (and consequently also in this study) for exactly these reasons. The practice goes well beyond these programmes, however, and encompasses also programmes and initiatives at binational, national and regional level, as well as the activities of organisations and individuals, which are undertaken without any recourse to programme funding.

It is possible to trace back the history of mobility in a VET-context to the tradition of the travelling journeymen (*fahrende Gesellen*) of the medieval guilds, a practice that endured up to the early 20th century, and rudiments of which still exist in a few countries. Dedicated transnational placement programmes only appeared after the Second World War, however, where the organisations AIESEC and IAESTE were set up under the auspices of Unesco in 1948 to facilitate placements for students of commerce and technology in higher education. Another placement programme was set up in 1964 by the

Commission of the European Communities in the shape of the Young workers' exchange programme (YWEP), and in 1981 a binational Franco-German programme for placements (exchanges) in VET was established within the framework of the Franco-German Treaty of 1963 ⁽⁷⁾. The Comett programme from 1987 – also set up by the European Commission – grant-aided placements of students in higher education in order to promote cooperation between universities and industry and to facilitate transfer of technology. Finally, Action 4 of the Lingua programme from 1990 contained funding provisions for young people in VET to undertake placement periods abroad in order to improve foreign language proficiency.

Up to the early 1990s, however, mobility in VET – and in particular in initial VET and for young workers – was very limited and certainly not a realistic proposition except for a very small minority of the total population engaged in VET. Mobility took a quantum leap upwards on the agenda of European and national VET-policies more or less precisely a decade ago, notably with the introduction of the enlarged Petra programme (Petra II) in 1992. That year, 8 500 placements were grant-aided through the programme, and by the end of the programme period in 1995, the total number approached 35 000 for the then 12 EU Member States. A significant development at national level was the establishment by the Danish government in 1992 of the PIU programme, which gave people in initial vocational training not just the opportunity but the right to undertake all or part of their mandatory work placements in another EU or EFTA country. Funding was provided by Danish employers through the Employers' reimbursement scheme for apprentices and trainees (AER). This was the first of several national programmes for placements abroad that have since been set up in various countries.

1.3. Problems connected with obtaining data on placements abroad

Initially, we should distinguish between placements abroad organised within the framework of programmes and spontaneous placement activities happening outside of these. We have only very limited ability to measure the placements abroad that are undertaken outside of dedicated programmes, or in programmes or initiatives that deal with wider issues and where placements abroad are only a possibility, and not a distinct programme activity. Anything concerning this must thus be based on guesswork.

⁽⁷⁾ These organisations and programmes are dealt with in more detail further on in this chapter and the next.

Even when concentrating on dedicated mobility programmes (or programmes where mobility is a distinct activity) are we faced with problems. First, problems of definition can make comparability difficult. Second (and partly as a consequence of this), the way in which information is gathered (and what is gathered) may differ from programme to programme, which makes it yet more difficult to come up with robust and comparable information. It is not possible to see from the statistical material available whether some activities were undertaken as placements or as another form of mobility. Moreover, mobility programmes (or programmes incorporating mobility activities) are undertaken in many different contexts, and there is virtually no national level overview of all mobility activities. The annual Dutch BISON monitoring report of international mobility within education and training remains an isolated initiative, but it includes only mobility taking place within the framework of educational establishments. In addition, all the information available is concerned with outgoing mobility (the sending aspect), and there is no indication of incoming mobility (hosting).

This lack of quantitative data makes it very difficult to arrive at any figures concerning both the participation rates and financing involved. For the Leonardo da Vinci programme, we can give very precise indications on participation rates and the amount of funding in the programme, but we do not have figures on funding that also involves national cofinancing. Given the different ways of calculating this from project to project, and the varying percentage of Commission funding, a conservative estimate would put this at a level equal to the Commission's contribution (e.g. for the second phase of the Leonardo da Vinci programme, approximately EUR 600 million). The Leonardo programme remains the biggest single funding mechanism for transnational mobility in VET in Europe, and in some countries it is more or less the only programme within VET that can be used for funding placements abroad on any significant scale. In other countries there are more funding opportunities. In the Netherlands 1 230 people benefited from a Leonardo mobility grant in the year 1999-2000 (total figure, including short study tours undertaken by teachers, instructors and human resource specialists). The total number of people participating in transnational mobility activities in VET in the same period, however, is registered by the BISON monitoring report as close to 7 000 (6 877). Of these, 204 come from the Lingua programme (i.e. another EU programme), but 5 158 were financed through the national *Onbegrensde talent* programme. Unfortunately we cannot assess the exact amount spent on placements abroad from this programme, since the funds are allocated as lump sums to educational establishments for broad 'internationalisation' purposes. Also, we cannot compare factors like length of stay and target

countries. Even without information on mobility financed through other sources than the established programmes, it would seem that Leonardo accounts for less than one fifth of the total figure for mobility within VET in the Netherlands. It is problematic, however, to transpose this figure to the rest of Europe for want of a reliable yardstick for measurement and comparison. In many instances, grant allocations and/or numbers involved are used as indicators.

Another complication is that a mere headcount will not give a correct picture of the scope of mobility in VET. In the Danish PIU programme, the participants (apprentices) stay abroad for eight to nine months on average, which has greater effect than, for example, a two week stay financed under Lingua/Socrates. Similarly, Danish apprentices are paid the appropriate apprentice wage by their employer in the host country, which means that programme costs measured by grant allocation only will not give a real picture of the total costs involved. However, some countries have only the Leonardo programme to finance mobility, which tips the scales in the other direction when trying to figure out a European average for participation and funding of mobility.

Quantifiable information on spontaneous mobility is virtually non-existent, even though we have anecdotal evidence of its existence as a factor. We might have got an indication of sorts from the German *Sprungbrett* programme; a national-level mobility programme which started in 2003, which gave grants to individuals within initial VET undertaking placement periods in other European countries. Unfortunately this programme was discontinued at the end of 2003 due to budget cuts. Measuring the factors such as the numbers of applications received may give us a rough estimate of this activity in at least one Member State, but only in initial vocational training, where spontaneous mobility is likely to be low for reasons of age. Almost equally impossible to assess are the activities that are undertaken as pilot projects within programmes that on the surface have nothing to do with the issue of placements abroad. An example of this is the Eurojoker project, which was financed out of funds from the EU Konver II initiative. In this project (duration March 1999 – May 2000) young unemployed persons from the Brandenburg region in Germany were sent on one year placements in other European countries with a view to increasing their employability. Locating such projects mainly relies on the unofficial network of the person collecting the data, or happens by chance.

It follows that any estimate of the numbers and amounts involved will doubtless be inaccurate. The scarcity of data is equally pronounced for the qualitative aspects of the phenomenon. Given the scope of activities, it is strange to note that studies on the qualitative aspects of placements abroad as a didactic tool in the context of VET are sparse. Very few evaluations of

mobility programmes and projects have been undertaken at European or national level, and even fewer of these concentrate on the learning aspects. Most of the evaluations undertaken are summative evaluations carried out by or for programme administrators with a view to justifying expenses and administrative practices, and have little to say about learning.

After the conclusion of the first phase of the Leonardo da Vinci programme, a 'valorisation' exercise was carried out on selected aspects of the programme, both at national and at European level. Valorisation is not the same as traditional evaluation or impact assessment, but focuses mainly on the achievements of the programme with a view to formulating recommendations for improvements and future priorities. It is not a very well defined methodology, and valorisation exercises consequently vary greatly from country to country, as well as in quality. Each country was given the possibility to choose between certain themes, and mobility was an issue in several countries covered by this study (Denmark, France, Iceland, Norway, and the UK) as well as an element in European-level valorisation. Other than these evaluations, research-based treatment of the theme of placements abroad is virtually non-existent.

Some work, however, has been done on organisational matters, notably on legal and administrative barriers, culminating with the Commission's Green Paper on obstacles to mobility from 1996. The main source of funding for development activities (in the majority of countries the only source) is the strand for pilot-projects under the Leonardo da Vinci programme. The recognition of qualifications acquired abroad is a major issue here. However, only 57 projects dealing with mobility-related subjects could be identified (out of a total project number of over 3 000) in the first phase of the programme (1995-99). Prominent themes were placement finding, preparation, and quality assurance.

1.4. Aspects of placements abroad

Some of the main findings of the empirical studies are highlighted below. This section contains an enumeration of major placement schemes at European and at binational, national, and regional level, and a short description of types of participants, project organisers and administrative actors in the field. At the end of the chapter is a small section giving the general position of placements abroad in relation to VET policies and trends in each of the 17 countries in the study.

The aim of this is not to offer any exhaustive descriptions of actors, programmes, administrative structures, and national policies but merely to

sum up the information presently available in Europe in order to serve as the empirical underpinning of the central chapters of the study.

1.4.1. Programmes and initiatives

Placements abroad are organised in many contexts and at many levels, and it is necessary to look far beyond dedicated programmes (or programmes with placements abroad as a separate and immediately recognisable strand) in order to get to the real scope of the phenomenon. Examples of such programmes and initiatives are given below to illustrate the point. Numbers have been given where these are available and help demonstrate the size of the programme. Additional data can be found in the overview of placements abroad in national VET-policies and practices at the end of the section dealing with quantitative aspects.

1.4.1.1. *Multinational programmes and initiatives*

EU mobility programmes are, as a rule, decentralised, which means that funds from the programme are distributed as lump sums to the national agencies, which then make decisions on the allocation to individual projects. The major EU mobility programme in a VET-context is the Leonardo da Vinci programme, but it is important to take a broader view in order to get the full picture. Also mobility activities in the Lingua/Socrates programme are carried out in VET (albeit seldom as placements), as well as certain types of projects under the Youth for Europe programme (notably the European volunteer scheme). It should also be noted that important mobility projects may be carried out under the structural funds, even though mobility is not an independent theme here. An example is the Swedish/Italian/UK Breaking Barriers project involving young unemployed people and financed under the Social Fund, and various regional exchange programmes organised between border regions in Europe, financed under the Regional Fund (notably the Interreg initiative).

In this context we should also mention the placements that the Commission organises within its own services for students in higher education. This is a possibility that also exists in other international organisations (e.g. the OECD), but on a far smaller scale.

The European Commission is not the only European-level player, though. The Eurodyssée programme is organised by the European Assembly of Regions under the Council of Europe. It consists of three to seven month placements abroad in a company in one of the regions associated with the programme. Currently 26 regions from 11 countries are involved, targeting young people in the age bracket 18 to 30 from 1 of the regions. It has not

been possible to get total figures for participation, but indications from individual regions suggest that the total numbers involved are probably below 1 000 on an annual basis. Also the activities of the organisations AIESEC (*Association internationale pour l'échange des étudiants de commerce*) and IAESTE (International association for the exchange of students of technical experience) should be mentioned here. Both are international organisations that were set up under the aegis of Unesco in the years following WWII with a view to preventing future conflicts through student exchange. The target groups for the organisations are tertiary level students within commerce and technology in the widest sense of these terms, who are offered long-term (2 to 24 months) placements in companies in a large number of countries worldwide. In 2002, 2 145 students went on placements abroad through IAESTE, while the corresponding figure for AIESEC was 888.

Within the context of the Nordic Council, the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) have set up a number of programmes that can be used for financing placements between Nordic countries for students and apprentices (NordPlus Junior, Nordjobb). The numbers involved are modest, though. Between 700 and 800 placements are organised through NordJobb every year (in total some 15 000 since the start of the programme in 1985). For NordPlus Junior, which finances both school stays and placements, placements are not registered separately.

Finally, the medieval tradition of travelling journeymen has been preserved in some countries, either within traditional guild-like organisations like the *Zünfte* in Germany, or in special organisations set up for the purpose (the *Naver*-movement in Scandinavia and the *Compagnonnage* in France and Belgium). The numbers involved are very difficult to assess, since much is done at local level through personal networks, but it is probably not a very significant amount. Historically, however, it is very interesting as a link to a long gone period in Europe where physical mobility was the main, and indeed the only, vehicle for the transfer of knowledge and technology.

1.4.1.2. *Binational, national and regional activities*

The Leonardo da Vinci programme is the largest single source of funding for mobility projects in the context of VET in Europe. In some Member States it is more or less the only one. This is the case for some of the Mediterranean countries, notably Spain, Portugal and Italy and also for the UK. In the other Member States, however, we find various other schemes and incentives for mobility that either combine with Leonardo (by providing national cofinancing for mobility projects) or live their own life independently of the European

Union programme. There are only few examples of national-level dedicated VET-mobility programmes, i.e. programmes that are exclusively directed at promoting transnational mobility in VET and which are permanently inscribed in national VET-policies.

Two examples come from Denmark and Sweden. Since 1992, all young people in initial vocational training in Denmark have had the right (and not just the opportunity) to take all or part of their mandatory work placements abroad with funding from the national PIU programme. Currently, some 1 000 young people avail themselves of this opportunity every year, undertaking work placements in most European countries of an average length of between 8 and 9 months. The total budget for this activity stands at a little over EUR 2 million annually. In Sweden, a newly established programme gives more or less the same opportunities to young Swedish people in initial vocational training, even though the conditions are slightly different. This programme is still in a trial phase, however, and the budget for 2002 is a modest EUR 450 000. In another national programme, young unemployed Swedes have had the opportunity to go on a six month placement anywhere in the world through InterPraktik, a national programme set up to improve their employability through participation in a transnational mobility project. Some 1 000 participants go abroad every year, and the annual budget stands at EUR 5.2 million (1999).

Mobility is also a strong national concern in Germany, but due to the *Länder*-structure and the principle of subsidiarity between these and the national government in matters concerned with education and training, much initiative is at regional level or through non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The major ones of these are the Carl Duisberg Gesellschaft (now InWent), the Franco-German Youth Office (see below) and the Franco-German secretariat for exchanges in VET. The former operate a large number of specialised mobility programmes for the state and several binational placement programmes.

The majority of the programmes that fund or otherwise support mobility in VET are either dedicated to mobility but not exclusively to VET, or dedicated to VET but not exclusively to mobility. In the former category we find a good many programmes that are informed by the 'humanitarian perspective' and try to promote intercultural understanding and prevent conflict through exchanges of (mainly) young people. A major actor is the binational Franco-German Youth Office (DFJW/OFAJ), that was set up in 1963 to fund encounters between young people from Germany and France (and, in some cases, also young people from a third country) in order to combat national chauvinism between two countries that had faced each other as opponents

in two world wars. The projects financed by the DFJW/OFAJ fall both inside and outside of the education and training sector, and it is not possible to have a precise overview of funds actually spent on mobility in VET. The total budget for the organisation stands at approximately EUR 20 million annually (2000) from which it finances a total of 7 000 cross-cultural 'encounters' involving 140 000 young people.

Another example is the Anglo-Irish Wider horizons programme, established under the National fund for Ireland to improve relations between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland and Ireland. Wider horizons is a placement programme, where young unemployed people from Ireland and young people from Northern Ireland are sent out on placements abroad together. No budget figures are available, but since 1986, more than 11 000 young people have participated, with projects lasting on average between four and five weeks. On a much smaller scale we find other programmes that fund encounters across borders with a view to promoting a specific language (Spain) and historical affinities (e.g. between Denmark and Iceland). An interesting programme which does not actually involve crossing any national borders, promotes exchanges of groups of young people from the Flemish-speaking and the francophone communities within Belgium.

An interesting initiative is the Greek EPEAEK programme, which has been partly financed under the structural funds of the European Union. The programme has as its aim to improve provision as well as delivery of secondary education and initial vocational training, and contains two mobility strands (one for teachers and one for students). Under the student strand, grants are given to groups of students, accompanied by a teacher, to travel in order to carry out 'educational visits or laboratory exercises' (i.e. placements) of between 8 and 16 days' duration in educational institutions or in companies both inside or outside of Greece, dependent on where it can be provided most efficiently. In the years 1996-99, a total of 15 598 students took part in placements financed under this programme; 6 526 of these involved travel inside Greece, and 9 072 went to other (EU) countries. The total costs of student mobility (no differentiation general education/initial vocational education and inside Greece/Europe) for the four years in question was slightly above EUR 13 million. Given the fact that the majority of the students went outside of Greece, and that the costs for travel and accommodation, etc. generally are higher here, it seems safe to conclude that close to three fourths of the total amount was spent on stays abroad.

Another interesting programme in this category is the French STEER programme run by the national employment authority, ANPE. The programme, which was originally developed under the EU Adapt-initiative,

targets an audience of adult, unemployed people, whose unemployment is caused by industrial restructuring. As a retraining initiative, placements abroad (typically from two to eight weeks) are offered to those who wish to find employment in areas requiring international contact. The placements are organised by ANPE and aim at cultivating specific vocational skills (also in terms of networks and knowledge of foreign markets) or linguistic competence.

Other programmes deal with VET and incorporate mobility activities, but not as a main line of action. An example of this is the Dutch *Oonbegrensd* Talent programme from 1997, which aims to stimulate the Dutch education and training sector to develop and extend their international contacts. A prominent activity under *Oonbegrensd* Talent is placement projects for students and apprentices in VET. The total annual budget for the programme is EUR 2.13 million, but as this is distributed in a lump sum to the participating institutions, it is not possible to estimate the number of placements organised under the programme. Unless mobility is a distinct action line or priority, however, the scope of the mobility undertaken inside such programmes is difficult to assess, as it often appears under other headings.

Several programmes operate at regional level in Europe, notably in border regions. An example of a regional programme that is not located in a border region is the *Europäisches Jahr im Ausland* programme that is organised by the Senate of Berlin (see below).

1.5. Actors at the level of practice

Various actors are involved in the implementation of programmes and policies. These include not only the participants themselves but also project organisers and programme administrators.

1.5.1. Participants

Participants come from all aspects of the education and training system. Most are already involved in a formal course, either initial vocational training or short cycle/long cycle higher education. There is also the younger element of the labour market.

Until quite recently, most mobility programmes operated with age limits and were directed exclusively at young people. Within EU programmes, the upper limit for participation was somewhere around 25 and 28 years. With the recognition of the principle of lifelong learning, many of the programmes – and certainly EU mobility programmes in the field of education and training

– have now done away with age limits. Despite this, the overwhelming majority of the participants are still to be found in the category ‘young people’, which is commonly defined as those under 30. The immediate reasons for this are obvious – young people have fewer commitments and are consequently easier to displace for a longer period of time, whereas many adults (i.e. over 30s) are tied by family, social, and financial commitments (e.g. mortgage payments). Projects or programmes that try to take this into account and create provisions for a more adult target group are scarce – the only example that came to light in the empirical studies was the French STEER project (see above). Also, many of the organisations and structures that organise placement projects overwhelmingly cater for the young. An interesting aspect here, sometimes maintained by placement organisers and to a certain extent corroborated by research concerned with changes in learning capabilities with age (e.g. Kruse, 2000), is whether young people are more open and accessible to the kind of learning produced in the course of a stay abroad than adults ⁽⁸⁾.

Since placements abroad do not form an obligatory part of the curriculum, one could anticipate that activities would mostly focus around the elite in VET, i.e. those students, apprentices or workers who are best motivated and best equipped in terms of personality and skills to cope with a stay abroad. This kind of elitist focus may indeed be found ⁽⁹⁾; it is rarely openly formulated in programme documentation, but expressed through practices in the projects. The line of thinking would be that these are the most likely to have international contacts in the course of their career and can best afford to spend time outside of the normal curriculum.

At the other end of the scale, however, we find a number of programmes and initiatives with an emphasis on a specific target group of ‘disadvantaged’ young people. These are young, long-term unemployed people who in many cases would never consider going abroad to work later, or for whom the possibilities of working in an internationalised environment later are equally tenuous. Programme preambles and other documentation focus on the development of ‘life skills’ (self-confidence, reliability, initiative, independence, etc.) rather than international skills. Examples of such

⁽⁸⁾ We will look at this issue again later, from a different angle.

⁽⁹⁾ An indication may be found in the fact that in Germany and Austria, stays abroad for individual students/apprentices in VET are sometimes financed under a special programme set up to provide additional possibilities for the best (*die Begabtenförderung* - Promotion of the gifted). Also the name of the Dutch internationalisation programme in VET (*Onbegrensd Talent* – Talent Unlimited) may be an indicator.

programmes are the *Europäisches Jahr Im Ausland* by the Senate of Berlin, the *Stages pour Jeunes en Situation Precaire* by the Franco-German Youth Office (OFAJ/DFJW), and the Swedish/Italian/British Breaking Barriers project, all cofinanced from the Social Fund. The Swedish *Interpraktik* programme is an example of a nationally financed programme.

1.5.2. Project organisers

Most placement projects involving target groups in formal education and training courses are organised by educational establishments such as vocational schools, training centres and institutes of higher education. For participants not enrolled in formal courses, the picture is more varied. Many VET-establishments are active here as well, and moreover a number of special placement organisations are active across Europe, offering their services either to individuals or to VET-establishments against payment. Also the social partners are active, albeit on a smaller scale. These include chambers of commerce and industry, crafts chambers, trade unions, employers' associations, or organisations set up specifically to handle practical aspects, such as the Austrian IFA – see below. In some cases, the national labour market authorities carry out placement projects as well. This is the case in Germany (ZAV - *Zentralstelle für Arbeitsvermittlung*), in the francophone part of Belgium (FOREM), and France (ANPE - *Agence Nationale pour l'Emploi*). The latter roles have been inherited from the former Young workers' exchange programme, which was the first EU mobility programme (1964), and which was firmly set within a framework of labour market policy.

Active involvement from private enterprise is a priority in the Leonardo da Vinci programme, but national agencies report very little activity from this side. Two national agencies (Italy and the UK) have launched major initiatives under the Leonardo da Vinci valorisation exercise to try to uncover the reasons for this passivity (Italy with specific reference to mobility, the UK for all programme strands), but have failed to come up with any significant recommendations for improvement, other than making the programme less bureaucratic (an issue also mentioned by several other national agencies). Very few companies apply for grants to send trainees and apprentices abroad.

The only exception to this is Germany, where several big companies have organised their own permanent transnational placement programmes and used Leonardo da Vinci to cofinance this. This is the case with Deutsche Bahn, BMW and BASF, large 'global players' who invest heavily in training and are generally considered to be on the cutting edge of human resource

thinking. In other countries, however, the activities initiated by companies are few and sporadic, and usually one-off projects that are not repeated. This does not necessarily mean that companies are not interested, however. Many companies are probably not able or willing to organise an entire project themselves, either for lack of time or for lack of willing and capable participants. These may then use the local vocational school or training centre to organise and carry out projects, to which they send one or two participants. Many of the projects that are now registered as initiated by educational establishments may actually cover a significant amount of company involvement, even though this is not evident from the reports. In addition, we do not know whether many companies actually do send trainees and apprentices on placements abroad, but without receiving funding from any programme (and thus not appearing in the statistics). Experiences from the Danish PIU programme indicate that companies are interested in this mode of training. In this programme, approximately one third of the 1 000 annual participants come from companies, many of them in the SME category. This may seem to indicate that the interest among companies is there, given the right conditions. It is a declared aim of the PIU programme to involve companies, and the bureaucratic procedures have therefore been made very user-friendly, with ongoing application (i.e. no deadlines) and very short evaluation procedures. Also, applications are made for individuals, and not for groups.

Companies make a contribution to placement activities in a more passive manner, namely in their capacity as hosts of the trainees/apprentices participating in the placement activities. This also has its problems. The difficulties of finding good quality placements for their participants is considered the major obstacle for a further development of activities by many project promoters. Within the Leonardo programme, several attempts have been made to mediate the contact between either project promoters and companies offering placements, or trainees/apprentices and companies. None of these projects have met with any significant success, and they have all been discontinued (e.g. TransNet, EuroStages, Arsenal). An interesting example of good practice comes from Austria, where a series of placements has been negotiated as part of a large, state-sponsored deal with a company abroad. A minority of placements are organised by VET stakeholders such as the social partners – either directly or indirectly through other organisations, which in some cases are set up by these (e.g. the Austrian organisation IFA).

1.5.3. Administrative structures

Special institutions have been set up at national level to ensure that transnational mobility policies for VET are carried out. In most countries, these are somehow connected to the administration of the Leonardo da Vinci programme, since the Commission provides financing for national administration. Every Member State has a Leonardo da Vinci national agency, whose task it is to evaluate applications, take decisions on grant allocation for the mobility strands of the programme and monitor programme activities. It is interesting to see exactly how these agencies have been positioned in relation to VET policies, administrative services and internationalisation agencies. Basically four models can be found.

In the first model, the national agency (or the agency dealing with the mobility strands) is placed in connection with a national mobility organisation. This is the case in Germany (mobility strands of Leonardo da Vinci placed within the *Carl Duisberg Gesellschaft/InWent*), Austria (NA part of ÖAAD - *Österreichische Akademische Austausch Dienst*) and the UK (NA placed within the Central Bureau for Educational Visits and Exchanges). A second model places it within a national centre for research and development in VET. This is the case in Italy (ISFOL), the Netherlands (CINOP) and Norway (*Norsk Teknologisk Institut*).

The third model integrates the NA into special (state) agencies created in order to deal with internationalisation of education and training, and which incorporate a number of other EU and national programmes dealing with these aspects. This is the case in Denmark (Cirius), Ireland (*Leargas*) and Sweden (*Internationella Programkontoret*). The fourth model places the national agency within the ministry of education (e.g. Belgium, Greece and Spain). In a number of countries (Belgium, Germany and France) the strand dealing with mobility for young workers (or workers, since the age restrictions have been abolished) are placed separately within the national labour market authorities.

1.6. The situation in individual countries

In order to present a more coherent overview of the state of affairs in each of the 17 countries involved in the survey, the following presents a short summary of the main findings for each. Given the difficulties in acquiring information on the subject, however, the text should not be taken as a complete and exhaustive inventory of mobility in the context of VET in the 17 European countries involved, but rather as a first step towards more structured descriptions.

When viewed from a European perspective, it is evident that there are big differences between the individual countries. In some countries there is a strong focus on placements abroad in VET and the issue has been integrated into national policies and practices. In others, there are no national initiatives of any importance, and the Leonardo da Vinci programme is the only opportunity for financing placements abroad, at least in initial VET. Comparisons of policies and practices (or ‘benchmarking’) in different countries are always problematic, but can be helpful in attempting an overview of the situation from a European perspective. When we divide the 17 countries into four different clusters (below), this happens mainly for the sake of overview, but caution is advised due to the difficulties of obtaining precise and reliable information. The four clusters are:

- (a) first cluster: placements abroad are integrated into the VET-system (or parts of it), and an important issue in VET policies and discussions. This group comprises Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden;
- (b) second cluster: placements abroad are an important issue in discussions on VET politics, but has not been integrated into the VET system to any great extent. This group comprises Austria, Finland and France;
- (c) third cluster: placements abroad are an issue in national discussions on VET politics, but not an important one. No national mobility programmes or initiatives in the context of VET. This group comprises Belgium, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg and Norway;
- (d) fourth cluster: placements abroad are largely absent as an issue from national discussions on VET-policy, and any impetus comes from European politics and programmes. This group comprises Italy, Portugal, Spain and the UK.

In the following, the situation in each of the 17 countries involved in the survey will be briefly summarised together with the other countries from the same cluster. Some short general comments concerning some characteristics of the whole cluster will precede these descriptions. The countries in each cluster have been listed in alphabetical order.

1.6.1. Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden

These countries are characterised by a general awareness of placements abroad as an important didactic tool in the context of VET. Students and apprentices in VET have good opportunities for going on placements, either

as a formal or an informal part of their training. European programmes – notably Leonardo da Vinci – complement national programmes and initiatives. Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands have strong apprenticeship systems, whereas Sweden has a school-based VET-system. It is common to all four countries, however, that VET generally has a high status.

1.6.1.1. *Denmark*

Mobility is fully integrated into VET policies through the PIU programme, which was established in 1992. A change in the law on initial vocational training gave apprentices the right to take all or part of their mandatory work placements abroad. Simultaneously, funding possibilities were made available through the Employers' reimbursement scheme, a training fund to which all companies above a certain minimum size must contribute. Currently approximately 1 100 apprentices take this opportunity every year. Most of the placements in the PIU programme are long-term, i.e. exceeding three months. The annual expenditure lies around EUR 2 million. The social partners have been very much involved with the PIU programme and have supported it actively.

In addition, a limited number of apprentices in VET also participate in short term placement activities through one of the Nordic programmes (Nordplus Junior). An independent state organisation - the Danish Centre for international cooperation and mobility in education and training (Cirius) - was established in the year 2000 to promote the internationalisation of education and training in Denmark. Cirius has edited material for programme organisers on qualitative aspects of mobility, and on how to incorporate mobility in the overall internationalisation strategies of individual vocational schools and training centres.

A major evaluation of the learning outcomes of participation in long term placements abroad was completed in the framework of the PIU programme in 2000.

1.6.1.2. *Germany*

It is the stated aim of the German government to increase the number of young people in VET who undertake educational stays abroad. This goes hand-in-hand with a general trend towards an internationalisation of VET in Germany, and is backed up by surveys that indicate that over 30 % of all employees in German companies currently need international qualifications in the execution of their daily tasks (see Werner and Lenske, 2000). Internationalisation of VET is an established research theme.

Bilateral programmes exist in abundance, first and foremost with France through the activities of the Franco-German Youth Office and the Franco-German secretariat for exchanges in the field of VET. Approximately 3 500 young people in initial vocational education and training participate in the latter every year. There are also bilateral programmes, albeit on a far smaller scale, with Britain, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Norway and Poland. In addition to these, the Carl Duisberg Gesellschaft (as of October 2002 merged with the German Foundation for International Development to form a new organisation: InWent), a large NGO set up in 1949 to promote educational stays abroad of a vocational character, is running more than 60 other mobility programmes that distribute themselves over the whole range of vocational education and training. There are several initiatives in border regions which involve regular exchanges of young people in VET, especially in the regions that belong to the Euregio-network. Funding for these often comes from the Interreg programme. Another example of a regional initiative occurs in the City of Berlin, where the Senate of Berlin runs the *Europäisches Jahr im Ausland* (European year abroad) programme, which is partly financed from the Social Fund. The target group here is young unemployed people.

Another development was the *Sprungbrett* programme, which as of 2003 was to finance individually organised placements abroad for young people in initial vocational training. Each placement was funded with a fixed amount of EUR 350, and a total of 1 000 grants were available in the first year. The programme was discontinued by the end of the year, however, due to budget cuts.

An interesting phenomenon is the strong involvement of enterprises. Several major enterprises have made special mobility programmes for their apprentices in order to give these an international dimension in their training. The most well known of these are BMW and the Deutsche Bahn (German railways), but enterprises in the chemical sector are also active.

The Carl Duisberg Gesellschaft, which is also the national agency for the mobility strands of the Leonardo programme, organises an annual gathering for all promoters of Leonardo da Vinci mobility projects with a view to sharing and developing knowledge. Thematic workshops on selected issues are organised, the results of which are subsequently published in addition to being made available on the internet.

1.6.1.3. *The Netherlands*

Since 1991, the Netherlands has had its own internationalisation programme for education and training, where mobility has featured as an integral part. Until 1997 the programme was called *Grenzen verleggen* (extending

borders), but was revised in 1997 and changed its name to *Onbegrensd talent* (talent without borders/unlimited talent). Through *Grenzen Verleggen*, vocational colleges could obtain funding for three major lines of action; participation in networks, innovation through participation in international projects, and mobility. 80 % of all funds were earmarked for mobility from the outset, even though this figure was somewhat reduced later. Almost all VET-institutions used the programme. With the *Onbegrensd talent* programme, the emphasis changed from individual projects to systemic incorporation of internationalisation, and the money is now distributed as a lump sum for internationalisation rather than for specific projects. The action plan for the programme also introduced the principle of ‘internationalisation on a bicycle’, which meant focusing primarily on neighbouring countries: Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Norway, Sweden and the UK. Within the framework of the programme, a reciprocal VET mobility programme with Germany was set up under the acronym BAND. This has a budget of approximately EUR 218 000, jointly financed by Germany and the Netherlands. The annual budget for the entire *Onbegrensd talent* programme is around EUR 2 million. The majority of this was used for mobility projects, even though it is not possible to specify this more precisely.

Information and statistics on outgoing mobility in the education and training sector in the Netherlands are compiled by the committee *Beraad Internationale Samenwerking Onderwijs Nederland* (BISON), which is an informal forum for the three major educational sectors. VET is represented here by the Centre for the Innovation of Vocational Education and Training (CINOP). The BISON committee issues an annual report on mobility in the context of education and training.

1.6.1.4. Sweden

Within the last five years, several major initiatives and programmes have been set up at national level, dedicated to promoting mobility in VET. The largest of these is the Interpraktik programme, which allows young unemployed Swedes to undertake work placements of up to six months’ duration anywhere in the world in order to upgrade their skills. The Interpraktik programme has an annual budget in excess of EUR 500 000, and approximately 1 000 young people have used this opportunity every year since the programme was set up in 1997. In 2002 it was made possible, in the beginning on an experimental basis, for young people in initial vocational education and training to undertake work placements abroad as well as in Sweden, of up to three months’ duration. According to the results of the pilot phase, the right to undertake work placements abroad may become a

permanent feature of the VET system, as in Denmark. In addition to the dedicated programmes, there are also funding possibilities for work placements abroad in other programmes that deal generally with education and training.

There is a strong emphasis on inclusion in Swedish mobility policies and practices, and efforts are made to ensure that an international experience is also extended to disadvantaged groups, notably the unemployed and handicapped. Several large projects that seek to develop mobility for these target groups have been carried out, some with funding from Social Fund initiatives. A major project concerning the inclusion of physically handicapped people in placement projects has recently been set up, partly funded by the EQUAL initiative.

1.6.2. Austria, Finland and France

In all three countries in this cluster, there is a general awareness of the relevance and the importance of placements abroad as a didactic tool in VET. However, this awareness has not (yet) been translated into major national programmes and political initiatives. Austria has a strong apprenticeship system, and also Finland and France have incorporated alternance-based courses in their system, even though traditional apprenticeships only form a smaller part of initial VET. The status of VET is generally high.

1.6.2.1. Austria

Transnational mobility is not integrated in VET in any concerted way, and Leonardo remains the major source for funding of mobility projects in VET. The Ministries of Education and Industry and Labour (who share responsibility for VET) are generally very positive towards mobility, however, and so are the social partners, who have set up the organisation IFA (*Verein zur Förderung des Internationalen Austausches von Lehrlinge, Facharbeitern und Ausbildern der Wirtschaft*) to promote mobility for apprentices and young workers through the organisation of concrete placement projects and development activities. The Austrian government is currently (2003) putting the finishing touches to legislation that will make placements abroad of up to four months' duration a statutory right for individuals in initial vocational training.

A source of funding individual mobility is found in the *Begabtenförderung*, a fund for rewarding excellent performers in the apprenticeship system.

Two political initiatives deserve special mention here. First, in connection with a large state order for a foreign company, part of the compensation package was negotiated in the shape of possibilities for placements for a

certain number of young people in the company winning the call for tender. Second, in order to heighten the overall quality of the placement projects and to focus attention on this aspect, the Austrian Leonardo national agency created a quality award that is given out every year for excellence within four categories: innovation, results and benefits, project management and sustainability.

1.6.2.2. Finland

As an element in a more comprehensive movement towards internationalisation of Finnish education and training, 'transnational mobility' has a distinct place in Finnish VET policies. According to an addition to the VET-legislation made in 1999, a student or apprentice may complete part of his or her on-the-job training abroad. A national internationalisation fund for VET was created in 1992, and approximately 30 % of the money in here go towards mobility projects for students and apprentices. The National Board of Education has formulated as an aim that between 10 to 20 % of all students and apprentices in VET participate in mobility projects. A Centre for international mobility (CIMO) has been set up under the auspices of the Ministry of education to deal with both outgoing and incoming mobility in the educational sector.

A major evaluation of placement projects was undertaken as part of the valorisation of the outcomes of the first phase of the Leonardo da Vinci programme in Finland.

1.6.2.3. France

There are no major national initiatives in France to promote placements abroad in the context of VET, and the Leonardo programme remains the major player. Exceptions to this are the programmes of the Franco-German Youth Office and the secretariat for exchanges in the field of VET, which were set up in 1963 and 1980 respectively. At regional level, several *conseils régionaux* are taking an active interest in promoting mobility, and have either earmarked funds to cofinance Leonardo projects, or set up their own mobility programmes for VET (e.g. Ile de France).

The French labour market authorities (ANPE - *Agence Nationale Pour l'Emploi*) have set up an interesting mobility initiative, originally funded through the EU Social Fund initiative Adapt (the STEER project). This concerns workers who have become unemployed through structural changes in the labour market. These are given the possibility to undertake a work placement abroad as part of a retraining activity for occupations that involve international contacts.

1.6.3. Belgium, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg and Norway

This cluster is rather heterogeneous in its composition. The unifying trait for countries in this cluster is that placements abroad in the context of VET are mainly introduced and supported through the European programmes. Two of the countries are atypical: Greece and Ireland. Both countries have had large national mobility programmes (ELPAEK and Wider horizons). These have been financed to a large extent from extra-national sources, however, and have been single initiatives and not part of any concerted policy. Luxembourg is also a case apart; due to the small size of the country and the limited possibilities for offering the full range of training programmes, a significant number of apprentices go to the neighbouring countries to do either their placements or the theoretical study. This seems to be driven out of necessity rather than virtue, however, and there is little interest in mobility in VET generally. For three of the countries – Belgium, Greece and Ireland – VET is generally perceived as inferior in status compared to other types of education.

1.6.3.1. *Belgium*

There are few mobility activities in VET outside of European programmes. The national labour market authorities in both the French and the Flemish speaking parts of Belgium are, however, actively involved as project promoters in the organisation and implementation of mobility projects for young workers. They use considerable resources in terms of manpower to organise these, even though the impetus, as well as much of the funding for the placement itself, comes from Leonardo. The target group is unemployed persons for whom participation in a placement project abroad is seen as a means of personal and vocational development.

1.6.3.2. *Greece*

With one notable exception, the programmes of the European Union have provided the major incentive for mobility within the context of VET. The exception concerns a special action called ‘mobility programmes’ within the framework of the operational plan for education and initial vocational training, which was created for the years 1995-99 with a budget allocation of nearly EUR 31 million. The programme (or programmes) covered short-term placements and school stays for both students and teachers, and did not only fund mobility in Europe, but also inside Greece. Thus of the total of 15 598 students, 9 072 went to countries outside of Greece, whereas 6 526 travelled within the country.

A few smaller mobility programmes in the framework of cultural agreements can also be used by students in VET, but the number actually

doing so is very small (approximately 200 students annually).

1.6.3.3. *Iceland*

Traditionally, many young Icelanders have gone abroad to work or study, notably to other Scandinavian countries. Many still do, and in the area of VET, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden each offer between three and seven grants for young Icelanders every year to do vocational training. There are, however, no national programmes to promote mobility as a didactic tool in VET or offer funding possibilities, and the only structured possibilities are offered by the Leonardo programme and the Nordic programmes (Nordjobb, Nordplus Junior).

1.6.3.4. *Ireland*

Besides European programmes, the major mobility initiative in Ireland has been the Wider horizons programme, which was set up in the framework of the International fund for Ireland, established 1986 by the British and Irish governments with contributions from the European Union, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the US. The aim of the programme is to send mixed groups of young people from Ireland and Northern Ireland abroad on placements in order to promote economic and social advance through skills acquisition, and to encourage contact dialogue and reconciliation between the North and the South. Since 1987, the programme has facilitated placements for some 11 000 participants in the age bracket from 16 to 28. The typical group size has been 20 participants.

Leargas - formerly the Youth Exchange Bureau - has been active in promoting mobility through material and training courses for project organisers. Leargas is coordinating the Leonardo programme, the Socrates and the Youth programmes of the European Commission, as well as a number of other internationalisation activities under the auspices of the Ministry of Education.

1.6.3.5. *Luxembourg*

Luxembourg has certain natural preconditions for mobility, being a small country, which cannot offer the whole range of courses in education and training. As, for example, there are practically no institutions offering higher education, anybody wanting a university degree will have to go abroad. There are, consequently, many students from Luxembourg in nearby universities in Belgium, France and Germany. The same goes for initial vocational training, where several courses are not offered, or the companies needed for the mandatory work placements simply not found within Luxembourg itself.

Young people wishing to be trained here consequently have to do so abroad, usually in one of the neighbouring countries (Germany and France). Provisions have been made for apprentices to do combined apprenticeships, where the theoretical part of their training is done in Luxembourg and the practical part in a neighbouring country, or the other way round. In the year 2000, 58 young people did so in Germany, while 13 chose France. To this can be added the fact that most young people in Luxembourg are practically trilingual, with proficiency in German and French as well as the native Letzeburgesch. This removes some of the linguistic barriers to participation in placement projects abroad.

In spite of these factors, mobility in Luxembourg is quite low, and the national agency for the Leonardo programme reports that it has to send money back to Brussels every year from the mobility strands because of a lack of applications. Besides the Leonardo programme, young people in initial vocational training have since 1996 also had the opportunity to participate in the activities organised by the Franco-German secretariat for exchanges in the field of VET. Funding for these projects is provided by the government. Annually some 30 young people participate in placement projects of a minimum duration of three weeks.

1.6.3.6. *Norway*

Internationalisation - and mobility - is an issue in debates on VET policy in Norway, and there are currently discussions about creating a national mobility programme for VET along the lines followed by Denmark and Sweden. To date, however, the only sources of funding dedicated to mobility are the Leonardo and the Nordic programmes, and (as of 2003) a binational placement programme with Germany.

1.6.4. **Britain, Italy, Portugal and Spain**

In this cluster there is little or no activity outside of the Leonardo da Vinci programme. Also common to this cluster of countries is that VET generally has a low esteem, and that apprenticeship is not very widespread.

1.6.4.1. *Britain*

Very little activity is recorded for Britain basically mobility is not an issue in VET politics, and what activity there is seems to be almost purely funding driven and synonymous with the Leonardo programme. The only activity outside of the Leonardo programme is the small Training Bridges programme with Germany, which only has a very small budget. Britain, however, is the most popular host country by far, for obvious (linguistic) reasons.

A contributing factor to the low activity level is that the interest among students/apprentices for going abroad seems very low, and that it often is a problem to find participants for mobility projects. This is coupled with a very low interest in learning foreign languages.

With its competence-based VET-system, there are good possibilities for incorporating placements abroad in the portfolio leading to recognised qualifications within the NVQ/GNVQ framework. Some isolated projects have experimented with this.

1.6.4.2. *Italy*

For a long time, VET in Italy has been mainly school-based and the role of placements and work experience has been limited. Consequently, there has also been no national strategy for mobility in the shape of placements abroad, and the only structured possibility comes with the Leonardo programme.

The national institute for research in VET (ISFOL) has carried out a large study of the role of enterprises in mobility, both in sending and hosting, and has tried to define strategies for a more active involvement of these in mobility projects.

1.6.4.3. *Portugal*

Only Leonardo activities are recorded. As in Germany, the national agency has organised national seminars for the Leonardo da Vinci funded projects in order to exchange experience, build networks and discuss matters of national concern.

1.6.4.4. *Spain*

The importance of educational stays abroad is inscribed in the national policy guidelines for VET, but the Leonardo programme remains the only source of funding. There is no report of mobility activities in VET having been funded through other national or European programmes.

1.6.5. **Placements abroad in national VET policies**

Generally, there is a growing tendency to accept placement projects as an integral part of VET systems in Europe. This tendency goes hand-in-hand with an increased awareness of the importance of the type of skills commonly presumed to develop in placement projects on the one hand, and the merits of learning acquired in non-formal circumstances on the other. It is now possible, at least on a project basis, to incorporate placements abroad in the VET systems of all the countries concerned, and it happens with increasing frequency.

Any estimate of the annual total number of people undertaking a placement abroad for the 17 countries involved in this exercise must necessarily be inaccurate and largely based on guesswork due to the unavailability of data. On the basis of what we have, however, the author of this study estimates that the total participation in VET placements abroad (including spontaneous mobility by individuals and companies without programme funding, and projects financed through programmes not directly concerned with mobility as a core activity, and thus not registered) is currently around 175 000 per year. As an informed guess, this figure may vary by as much as 20 % on either side. The number is clearly growing, but as long as no effective indicators and monitoring systems have been devised, we have no reliable way of ascertaining exactly by how much. What is clear, however, is that we are dealing with a phenomenon that is quite significant in terms of participation rates and funds invested, and which goes well beyond the Leonardo da Vinci programme.

But even though numbers are increasing, the use of placements abroad in the context of VET is, on the whole, still at an experimental stage, and participation in a mobility project is a realistic opportunity for a minority of students, apprentices and workers in Europe only. With a few notable exceptions, the systems do not make specific provisions for accommodating placements abroad; they merely replace all or parts of already existing placement periods with placements abroad more or less on an ad hoc basis. Also, the level of pedagogical reflection concerning the learning opportunities inherent in this didactic tool is generally low, and there is only little pedagogical support available for project organisers. However, information and advice on organisational and practical matters seems to be readily available in all of the countries encompassed by this study.

1.7. Discourses on the use of placements abroad in VET

The development of the phenomenon over the period since the Second World War – and not least the almost explosive growth within the last decade – trigger some interesting questions; in particular concerning the rationale (or legitimisation) of the activities. Exactly what is/are the line(s) of thinking behind the establishment of programmes, initiatives and projects? The ambiguity between the use of the singular and the plural here is intentional. An analysis of policy papers and other texts related to the subject indicates that the discussion on placements abroad in the context of VET is informed by not one single, but four different discourses which have evolved over the

years in response to various historical and economic circumstances. Neither is the use of the term ‘discourse’ accidental.

Discourse and discourse analysis represent a specific methodology that comes from the field of social constructivism. A discourse is defined as ‘a specific way of seeing the world, or parts thereof’ (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999, p. 9) and as such a way of interpreting a phenomenon, of ascribing meaning to it and explaining its significance. The term was originally introduced by Michel Foucault with his work *The archaeology of knowledge* from 1969, but has since been further developed as an analytic tool by several people, notably by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe whose work *Hegemony and socialist strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001) forms the theoretical background for the approach used in this study. Discourse analysis is about identifying and describing how a specific issue is perceived by different actors, and how these try to impose their perception of ‘reality’ on others, notably through language. Discourses are grounded in historical developments, but do not necessarily supersede each other in a temporal sequence. For any issue there may be several discourses extant at any given moment that compete with each other in order to establish their hegemony; i.e. the power to define what the issue ‘really’ is about. In connection with placements abroad as a pedagogic activity, we have thus identified four discourses, where each discourse represents certain specific preferences for what it is we should learn in terms of skills and attitudes. These preferences will, in turn, lead to specific practices (or ways of organising the learning experience). If we want to understand these preferences and the derived practices, it is therefore necessary to identify and describe the constituting discourses. These four different discourses can be briefly summarised as follows.

- (1) Placements abroad as a means for achieving intercultural understanding. This is about learning how to live peacefully together in Europe and the world and develop a sense of European Citizenship as opposed to a strictly nationalist outlook. It corresponds to the initial thoughts of e.g. Jean Monnet when forging the European Coal and Steel Union in 1951 as a means to promote peace and understanding in a war-torn Europe. Latterly, this discourse has also been used in connection with the fight against racism and xenophobia.
- (2) Placements abroad as a method for promoting the free movement of workers in Europe. This discourse sees placements abroad as learning how to live and work in another country, or how to become a ‘migrant worker’ willing and able to move across borders and thereby allay

skills shortages in other Member States. This corresponds to the thoughts in the Treaty of Rome from 1957 creating the European Economic Communities, where the free circulation of labour across borders was seen as an essential element in the economic development of Europe.

- (3) Placements abroad as an activity linked to the internationalisation of education and training in Europe. According to this discourse, we undertake placements abroad as a response to the globalisation process. First, this enables the future workforce to acquire foreign language proficiency and intercultural skills so that they can deal with increased foreign contacts at the workplace. Second, national educational systems can fill in temporary gaps in their training provision by sending trainees abroad to where such training opportunities exist.
- (4) Placements abroad as a method for acquiring new basic skills and developing employability. Within this discourse the rationale for the activity lies in the use of placements abroad as a didactic tool to equip participants with so called 'key skills' to cope with constant changes in work organisation and career paths arising as a consequence of globalisation and technological change. This corresponds to a focus on education and training as a motor for economic growth, and the aims of the Lisbon declaration concerning the creation of a 'Europe of knowledge'.

It is possible to connect each of the four discourses to specific historical events. Stays abroad as a means for intercultural understanding was an idea that came to the fore in the aftermath of the Second World War, where youth exchange was seen as a means for preventing a similar situation from ever occurring again. Initially, these exchanges were mostly organised within general and higher education and within youth organisations, but later spread to vocational education and training. Placements abroad as a means to promote labour market movement across borders in Europe was put on the agenda in connection with the establishment of what was then known as the European Economic Communities, where migrant workers were seen as a vital element in the economic development of Europe.

Placements abroad as a means for providing access to training that is not available in the home country has deeper roots, since it may be traced back to the medieval tradition of travelling journeymen. These ventured abroad as part of their training to learn about new technical skills that they would later apply in their home country or region. More recently, it can be linked to the

Treaty of Maastricht and the introduction of the European Single Market in the early 1990s. This declared that training as a service provision should be made available across borders, so that European citizens could go anywhere in Europe for training opportunities that either did not exist in the home country or could be better and more cost-efficiently delivered elsewhere. Finally, we have the rationale on education and training that found expression in the Lisbon Declaration (March 2000) with its acknowledgement of the importance of new basic skills and non-formal learning processes in a knowledge society. Here, placements abroad are seen as a means for acquiring certain skills that are deemed important for a European economy affected by the twin processes of globalisation and constant technological change.

The historical origins of these four discourses should not be seen as distinct steps in a temporal line of progression, where one discourse takes over after another has outlived its usefulness. They are all active in different contexts, and continue to appear in both official texts and project documentation. Intercultural understanding, European labour market mobility and internationalisation are still important concerns when speaking about placements abroad in a VET context, along with more recent phrases. We can talk, with Fairclough (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 2002, p. 114) of an 'order of discourse' as a concept that denotes different discourses that are active within the same part of the world, or field. Regarding placements abroad, we find four different discourses that are struggling with one another to define what the phenomenon really is and how its true significance and meaning should be explained.

Within discourse analysis, language holds a special position in how we perceive reality. Discourses are struggling to define words and determine their meaning, and each of them uses a specific vocabulary when explaining practices; specific terms or 'nodal points' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p. 112) that have a privileged position and from where other terms derive their meaning when placed in this context. In the first discourse, it is the term 'exchange'. It is used to denote the practice in general, both when it is reciprocal and when it is only going in one direction; but it implies something that goes in both directions; a process whereby both parties involved give and receive. In the second discourse, the similar nodal point is constituted by the term 'migration', a term that implies physical - geographical - movements and is prevalent in labour market and employment studies. A similar signifier does not really exist in the third discourse, where the practice is couched in rhetoric of 'internationalisation', and 'European space for education and training'. In the fourth discourse, however, the term mobility

(or transnational mobility) has gained widespread currency over the past 10 years. This term denotes an individual ability, an important asset or skill, rather than an exchange or a physical movement.

Each of the four discourses has its own specific context and proponents. The first is linked to youth and youth organisation, as well as general education at primary and lower-secondary level. The second is used in the context of labour market policy and research, whereas the third and fourth are both within education and training. They all come together at the very highest and the very lowest levels, however; i.e. at the level of documents establishing political decisions (e.g. programme preambles) and in the statements of participants and project organisers. Political decisions (which are often the result of compromise) have a tendency to overuse positive statements to the extent that the phenomenon almost seems a panacea to cure all societal ills; in the course of this they borrow indiscriminately from all four discourses. Participants and project promoters (placement organisers), often struggle to distinguish in which discourse a given activity inscribes itself, both due to an opaqueness in the description and to the fact that many terms may be used in different discourses - so called 'floating signifiers' (Laclau, 1990, p. 28). When a project promoter writes that participation has greatly 'broadened the horizon' and 'improved foreign language capacity' we could be in any of the four discourses. Only a closer analysis of the activity and the statements may disclose what is actually meant by this, what constitutes the ulterior aims of this learning, in so far as this is possible, as practitioners do not always have a clear insight into the mechanisms and connections that ultimately direct their activities. A further complication arises because discourses are not static entities. They stand in an unstable relation to one another, and may absorb elements from each other in the struggle for supremacy, for the right to define meaning. We should therefore view the discourses as analytic constructs, as a framework for the analysis of the phenomenon, rather than clear and unequivocal entities in real life.

Discourse analysis as a method can tell us something about how stakeholders view the phenomenon, and help us clarify our own position in relation to this. By comparing discourses and practices, we may come to accept the discourse we stand in ourselves as a social construct and see it in relation to other social constructs. We may open our minds to new conceptions of what can be, e.g. by transferring elements from one discourse to the other, and, in doing so, change and develop the discourse. In the following we will go through each of the four discourses and try to describe their characteristics with regard to both rhetoric and practice.

1.7.1. Placements abroad as a means for promoting intercultural understanding

That a stay in another country, especially when undertaken in the formative years, can provide an understanding for other peoples and cultures, and thus help prevent national chauvinism and ultimately international crises and war, is no new thought. It gained particular currency after the two world wars last century, and especially in the aftermath of World War II, where a large number of exchange organisations were set up to provide opportunities and funding for young people to go abroad for international experiences of various kinds. The learning outcome of these stays - intercultural understanding - has been defined, in the words of the Franco-German Youth Office, as ‘... the ability to perceive the interests of the partner as well as one’s own, to relate them to one another, to discuss them openly and to handle possible conflicts. It demands the realisation of one’s own prejudices as well as those of others, self-criticism, and a responsive attitude to criticism from others.’⁽¹⁰⁾ The term ‘intercultural learning’ is often used to denote the kind of learning leading to an increased understanding of the cultures of other nations. The origins of this term are not known, but it seems first to have been used by AFS (the American Field Service), which was one of the first organisations that used international exchange as a pedagogic method for intercultural understanding. The organisation was set up by ex-American servicemen after WWI to provide opportunities (predominantly) for school stays abroad for young people. AFS is now one of the largest organisations of its kind, and operates all over the world. Its mission statement reads:

‘AFS ... provides intercultural learning opportunities to help people develop the knowledge, skills and understanding needed to create a more just and peaceful world’⁽¹¹⁾.

AFS is one of many organisations operating within this discourse, most of which relate to youth and general education. Placements abroad seem to be covered by this only by default. An example, which specifically targets placements abroad, is furnished by the organisation AIESEC. AIESEC⁽¹²⁾ was set up under the aegis of Unesco in the late 1940s and organises exchanges of students in the various commercial fields. In a similar fashion, it declares its philosophy as:

⁽¹⁰⁾ Translated from German by the author. From Richtlinien des DFJW (www.dfjw.org) [cited 4.3.2004].

⁽¹¹⁾ From the introduction to the AFS website [cited 4.3.2004].

⁽¹²⁾ Association Internationale pour l’Echange des Etudiants en Commerce.

‘Behind everything we do is our mission: to contribute to the development of our countries and their people with an overriding commitment to international understanding and cooperation’ (13).

A further example is provided by the Franco-German Youth Office (FGYO), which was set up as a binational organisation in 1963 to improve relations between the two countries. Article 2 of the Treaty establishing the FGYO states its aims as assigned by the two governments:

- development of closer links between the young populations of both countries;
- deepening of mutual understanding;
- encouragement, promotion and implementation of contacts and exchanges of young people (Reichel, 1999).

The value of intercultural learning has since become accepted on a broader basis as not only pertinent to international relations, but increasingly in a national context due to immigration and the consequent the emergence of xenophobia and racism as everyday occurrences:

‘The societies in which we live in Europe have become increasingly multicultural during the second half of this century. Migration, whether economically or politically motivated, continues to change the face and the faces of these societies. Exchanges, by bringing together young people from different cultures for a short period of time, are one of the many ways in which we can begin to understand and to learn about the possibilities for cooperation and conflict in this changing Europe’ (*Improving the quality of youth exchanges ...*, 1992, p. 15).

Significant in this context is the term exchange, which is usually employed as a designator for what these organisations do. Exchange does not necessarily mean that every project has in it a return visit, an element of reciprocity at physical level. Many projects go in one direction only. Exchange however, signifies that something goes in both directions - in this context intercultural understanding - and moreover something that is of equal value, where both sender and receiver benefit. This is a connotation that is not included in the term ‘mobility’, which does not involve more than one person; it is basically a skill owned by an individual.

Traditionally, these intercultural encounters have assumed two forms. One consists of individual school stays, where a student/pupil has gone abroad to spend a longer period of time (usually one academic year) (14) at an

(13) From introduction to AIESEC website [cited 4.3.2004].

(14) See Englert (1996) for an overview of how many organisations offer these stays in Germany alone.

educational establishment abroad. This happens in upper secondary education, when the participant is in the age bracket 16-18, and the stay is, as a rule, not recognised as part of their course. A large number of organisations exist that offer to organise these school stays. The USA is the most popular target country, even though it is possible to undertake such a stay in any continent.

The second consists of group stays, usually of a short duration (a couple of days and up to three weeks) that are typically undertaken in the context of youth organisations (i.e. outside of the formal educational system). Such encounters are eligible for funding under the European Commission's Youth for Europe programme, and constitute the majority of the activities funded by the Franco-German Youth Office. In this type of encounter, the participants usually meet a similar group from the target country, and they carry out some kind of activity with their peers from here (e.g. a play, a sports event, a musical performance).

A special category are the 'work camps', where young people from a large number of countries jointly carry out a piece of work that otherwise would not be undertaken. This could involve clearing a trail through an inaccessible tract of forest, thereby opening it for recreational purposes, building a playground in a deprived area, etc. The tasks undertaken are of a character where no vocational qualifications are required. Another kind of activity that may be included in this category – albeit somewhat atypical in comparison with the rest – are the *au pair* placements, where young people (primarily girls) are accepted in the house of a family in another country than their own and perform light household chores in exchange for board and lodging and the possibility to follow language courses. These stays are undertaken 'to improve their linguistic and possibly professional knowledge as well as their general culture by acquiring a better knowledge of the country where they are received' (*European agreement on au pair placement* Council of Europe, 1969, p. 3).

The basic idea underlying these intercultural (or cross-cultural) encounters has been called the 'contact hypothesis'; a concept which has been summarised by Thomas (1994, p. 228) as follows: 'Through the contact between two different groups, possibly prejudiced against one another, increasing interaction between the members of the groups will lead to cumulative and differentiated knowledge of one another. This will increase perceived similarities and intensify feelings of mutual sympathy, whereby prejudices are de-constructed'⁽¹⁵⁾. Because of the somewhat sweeping statement that all contact will lead to improved relations, it is also sometimes

⁽¹⁵⁾ Translated from German by the author.

referred to as the ‘to-know-them-is-to-love-them’ hypothesis. In this spirit, young people from different countries are brought together in the framework of a joint project (a sports tournament, an amateur theatre festival, a scout camp, school exchanges, etc.) and a harmonious atmosphere is created where they can explore common ground and develop a sense of solidarity and understanding. The preparation seminar is significant as a means for coaching participants to avoid conflicts that could otherwise diminish the development of harmony among the different cultures. The contact hypothesis in its most crude and unreflected form has been challenged from within, however. In an article (Reichel, 1999) written on the occasion of the 35 year anniversary of the FGYO, Dieter Reichel comments on the initial failure of the measures to have any noticeable impact on the relations between young people from the two countries:

‘But what can we do in order to live together in peace? The first answer given in the (ongoing) process of reflection and development of intercultural learning pedagogy was: simply get young people from both countries together, and this takes care of the rest. This view soon turned out to be too naive. It goes without saying that there was much sympathy on both sides, and many lasting friendships were formed. Yet, many intercultural encounters were deemed ‘quite nice’, but had no impact. The organisers even found that prejudices or pre-prejudices young people had about each other were strengthened in the negative sense. Why were the programmers not more successful? The simplest answer is that the organisers’ fervent desire to do something for Franco-German friendship had made them focus on the common interests of people and cultures. This strategy was based on the insight that conflicts are caused by differences in culture and ideology, in everyday life, but also regarding claims to power and possession. The differences were obviously concealed to such an extent that it was impossible to learn how to handle them, i.e. to accept them and to concede that others might have a different view. Participants had no chance to get on the difficult path of learning how to live with these differences instead of going round the bend.’ (Reichel, 1999, pp. 247-248).

Reichel’s point here is that not all cross-cultural encounters will automatically lead to an intercultural learning process. Others (e.g. Thomas 1994, p. 236) have also pointed out that only under special circumstances will intercultural encounters have these effects. There is quite an extensive research on processes of ‘intercultural learning’ or ‘intercultural communication’ in the context of youth encounters and the conditions that are necessary for this to happen. In Europe, this research is mainly focused

round (and largely financed by) the Franco-German Youth Office ⁽¹⁶⁾, but also within the framework of the Council of Europe significant work has been undertaken. There is very little research, basic or applied, that specifically deals with placements abroad, however. In a small, but instructive, evaluation study of a three-week work placement of German apprentices in Ireland, the authors (Stahl and Kalchschmid, 2000) look at aspects of intercultural understanding and conclude that even though there is a potential for intercultural learning in this type of stay abroad, it is by no means an automatic process, and the outcome may actually go both ways. Even though some prejudices were diminished or done away with altogether as a result of the stay, others were strengthened, and new ones were actually seen to emerge. Partly based on the work of the Israeli psychologist Yehuda Amir (Amir, 1969) and others, they enumerate seven preconditions that are to be present for an intercultural learning process to be successful. These are:

- (a) equality in terms of status, i.e. similar socio-economic status of the participants;
- (b) convergence of aims, i.e. common aims and interests in the participants;
- (c) appropriate attitudes prior to implementation, i.e. no overly negative attitudes towards people from the other culture;
- (d) appropriate contact intensity and length, i.e. the contacts should last for a certain period and must not be superficial in nature;
- (e) low cultural barriers, i.e. no insuperable cultural barriers;
- (f) social and institutional back-up, i.e. the existence of an integrative institutional framework and a climate of mutual back-up;
- (g) appropriate preparation, i.e. linguistic and cultural preparation of participants.

(Stahl and Kalchschmid, 2000, p. 22)

The project concerning German apprentices in Ireland is not an exchange in the literal sense of the word in that the study only comprises German apprentices going to the Republic of Ireland. The term participants refers to the sending and hosting sides involved in the project, i.e. both the German apprentices and the Irish employees in the companies hosting the placement.

⁽¹⁶⁾ For an overview of the research here, see Dible and Wulf (1999), Colin and Müller (1998) and Hess and Wulf (1999).

The evaluation of Stahl and Kalchschmid is interesting in that it is one of the few pieces of research within the discourse of intercultural learning that takes a work placement project as its medium, and tries to test this against the contact hypothesis. This can probably be explained by the fact that placements abroad do not constitute a very prominent activity within this discourse. Even though some of the activities/exchanges undertaken by traditional exchange organisations have a vocational element, this is not the predominant mode. Exceptions are the activities of the organisations AIESEC (see above) and IAESTE⁽¹⁷⁾, which organise long-term work placements for students in higher education. Other organisations have moved with the times and developed vocational exchanges as funding possibilities for these became available. This is true of AFS, which organises work placements abroad with funding from the Leonardo programme, and the FGYO, which funds, and also organises, placement projects⁽¹⁸⁾.

It can always be debated whether youth exchange in general really does result in increased intercultural understanding. Detractors can cite several examples from recent European history, where population groups with different cultural orientations have suddenly turned upon each other with disastrous consequences, despite a long history of peaceful coexistence and common projects. Given the fact that the practice of exchange has continued, and indeed grown and developed, over the last 50 years, however, it seems that a sufficient number of policy-makers, investors, parents and others have enough faith in the beneficial effects to keep it alive and thriving. Specifically for the practice of placements abroad as a particular form of intercultural encounter, however, it is interesting to discuss the extent to which this actually is conducive to the development of intercultural understanding. When held up against the seven conditions enumerated by Stahl and Kalchschmid, it is obvious that certain of these are can only be present to a limited degree in a placement, and some possibly not at all.

First, the participant will not be with a peer group. He or she will participate in a community of practice centred round a specific task, but there will be significant differences in term of age and power/status, and consequently also in aims. The host company may appoint a mentor to help with overall integration into the work processes, but generally there will not

⁽¹⁷⁾ International association for the exchange of students of technical experience. An organisation similar to AIESEC, but with a target group of students in higher technical education. Also set up under the aegis of Unesco in the late 1940s.

⁽¹⁸⁾ E.g. within the programme *Stages pour jeunes en situation precaire* set up by the FGYO with additional funding from the European Social Fund.

be trained staff available to monitor the intercultural learning process on a continuing basis. The setting will not be specifically constructed to promote intercultural learning, and there will be a significant pressure to comply with the requirements of the production, which can lead to stress and tension in peak periods ⁽¹⁹⁾. At the work place, there is often, due to the pressure, a tradition for ‘instant assessment’ – i.e. those who are seen to make mistakes and disrupt or hold up work processes are immediately reprimanded. Delivered across cultural divides and language barriers, this will often strike harder than intended, leading to frustration and anger. Amir, in his original paper from 1969, mentions as a specific unfavourable factor ‘... when the contact is unpleasant, involuntary, tension laden ... when the prestige or status of one group is lowered as the result of the contact situation ... when members of the group or the group as a whole are in a state of frustration ...’ (Amir, 1969, p. 338). This point is not included on Stahl and Kalchschmid’s list, but would seem highly pertinent here. All this should be coupled with the fact that the participant *a priori* is in a vulnerable position, being younger, less experienced and away from his usual sources of help and support. Moreover, he or she is at a disadvantage both culturally and linguistically. In comparison with another type of exchange, which also has a ‘vocational’ component, namely the work camps mentioned earlier, the differences are significant. Here the participant is together with a group of young people in a similar situation, often from many different countries (equality of status, convergence of aims), there is staff available trained in intercultural encounters, and the emphasis is on process rather than product, eliminating a powerful incentive for stress and frustration.

There is a further point in Amir’s original paper, which only to a limited degree is reflected in the seven conditions mentioned by Stahl and Kalchschmid. Amir (1969, p. 338) mentions it as a favourable condition for intercultural learning ‘... when the members of both groups in the particular contact situation interact in functionally important activities’. This is where placements have an edge when compared to other types of encounters, where tasks are often artificially constructed, and therefore may not be seen as functional by the participants. In a placement, they are engaged in real production (or at least in a production environment). On the whole, however, the claim of the discourse of intercultural understanding to represent placements abroad along with other types on intercultural encounters is not

⁽¹⁹⁾ Or, potentially worse, the participant is not involved in the production process at all, but left to fend for himself in a corner with some trivial tasks, or restricted to peering over the shoulders of busy colleagues.

unproblematic. When held up against the seven conditions enumerated by Stahl and Kalchschmid (and the additional two from Amir), placements may not come across as the most efficient tool. The risk of negative consequences remains high, especially when we go outside the group of well-functioning and adaptable young people and involve disadvantaged groups, as many programme preambles exhort us to do. But even for normal, well-functioning young people the risk for misfire is always present. This is often quite evident in uncensored participant reports, which can include quite astounding statements on the achievements in terms of intercultural understanding. One such example is the Danish apprentice on a long-term(!) placements in Germany, quoted in the evaluation of the PIU-programme: 'I've had enough of Germans for quite a good few years to come' (Sølvmoose et al., 2000, p.37).

Stahl and Kalchschmid's conclusion of their evaluation study is that placements abroad may be used as a tool for intercultural learning, but that this does not happen automatically. Special attention must be paid to the preparation, the accompanying measures during the stay, and the follow up if it is to be successful. Preparation was also included as one of the seven conditions for learning; and overall, this discourse is characterised by a strong emphasis on preparation as a way of avoiding conflict that may disrupt the peaceful and harmonious ambience that projects strive to create. It is typical that in a recent article on quality in mobility financed by the Leonardo da Vinci programme in Germany (Alexander et al., 2003, pp. 31-33), written by an employee of the Franco-German Youth Office and authors involved in FGYO activities, preparation is seen as the absolutely crucial element, even to the exclusion of other criteria. Much energy has consequently been devoted to devising preparation material and techniques within this discourse (see e.g. *Training Resources ...*, 1992; *Intercultural Learning ...*, 2003).

What is especially interesting to note here in terms of discourse analysis is how a vast amount of material and recorded experience on how to handle cultural conflicts proactively in the form of preparation, developed in the context of youth and school exchanges, apparently has failed to have much of an impact on practices recorded within other discourses. Stahl and Kalchschmid's study seems to be one of few examples where it has been applied to a typical mobility project in a VET-context. Despite operating in a different discourse, and consequently in a different logic and environment, it would seem evident that some of the theoretical work, plus experiences harvested and material developed, could be useful in this context. But there seems to be very little spill-over from this to other discourses, as is evident

from a survey involving about 60 % of all participants from the 1987 group of participants in the Young workers' exchange programme (see below). In here, it is noted that 'Of 591 participants, only 156 (26.4 %) said that they had taken part in any organised preparation' (*Third joint programme ...*, 1989). This is echoed in an evaluation of strand 1b (placements of young workers) from 1992, which states that '... it is somewhat surprising to find that 56.5 % considered that they did not receive such preparatory activities' (NI-CO education services et al., 1994). Preparation has clearly not been accorded the same importance here as in exchanges carried out in a discourse on intercultural understanding. A further characteristic of practice within this discourse is the strong focus on youth here, almost to the exclusion of other target groups. Much of the material produced within this discourse is directly addressed to young people as the primary target group, and then to youth workers as the secondary group (see e.g. *Working our way to Europe*, [n.d.]; *Intercultural Learning*, 2003).

1.7.2. Placements abroad as a means of promoting European labour market mobility

The free movement of persons - and especially workers - is one of the four cornerstones on which the European house was originally built. The existence of a mobile labour force willing and able to move across borders in search of employment was considered vital to the development of the European economy in 1957 ⁽²⁰⁾, when the Treaty of Rome was signed. Since then, massive efforts have been directed at removing technical (legal and administrative) barriers to the free movement of workers. With the (partial) exception of the recognition of qualifications from other Member States, these barriers have now largely been deconstructed (Werner, 1996), a feat which constitutes one of the most impressive elements in the *acquis communautaire*.

Not all barriers to mobility are external, however. Some may be of a mental nature, and the question, then, is how to deconstruct these. It would appear logical to assume that a temporary stay abroad in the formative years would provide learning and encouragement to look for and take up employment in another country later. A similar idea of causality forms the

⁽²⁰⁾ E.g. as expressed in the Commission's *Report of the high level panel on the free movement of persons* (Commission of the European Communities, 1998, p. 15): 'It must not be forgotten that the free movement of persons was considered originally as an economic phenomenon. It was the mobility of human resources as a factor of production which inspired the chapters of the EEC-Treaty relating to the free movement of workers, freedom of establishment and, to a certain extent, the freedom to provide certain services'.

rationale of the oldest mobility programme of the European Communities, the Young workers' exchange programme (YWEP), set up in 1964, initially as a relatively modest activity, but later enlarged in scope as it became part of the Petra and, eventually, the Leonardo programmes. The establishment of the programme followed directly from the Treaty of Rome, where article 50 (article 41 in the consolidated version) in the section on the free movement of workers states that:

'Member States shall, within the framework of a joint programme, encourage the exchange of young workers'.

Another significant European-level initiative, set up by the national labour market authorities in 10 European countries (Member States) and financed from the structural funds – Euroqualification – functioned from 1992-95 with exactly the same purpose. Through this initiative, some 3 000 participants from all participating countries were sent on work placements abroad in order to prepare them for later employment in another country than their own (Mellet d'Huart, 1998).

Within this discourse, the claim is made that the main rationale for placement programmes is their effect on European labour market mobility. A fairly recent study of this thus states: 'In order to promote the mobility within a common market, a series of programmes have been initiated by the European Commission since the late 1980s. The programmes such as Socrates (with Erasmus, Lingua) and Leonardo (with Comett, Petra, Lingua, Force) have the aim of promoting the future mobility via the international exchange of students, teaching staff, and, to a lesser extent, young working people and trainees' (Tassinopoulos and Werner, 1998, p. 22).

Some evaluations undertaken of placement projects would seem to corroborate that these programmes have precisely this effect. A European-level evaluation of participants of Petra 1b-placements (young workers) indicated that nearly 85 % of the participants were ready and willing to take up a job abroad after having returned from their placement (*A report on the implementation in 1992/93 ...*, 1994). But does this also mean that they actually go abroad later in their careers to take up employment? Given nearly 40 years of experience with placement programmes within the context of Europe, we are justified in asking whether this has had any measurable impact on European labour market mobility.

This is a tricky question to answer, in so far as the mobility programme is only one element - and a fairly small one at that - in a total package of policies and actions taken to facilitate mobility in an EU context.

Other elements include: the establishment of the EURES ⁽²¹⁾ network of European job centres to mediate concrete offers of employment and employment related information across borders; the implementation of various council decisions concerning transferability of social security rights; the efforts of harmonisation and transparency of formal qualifications; and the abolition of numerous other obstacles and barriers of a legal and administrative nature. It is difficult to isolate any one element and measure its effect from a global viewpoint. One approach is to take one or more concrete mobility measures as a point of departure and, via a longitudinal study of the participants' later career trajectories, try to measure how, and to what extent, participation in a project involving a placement abroad has resulted in employment in another country. Studies of this kind are rare, however, since effects may be slow to manifest themselves and, therefore, demand a commitment over a period of several years in order to yield valid statements.

In a study undertaken by Busse and Fahle (1998), a sample of German participants in several VET placement programmes ⁽²²⁾ from the years 1988 and onwards were sent a questionnaire containing 32 questions on their career after participation in a mobility project. The participants were either enrolled in an initial VET course or in the labour market (employed or unemployed). For the EU programmes, a stochastic selection was made, whereby a full group of participants in the national programmes (see below) were sent a questionnaire. In total 1 007 participants were selected, 205 of which were not traceable. Of the remaining 802 participants, 403 returned the questionnaire. All participants involved had spent at least 12 weeks abroad, and 37 % of the respondents participated in projects of more than 6 months. The questionnaire was primarily concerned with the learning contents (one of the very few studies to do so), and did not specifically ask for details of any subsequent experiences abroad. The researchers note, however, that 48 of the returned questionnaires were sent from abroad or gave a foreign contact address. This means that 12 % of the participants were probably residing in a country other than their own at the time the questionnaire was sent out, even though it is not possible to ascertain whether this was for work, study or other purposes.

A similar, but more comprehensive (European-level) study undertaken by Maiworm and Teichler (1994, 1996) concerns the experiences of participants

⁽²¹⁾ Acronym for EUROpean Employment Service.

⁽²²⁾ The EU programmes Young workers' exchange programme, Petra II and Leonardo da Vinci, and the national (German) programme Besondere Fachgebiete and the placements financed by the Hermann Strenger Stiftung.

in the Erasmus mobility programme for students in higher education. Over a period of 3 (5) years they followed the careers of all Erasmus students in Europe who spent a long-term period of study (average duration 7.3 months) in another Member State during the academic year 1988-89. The full group of nearly 5 000 students was sent an initial questionnaire in the winter 1989-90, i.e. immediately upon homecoming. The 3 212 participants who responded and declared themselves willing to cooperate in the longitudinal study were sent a second questionnaire three years later, to which 1 339 responded. A final follow-up study was undertaken in 1995 of the participants who had responded to the second round, to which 1 234 responses were received. Thus, the former Erasmus students were followed for a period of more than five years after completion of their study period abroad. The impact of their stay abroad on future international mobility would seem substantial: a full 9 % of the respondents were now (five years later) employed in the original host country, while a further 9 % were employed in a country other than the one in which they undertook their study period in. In total, 18 % of all respondents in the 1995 study were working abroad.

The outcome of these studies would seem to testify to the fact that a stay abroad during the formative years provides a powerful incentive for future mobility. However, as Maiworm and Teichler rightly point out, the results can only be indicative. Despite the fact that response rates are satisfactory when compared to similar studies, they still only concern a minority of the former participants. In the context of labour market mobility, this may be interpreted either positively or negatively in the two studies.

In the German study, the fact that 399 participants did not respond might mean that at least some of these had now moved to another country and, therefore, could not be reached via their original contact address. The actual percentage of those living and/or working abroad may therefore possibly be higher than the study indicates. For the Erasmus study, in contrast, it may work the other way. Since all participants received the questionnaires, those not responding might conceivably be those with negative or mixed experiences from their time abroad, and hence not likely to look for career options abroad. Likewise, in the second round, those not responding (even though they had originally agreed to do so) might have failed to respond because they felt that they had no noteworthy long-term effects to report. A survey including all participants (and not just those responding) might, therefore, bring the percentage of participants working abroad much closer to the actual average for all graduates (and not just those with an Erasmus-stay), which lies between 2 and 3 % (Teichler, 2001, p. 5).

The main difficulty with both these studies, however, lies with the target group and not with the response rate. Participants in mobility projects - be they in vocational training, in the labour market, or in higher education - are not randomly picked. There is always some kind of selection procedure and participation is voluntary. In most cases the participants themselves must show a varying degree of initiative to be accepted for participation. It is highly probable that those going abroad are the most adventurous and motivated, those with the best personal and professional skills, and those who are most self-confident and prepared to take risks, i.e. exactly those who under any circumstances would show a greater willingness to look for work abroad than the average student. It is doubtful whether we can conclude anything definite about the correlation between participation in a mobility project and subsequent labour market mobility. In order to validate the findings, we would need a control group to compare with; an undertaking that for ethical reasons is not feasible (the 'counter factual' problem).

Despite 40 years of European mobility programmes in an education and training context, however, and despite all the efforts made at political level to eliminate legal and administrative barriers to European labour market mobility, the scale of labour force mobility across the EU is relatively limited. In 1995, less than 2 % of the European labour force lived in an EU country other than the one in which they were born ⁽²³⁾. The German economist Heinz Werner (1996) has pointed to a number of macro- and microeconomic explanations for this lack of mobility. At macroeconomic level, he points to developments in industry and trade as well as the redistribution of funds taking place in the framework of the Regional Fund, which have prevented the creation of a 'prosperity gap' and deactivated the traditional push and pull factors of migration (Werner, 1996, pp. 7-8). At microeconomic level, he points to the fact that migration is often connected with significant costs for the individual, e.g. in connection with the selling and buying of property, etc.

Other studies have focused more on other types of barrier: still existing legal and administrative problems (in particular regarding the recognition of qualifications acquired abroad), language barriers, and the problems of getting adequate information on opportunities in other Member States ⁽²⁴⁾. Others again draw attention to even more basic psychological factors. Farla and Meijers (1995, p. 28) in a study on the impact at national level of

⁽²³⁾ European labour force survey 1995, conducted by Eurostat.

⁽²⁴⁾ E.g. the work of the High level panel (see above) and the subsequent follow-up, the *Commission's action plan on skills and mobility* from 2002.

European VET programmes, draw a parallel with the situation in the Netherlands, where migration within the country itself is very low. They conclude: ‘... it seems unrealistic to expect cross-border mobility to be any different. The vast majority of employees will only consider emigration (either temporarily or otherwise) in cases of extreme need (in particular once they have started a family)’.

In an attempt to obtain more detailed information on mobility (migration) within the European Union, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) commissioned three studies in the year 2000 which were to shed light on labour market migration within the sectors of tourism, health, and the chemicals industry (Skar, 2001; Rolfe, 2001; Richards, 2001). The studies have a special focus on the role of transparency and recognition, but have important messages on migration and mobility in general. Thus the study of the health sector seems to indicate that even full recognition of diplomas across Europe will not bring about any increase in migratory movements. The nursing profession is actually one of the very few where qualifications achieved in one Member State are recognised in others, since courses are harmonised across the EU ⁽²⁵⁾. Movements across borders in all three sectors remain very low. The two other studies indicate some interesting trends, however. It would seem that ‘traditional’ migration in the sense of a worker moving from one country to another to take up employment on a more or less permanent basis, is extremely rare. Temporary migration, however, does occur for two groups. Both the chemicals and the tourism sector report of a rise in temporary postings abroad within multinational companies and/or ‘global players’. Employees at executive level or highly specialised technicians are moved across borders between production plants or tourism resorts belonging to the same company, either as part of an individual career plan or to solve specific tasks for which no expertise is available on site. Other studies seem to indicate that this is a steadily growing trend in Europe. The other group for which cross-border movements are reported occurs within the tourism sector, where young people (often students) go abroad for a period of time, either immediately after their studies or during a study break, with a view to ‘seeing the world’. In order to finance this, they find employment in hotels, restaurants and bars, etc., where skill requirements are low and where the main asset is a

⁽²⁵⁾ This, however, does not happen automatically. There is a somewhat complicated recognition procedure, and moreover the host country may demand adequate linguistic abilities before issuing an authorisation. In principle, however, nurses should be able to exercise their profession freely inside the European Union.

willingness to work long hours under uncomfortable conditions and for a low wage.

Meanwhile, the official view on cross-border mobility has changed somewhat, from being a means for macroeconomic adjustment into an instrument for micro-economic capacity development of individuals. The European Commission's yearbook *Employment in Europe* (1993, p. 82) thus states that:

'In practice, Community policy is based on capital flows being the primary means towards convergence rather than labour movements. Mobility is viewed more as a means of widening the career opportunities for individuals, wherever they happen to live, rather than a mechanism of labour market adjustment. Indeed, there are compelling reasons why substantial movement of labour from depressed to prosperous regions is likely to prove undesirable, not least because of the cumulative loss of incomes in the former region and the additional pressure on social and physical infrastructure in the latter which tends to result.'

There is an interesting linguistic complement to this policy change. In the early days, free movement of persons was spoken about in terms of 'migration', i.e. the physical act of moving from one place to another. This word has by now almost entirely disappeared from official documents dealing with intra-EU movements of persons across borders, and has been replaced by the word 'mobility', which denotes an ability to move, and not the actual act of moving itself; the propensity and ability of an individual rather than an aspect of the labour market.

In light of the above, the claim of this discourse to represent the rationale for transnational placement activities would seem somewhat weak: European labour market mobility has not increased despite many years of placement activities, and the causal link between participation in a placement abroad and later cross-border labour market mobility is tenuous. No doubt the experience from the participation in a placement abroad is useful for somebody going abroad to work, but it is difficult to argue that this will have been the main motivation for doing so. Yet the argument is still used (Tassinopoulos and Werner, see above), and placement activities are still carried out with this as the main rationale (see Euroqualification).

Moving within this discourse has also certain implications for practice, which can be summed up in the word 'engineering'. The principal success criteria for the placements is that participants have a positive experience that can remove any fears they may have about going abroad to work later in their careers, and also to prepare them for this by improving their foreign language proficiency and intercultural skills. Therefore practice here is mainly about

removing obstacles or problems that may frustrate and trouble participants. Examples are legal and administrative matters, housing, social security, etc., whereas ‘culture’ in the sense of cultural differences that may give rise to frustration and conflicts, is largely absent as element in this discourse. This is a very practical task, and the term ‘engineering’ is therefore fitting to describe it. The word is used by practitioners within this discourse themselves; the impressive manual for the Euroqualification initiative (1995) is thus described as *une ingénierie transnationale de formation* (transnational training engineering). Learning, then, once these engineering aspects are in place, will follow more or less automatically.

1.7.3. Placements abroad as an element in the process of internationalisation of VET in Europe

The term ‘internationalisation’ in the context of education and training is notoriously difficult to pin down. Many have tried to define it, but there is no commonly accepted definition. Most of the time, it is used somewhat unreflectedly at system and institutional level to denote the process of increasing involvement in international operations. It is also defined as an open-ended computation of its manifestations, one of which is ‘transnational mobility’ (and, as a sub-category of this, placements abroad). Gordon (Teichler and Gordon, 2001, p. 407) summing up the European debate on internationalisation in education, concludes: ‘The question remains: what is the aim of internationalising education? What forms do we expect it to assume, and what contents should it be given?’ The term sits in an uneasy relationship with the term ‘globalisation’, to which it refers. The two are sometimes used interchangeably, but in common usage and in recent years, at least, some distinction seems to have been made. ‘Globalisation’ is thus used to as a descriptor for the development towards an economic system, which is based on a global marketplace for production, distribution and consumption, aided and abetted by the new information and communication technologies (e.g. Korsgaard, 2001, p. 36). Rapid changes brought on by an accelerating technological development and the privatisation of public enterprise are usually also seen as part and parcel of this process.

‘... the concept of globalisation is most usually associated with transnational financial markets; multi- and transnational enterprises; new intangible products which can be transferred instantaneously; and, as the infrastructural precondition for and a crucially inherent element in all these practices, computerised information and communication structures with ‘real time’ as the parole expressing a new kind of separation of time and space’ (Kettunen and Gudmundsson, 1998, p. 13).

‘Internationalisation’, when used in a context of education and training, denotes the reaction of national educational systems and institutions to the challenges posed by globalisation (e.g. Kristensen, 1999). As a specific discourse, internationalisation is concerned with the strategies of national education and training systems on how to cope with the perceived challenges (threats) generated by the globalisation process.

These ‘perceived challenges’ are basically of two kinds. The first kind are concerned with contents (curricula), and focus on the need to train the present and future workforce to cope with the increased contact with foreign partners and competitors. In an era where production, distribution and consumption happens at a global level, workers need specific skills in order for national industry and commerce to remain competitive, and national educational systems must make an effort to supply these. These skills have been termed ‘international skills’ (Wordelmann, 1995). As a typical example of what this term implies, we can turn to Lenske and Werner (2000, p. 32), who carried out a survey of 4 000 German companies and how these see globalisation was affecting their skills needs. They created a grid whereby they classify ‘international vocational competence’ in two groups: international basic skills and ‘international key skills. Under the first heading they subsume ‘international professional knowledge’ (knowledge of foreign work practices and markets, international law, etc.), and foreign language proficiency. Under the second, they place what they call ‘intercultural factual knowledge’, by which they understand concrete, culture-specific knowledge about history, politics, education, mentality, customs, etc., and ‘intercultural dispositions’ (tolerance, flexibility, adaptability, etc.). Over and above all these, however, it is necessary to possess outstanding vocational skills as a precondition for the other. International skills, therefore, are not replacing any of the vocational elements in VET courses. They represent an addition to the original curricula, for which reason they are sometimes also referred to in German by the term *Zusatzqualifikationen* (additional qualifications). International skills are also important in the second discourse, as necessary skills for living and working in another country. Here, however, international skills are not acquired for migration, but in order to cope with increased foreign contacts at the workplace in the home country. According to the survey, over 30 % of the workforce in the companies involved needed international skills in order to carry out their work. Placements abroad offer the workforce (both present and future) an opportunity to acquire these skills, and consequently this motive figures strongly in many national programmes. Examples of this are the Dutch BAND programme, and the German *Sprungbrett* programme, both of which have been described earlier.

The second kind of challenge stems from the fact that educational systems and institutions themselves are actors in a market that is affected by globalisation (albeit to a lesser degree than industry and commerce). Education and training is a commodity as well, and is open to competition, also from abroad. Cheap means of transportation and the opportunities for distance learning afforded by new information and communication technologies, coupled with privatisation drives, threaten local, regional and national monopolies. The decline in traditional client groups (due to the falling birthrate) and the rise of new, lucrative markets because of lifelong learning strategies underpin this development. Internationalisation, then, concerns the strategies of national education for trying to control this development and steer it into paths which do not threaten their existence. Internationalisation can be a way of opening up to new markets, and covering lacunae in the existing provisions. How the latter could function in practice can be illustrated with the example of Luxembourg, where training provision, due to the size of the country and population, cannot cover the full range of courses. Young people in Luxembourg wishing to undertake a training course (e.g. an apprenticeship), which can only partially - occasionally not at all - be covered within the national system, have various possibilities open to them across the borders in the neighbouring countries. They can, of course, take a full course abroad, but they can also, in many cases, do the theoretical (school-based) parts abroad and the placements in Luxembourg, or the reverse. In the year 2000, 58 young people from Luxembourg were doing their apprenticeship partly in Luxembourg, partly in Germany, while 13 had chosen France ⁽²⁶⁾. They may then choose to do their trade test either at home or in the partner country, and the qualifications are jointly recognised by both. The situation of Luxembourg may be seen as a model for how education and training will be organised and delivered in the rest of Europe. The Austrian Ministry for Education, Science and Culture (BMBWK) see it this way:

‘Young people as well as adults in employment will in the future also increasingly use the European Union as a “space for education and training”. They expect that they can continue or complement their initial or further education and training in other EU Member States’. (*Report on the recommendation ...*, 2003, p. 2.)

Seen from the point of view of the European Commission, such a development is in line with the thinking on a European ‘Single Market’. It is, for example, reflected in the *Commission memorandum on vocational training in the European Community in the 1990s* (pp. 9-10):

⁽²⁶⁾ Source: Ministry of Education, Luxembourg.

‘The range of education and training on offer should also develop in this direction, so that a European dimension may be added to VET. There is at the moment no single market for education and training, but many education and training markets which must be made more transparent.’⁽²⁷⁾

The two quotations may at first seem to be complementary, but there is an important difference. The Commission speaks about a single market for education and training, but the national government speaks more guardedly of a ‘space’ where young people and adults may ‘continue or complement’ their education and training. In the vision of the latter, the national markets (and hence the systems) are still very much in evidence, and have not been replaced by a single market. ‘Internationalisation’ is, therefore, essentially a national strategy, which is also evident from the etymology of the word (*inter nationes*; i.e. between nations, no-one over and above). The Commission, on the other hand, is not using this word, but favours instead the adjective *transnational* (i.e. over and beyond nations)⁽²⁸⁾. The European Commission is the biggest single stakeholder in the field of ‘transnational mobility’ (or placements abroad), and also the most conspicuous. But as we have noted in the section dealing with quantitative aspects, the European programmes may only represent the top of the iceberg. Several Member States have their own programmes under which placements abroad are organised, within the framework of an internationalisation strategy. Two illustrative examples are the Danish PIU-programme and the Greek ELPAEK programme.

The Danish PIU programme was set up in 1992 in a period of crisis in vocational training. Due to the recession in the economy in Denmark (and Europe), Danish companies were reluctant to take in new apprentices. As the apprenticeship principle forms the backbone of initial vocational training system, politicians were looking at innovative ways of coming to terms with the problem of an increasing number of young people who had met with a dead end in their training plans because of the lack of placement opportunities. The idea was then mooted that it should be made possible for these young people to go beyond the national borders in their search for placements; spurred on by rumours (erroneous, as it later turned out) about 160 000 vacant apprenticeships/placements in German companies. The appropriate amendments in the law on vocational training were made, and a system for financial support was set up under the Employers Reimbursement System (AER), a fund paid for by the employers and controlled by the social

⁽²⁷⁾ Translated by the author from the Danish.

⁽²⁸⁾ Which, of course, only means the nations in the European Union.

partners. It was confidently expected that several thousand young people would avail themselves of this opportunity immediately. However, only 16 went abroad in the first year; and after more than 10 years, participation has apparently found a saturation point at about 1 000 participants annually. The PIU programme has not been a success in terms of numbers, but the government and the social partners were seen as doing something innovative at the time. The PIU programme is still retained, however, and meanwhile the economic climate has changed and the situation eased. More placements were created in the national context, and the rationale for the PIU programme has been reformulated accordingly (Sølvmoose et al., 2000, pp. 9, 17). Now, much greater emphasis is placed on the acquisition of international skills.

The Greek ELPAEK programme affords an analogous example. The programme was set up in 1995 with funding from the European Social Fund, and financed placements and school stays both within Greece and abroad. The rationale for this was to give students and trainees the opportunity to become familiar with technology that would otherwise not be available to them. The programme was discontinued in 1999 as it was estimated that adequate facilities were now available within the training centres in Greece (for more information on this programme, see the section dealing with quantitative aspects of placements abroad).

Placements abroad as a means of acquiring know-how on new technology unavailable at home is by no means a recent idea. There was a time when this was almost the only means for the transfer of technology and know-how across geographical distances. In the medieval guilds, it was a prerequisite for anyone wanting to set up as a master craftsman that he had travelled abroad within his chosen profession for a prescribed period of time, usually one year and one day, two years and one day, etc. This tradition lingered on right up till the 20th century, even though the guilds no longer had the powers for regulating the professions that they once had. In Scandinavia, this was institutionalised through the *Naver*-movement, which was basically a system of health insurance for travelling journeymen abroad. In other countries the practice also lingered on and was quite common. The following is an extract from a draft of a General crafts and trades law passed by the German Crafts and Trades Congress in Frankfurt and presented to the Constituent National Assembly in August 1848 (quoted in: *Transnational placements: impact and potential*, European Commission, 1995, p. 11):

‘Journeying abroad provides for every person a school of training and experience of the most manifold nature and is for the craftsman and tradesman all the more indispensable in that only through his own observation of alien conditions and circumstances can he make comparison

with such as are familiar to him, thereby forming a correct perception of truth, beauty and usefulness and at the same time educating himself as an individual and craftsman. Exemption from the obligation of journeying may be granted only on the most imperative grounds’.

The importance of this practice for the development of Europe is widely recognised, and reference is often made to this tradition on official occasions where mobility and VET are among the themes. In the Commission’s White Paper, *Teaching and learning - towards the learning society* from 1995, this is couched in the following terms:

‘The aim is to improve opportunities for young people returning to some extent, throughout the Union and in the most diverse of occupations, to the ‘journeyman’ spirit, which contributed so much to the quality of European products and has demonstrated how important mobility is in acquiring knowledge and know-how’.

The phenomenon of the ‘travelling journeymen’ all but died out in the first half of the 20th century. Two world wars, and in particular a long and severe economic slump period in between, effectively killed it off. A contributing factor was undoubtedly also the fact that the provision of national education improved enormously, thus obviating the need for travel. The late 1980s and early 1990s brought a revival of the ‘spirit’, albeit in the shape of sponsored programmes rather than individual enterprises. This development is caused by new skills needs brought on by globalisation, and the concomitant pressure on national educational systems. A major stakeholder in this is the European Commission, which has, of course, a different focus from national education: trans-national rather than inter-national. But the execution of the mobility (placement) programmes of the European Commission are decentralised; i.e. not controlled from Brussels. Programme funds are paid out in lump sums to the national agencies in the individual Member States, who are then responsible for allocating these to individual projects. The national agencies are all closely associated with the national ministries of education and, in many cases, actually integrated in these. The money in the programme is therefore distributed in accordance with national policies, whereas the Commission’s role mainly is a coordinating one.

It may be argued whether ‘internationalisation’ actually constitutes a discourse or not. But it is a way of understanding the phenomenon of placements abroad, it provides the rationale for national programmes, and it has a specific linguistic presence (internationalisation). It is not equally well represented in all European countries, however, being (logically, perhaps) stronger in countries with a well developed and traditionally strong VET-system (Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria). It has two modes of

expression, the common denominator of which is that they are both brought on as a reaction to perceived challenges of globalisation: a curricular expression (international skills) and a systemic one that aims at containing and controlling a tendency that ultimately may lead, if not to the demise, then at least to a curtailing of the powers of the national systems. Acting within this discourse can have certain consequences for practice. When the focus is on acquisition of international skills, there is often a tendency to pick participants among the most gifted (vocationally and personally), since these are the ones that are most likely to be using their international skills in their working life (see Lenske and Werner's finding that companies believed outstanding vocational skills to be essential for workers with international skills).

1.7.4. Placements abroad as a method for improving the employability of participants

An evaluation of the first phase of the Leonardo da Vinci programme in 2000 (*Final evaluation of the Leonardo da Vinci programme*, 2001, p. 86) states as one of the major impacts of the mobility strand of the programme that 'Leonardo is perceived to enhance the employability of participants'. What this term more precisely implies does not appear in the document, but in the glossary attached to the Commission's *A memorandum on lifelong learning* from the same year. It is defined as 'the degree of capacity an individual demonstrates to find a job, keep it, and update occupational competence'. This definition is interesting, in that it signals more than just employment, i.e. getting a job. Employability also implies the ability for keeping it, and, as a key element here, the ability to update vocational skills. Inherent in this definition is the notion of change. No one can expect lifelong employment: skills requirements change constantly; sometimes whole occupational profiles disappear and new ones are created.

There is nothing new in change as such – only in the unprecedented rate at which it is happening. The driving forces behind this are primarily globalisation and technological innovations. Globalisation is another term subject to different definitions. In this discourse, it is a different definition of globalisation that is employed: perhaps more correctly, different aspects of the phenomenon that are accentuated, as compared to the description of the previous discourse. Giddens (2000, p. 64) has defined it as '... the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away, and vice versa'.

Developments in knowledge and, in particular, technology are growing at an exponential rate, and affect production methods and the organisation of

work, as well as social practices in general. Giddens (2000, p. 38) calls this the ‘reflexivity’ of modern life. Instead of lifelong *employment* as the ideal of the industrial society, the emphasis in the knowledge society is on lifelong *learning*: how to maintain one’s employability throughout one’s working life. According to this logic, education and training is no longer the once-and-for-all proposition that it once was; an investment made at the beginning of one’s career, which would last till retirement. Instead individuals must continue to revitalise and, in some instances, completely renew their arsenal of vocational skills. Consequently, there is an increasing premium on skills that will enable an employee to learn continuously, at the expense of pure technical skills. How this impinges on the thinking on placements abroad in the context of VET is very clearly formulated in a report from the Danish National Agency for the Leonardo da Vinci programme (*Next stop Denmark ...*, 2000, p. 6):

‘The development of the labour market with new technology and new forms of organisation has also created a situation where concrete vocational skills may become obsolete from one day to the other. Nobody can expect that the skills acquired in a vocational training course will be of lasting value and sufficient for the rest of one’s career. Lifelong learning has become the precondition for staying in the labour market, and personal skills such as flexibility, independence, adaptability, initiative, etc., are now playing a much more prominent role. This development has, of course, also had a strong impact on education and training. International skills and the development of personal skills have become key issues in an educational context. These are abilities that only with great difficulty can be mediated through traditional teaching methods, but it is possible to create frameworks in which they can be learned and developed. It has been demonstrated that stays abroad contain a great potential for the development of personal as well as international skills. [...] The acquisition of specific vocational skills has often been the primary motivation for employers for sending apprentices abroad, but experience shows that in terms of vocational skills apprentices could often have learned exactly the same in Denmark.’ (Translated from the Danish.)

Within this discourse, the ‘international skills’ which constituted a central theme in the previous discourse are relegated to an inferior position in favour of the personal skills mentioned in the quotation above. This is clearly illustrated by a quotation from a brochure presenting the Swedish Interpraktik programme, which states:

‘Experiences and evaluations of transnational mobility unambiguously point to gains for the participants. Examples of such positive effects are

increased self-reliance, and a bigger propensity for taking initiatives and making efforts to changing one's life situation. Transnational mobility is now an integral part of many EU programmes, and, at least for Sweden, also in a national effort in the field of labour market policy through Interpraktik. Interpraktik may here serve as a good example for (re-)integration on the labour market' (*Mobilitet – en rättighet för alla*, 2003) ⁽²⁹⁾.

This role of placements abroad has also been the subject of several research projects: here we quote from three. One is an evaluation study carried out by the German Carl Duisberg Gesellschaft (now InWent) and Cedefop concerning the learning outcome in transnational placement projects. The other is an evaluation carried out by the DEL and the PIU Centre ⁽³⁰⁾ in 2000 of the Danish PIU programme. The third is a Dutch evaluation of the outcomes of the mobility strands (strands 1a and 1b) of the Petra programme (1992-95). The German evaluation study comprises several programmes, which all finance placements abroad. Three of them are European and actually represent three generations of VET mobility programmes: the Young workers' exchange programme, the Petra programme, and the Leonardo da Vinci programme. The two other programmes are national: the Hermann Strenger Stiftung and the Besondere Fachgebiete (special vocational fields). The method used is a questionnaire survey of a large number of former participants covering a period of nearly 10 years (over 1 000 questionnaires sent). The survey covers a range of target groups, mainly students of VET, apprentices, and young workers. The Danish evaluation of the PIU programme only comprises one programme and only one target group, namely apprentices. The methodology is also based on a questionnaire study, but questionnaires were sent both to participants and to their host companies abroad, their vocational schools, and the Danish companies they come from. The Dutch evaluation covers young people in initial vocational training and young workers (skilled and unskilled), and the results are based on a mixture of questionnaires and individual interviews.

As the conclusion of the evaluation, the German study (Busse and Fahle, 1998, p. 65) translated into English, states:

'All in all the results of the evaluation of the effects of placements abroad suggest that the learning of new vocational and technical skills and competences is clearly overshadowed by the acquisition of 'soft' skills (key

⁽²⁹⁾ Translated from the Swedish.

⁽³⁰⁾ DEL is the Danish Institute for Educational Training of Vocational Teachers. The PIU Centre (PIU is the abbreviation for Praktik i Udlandet, which means placement abroad) was set up by the social partners at the instigation of the Ministry of Education to accompany the PIU programme. It merged with several other organisations in 2000 to form Cirius.

skills): foreign language proficiency, intercultural competence, flexibility, mobility, etc. Therefore the real - often more informal in character - learning process of a placement abroad seems to lie in the mediation of these competences’.

In the Danish evaluation study (Sølvmoose et al., 2000, p. 56), this result is replicated, even from the perspective of the participating companies (i.e. the companies where the apprentices came from before participation, and go back to after their experience):

‘It is furthermore remarkable that nearly all companies who have returned the questionnaire highlight personal skills as the major benefit from the placements abroad. This shows that these specific competences are highly appreciated in the company, and that a placement abroad is recognised as a didactic tool for acquiring them. Several companies, however, mention that ‘there is not a lot to come for’ in terms of strictly vocational (technical) competences’. (Translated from the Danish.)

Likewise, the Dutch evaluation (Farla and Meijers, 1995, p. 86), concluding on the statistics from the questionnaire survey, states:

‘The picture that develops from the previous table, that foreign placements contribute more to process-independent than to process-dependent qualifications, is confirmed by the data in table 8. The overwhelming portion of young people say that the foreign placement has increased their self-confidence (100 % of 1a and 82 % of 1b participants), has improved their ability to adapt to change (83 % and 73 % respectively) and has made them better able to take initiatives (91 % and 71 %). Participants were less positive about the contribution of the placement to their ability to take responsibility and to solve problems, but on these items a clear majority was again positive about the effect of the placement.’

These evaluations – dating from 1995, 1998 and 2000 – are not the first evaluations of placement activities. Neither are the activities they report on vastly different from placement activities preceding them. What is interesting here in terms of discourse theory are the questions they ask; that they enquire in detail into what learning has taken place. Previous evaluations have been more concerned with administrative details, obstacles encountered, and matters of project engineering, with learning taking a secondary position almost as a thing that happened more or less by itself. The discourse is here clearly seen at work, defining and circumscribing legitimate questions and matters of concern.

But what exactly do we mean when we talk about key skills/personal skills? The concept is complicated to work with in any context but the term itself is a tricky proposition, since it covers an enormous range of related and

disparate skills. A German study from the beginning of the 1990s ⁽³¹⁾ lists no fewer than 654 different concepts that have occurred in connection with discussions of the theme. The basic (generic) definition of personal/key skills, formulated by Dieter Mertens in 1972, translated into English, runs as follows:

‘Such knowledge, skills, and competences that cannot be immediately and in a well-defined manner ascribed to particular, disparate practical activities, but which rather are applicable (a) to a larger number of positions and functions available as alternative options at the same moment, and (b) for a sequence of (in most cases unforeseeable) changes in demands in the course of one’s life.’

In other words, key skills are characterised by not being tied to any particular situation, but can be used in a number of contexts and moreover enable the ‘owner’ to cope with changes in these. It is interesting that within this discourse, the phenomenon of placements abroad is called ‘mobility’, even when it refers to a concrete activity (e.g. ‘mobility projects’). Mobility is a key skill; the ability of an individual to move – not necessarily across borders, but also within the country, between work tasks and roles, upwards or sideways in society, etc.

The role of key skills is fully acknowledged in European level education and training policies. In the Lisbon Declaration of March 2000, the European Council of Ministers set itself the strategic goal of becoming, before 2010, the ‘most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion’ (article 5). One of the targets to be met on the way to this is ‘a European framework should define the new basic skills to be provided through lifelong learning: IT-skills, foreign languages, technological culture, entrepreneurship and social skills ...’ (article 26).

What, however, does the concept mean specifically in the context of placements abroad? An Irish publication, intended as a guide for organisers of mobility projects (*Focus on mobility management ...*, 1998) enumerates a list of key skills that can be acquired during a transnational placement. The list is not compiled on the basis of research, but on the basis of statements from Irish project organisers and participants. The guide is written and published by the Irish national coordination unit for the Leonardo da Vinci programme. It cannot serve as conclusive proof of the kind of skills which

⁽³¹⁾ Didi, H-J; Kloft, E; Carmen en Vogt, H. *Einschätzung von Schlüsselqualifikationen aus psychologischer Perspektive. Gutachten im Auftrag des Bundesinstituts für Berufsbildung* (Bonn 1999), quoted in Busse and Fahle (1998, p. 19).

can be acquired, but it can tell us something about what practitioners think about this issue (or, in a more demonic interpretation, what programme administrators would like us to think about the activities they fund). Under the heading ‘Benefits of transnational vocational placements’, it lists the following items as learning outcomes:

- (a) enhancing vocational skills through exposure to different structures, different standards, different methods, new work practices, different work ethos;
- (b) fostering cross cultural communication competence through appreciation of the dynamics of human interaction; understanding the role of verbal and non verbal signs in communication; awareness of the cultural context of language and the strategies, attitudes and skills necessary to insert oneself into different cultures; ability to control and accelerate learning once in that new culture;
- (c) increasing vocationally orientated language proficiency; in the general and specific linguistic notions/functions associated with working in the sector and in the specialised terminology; this is complementary with cross cultural communicative competence;
- (d) enhancing key competences; transnational vocational placements provide a unique opportunity to enhance the development of highly sought after competences, inter alia: adaptability; flexibility; team working; decision making; problem solving; conflict management; risk taking; taking initiative; taking responsibility; quality awareness; negotiating; planning/organising; perception/observation; tolerance, empathy, trust; esteem/confidence building; coping – crisis and stress management; self analysis/assessment’.

This enumeration also encompasses the concept of ‘international skills’ which was introduced in the section dealing with placements abroad as an element in the internationalisation of VET, though not quite in the same form. The focus here, seen from the vocabulary used (the words ‘foreign’, ‘abroad’, ‘international’ and ‘globalisation’ are conspicuous in their absence), is less on relations specifically with other countries and more on general intercultural skills that are also useful inside the borders of the home country.

There is an interesting degree of compatibility with this list of skills that can be acquired during a placement abroad, and general enumerations of skills for the knowledge society. *Kompetencerådet* (the Skills Council), a Danish think-tank set up to define the skills requirements of the knowledge society, came up with the following four categories, in which the individual

skills of the above list would fit nicely:

- (a) change-related skills (ability for mobility, of coping with innovation);
- (b) relational skills (social skills);
- (c) learning-related skills (ability for learning);
- (d) meaning-related skills (ability for motivating oneself, for creating meaning in a chaotic situation with no fixed bearings, and – in prolongation of this and with a bit of conceptual massaging - also abilities like independence, self-reliance) ⁽³²⁾.

The Leargas list is at best indicative, since it does not rest on a foundation of research. The evidence from the three evaluations, however, would seem to make a convincing case for the suitability of placements abroad as a tool for acquiring key skills. This is corroborated by other high-quality evaluations, which, mainly for space reasons, have not been quoted here ⁽³³⁾. This should not close our eyes to the problems that evaluations in the field suffer from. Generally, despite the sound methodologies of the evaluations, their statements concerning skills and skills acquisition in placement projects are still not very precise and their definitions not rigorous enough due to the lack of a more detailed theoretical understanding of the phenomenon. The concepts used are too broad and general to give us more than a sense of direction of the learning in placements abroad. The findings are, therefore, often difficult to make operational in the shape of concrete didactic recommendations. There is, furthermore, the probability that important learning outcomes and processes remain obscure because the right questions are not asked. The fact, for instance, that participants during their placement have to assume responsibility, to a large extent, for their own learning in the absence of the teachers and instructors that surround them at home, may thus have an interesting effect on the capacity for self-directed learning. We know very little about this, however, and it would probably require a dedicated study to tease out the connection, if any.

The newness of the discourse is most tellingly revealed in the practices attached to it, where efforts have started more or less from scratch, and are still little developed. There is a strong willingness, especially in the latter years, to tackle pedagogical aspects of practice, frequently under the

⁽³²⁾ The Danish terms are *forandringskompetencer*, *relationskompetencer*, *læringskompetencer* and *meningskompetencer*. The word *kompetencer* has here been translated by 'skills' to make the usage consistent throughout this study. Summarised in Hermann (2003, p. 69).

⁽³³⁾ E.g. Amorim (1999) and Berrang et al. (1997).

heading ‘quality in mobility’ (Alexander, 2003). In a recent French publication (*Mobilité des jeunes ...*, 2000, p. 12), this new emphasis is described as follows:

‘Organisers of transnational placements and exchanges are going along with new forms of training that is developing in the European Union. These organisations, which several years ago were primarily concerned with juridical and logistical problems (this is particularly so for long term placements), have become important torchbearers for the development of vocational training for young people. This has led them to – and is constantly leading them to – refine the quality of the practices they are developing and implementing’. (Translated from the French.)

A further characteristic of this discourse is inclusion. Unlike the discourse on placements abroad as an element of the internationalisation of VET, there is no tendency here to focus on the cream of students, apprentices and workers as participants. Disadvantaged groups (participants who are socially and/or physically challenged) are *a priori* not marginalised here, since the skills that can be acquired during a placement abroad are seen as generally useful, and not merely in the context of an international career.

1.7.5. Discourses on placements abroad: conclusions and perspectives

We have above identified four discourses, which are struggling for supremacy to define the meaning of placements abroad.

The first discourse – about exchange (of which placements abroad is only one manifestation) as a means for achieving intercultural understanding – is the oldest and most established of the four discourses, having existed for at least 50 years. There has been extensive theory building within this discourse, and practice is well developed, with specific focus on preparation as a means of conflict-avoidance, where much material (e.g. in the form of handbooks) is available to practitioners.

The second discourse on placements abroad in the context of labour market migration is basically about removing obstacles to the free movement of workers within the European Union. Some of these obstacles are psychological, and can be deconstructed in the minds of the individuals through a stay abroad (placement) in their formative years. In analogy with this, practice is a matter of engineering; removing problems so that participants can avoid frustration and trouble during their placement period.

The third discourse on placements abroad concerns the process of internationalisation, or the reaction of national educational systems to certain aspects of globalisation. It manifests itself at two levels. One is at the level of curricula, where increased emphasis is placed on ‘international skills’ and on

placements as a way of obtaining these. The second is at systemic level, where placements abroad are used to complement or supplement the provisions offered by national education.

The fourth discourse on placements abroad as a didactic tool for the improvement of employability is the latest discourse, and has arisen largely within the last decade. It is associated with the notion of the ‘knowledge society’, with key words like globalisation, change, key skills and with discussions about new trends and reform in education and training (e.g. lifelong learning). It has a strong focus on practice, but only at an incipient level due to the newness of the discourse.

The origins of each of these four discourses can be traced in specific historical developments, but, despite their historical grounding, they remain active, not only in discussions, but also in policies involving the phenomenon of placements abroad. It is thus significant that each of them has had major initiatives running more or less simultaneously during the mid-1990s:

- (a) first discourse: Youth for Europe I (1991-95);
- (b) second discourse: Euroqualification (1992-95);
- (c) third discourse: Petra II (1992-95) (see list of acronyms);
- (d) fourth discourse: Leonardo da Vinci I (1995-99).

Similarly, each discourse can be associated with particular ‘ideologies’ and stakeholders in VET:

- (a) first discourse: a humanistic outlook (youth organisations and general education);
- (b) second discourse: traditional labour market economy (e.g. labour market authorities);
- (c) third discourse: national educational systems (ministries of education);
- (d) fourth discourse: the ‘knowledge economy’ (human resource specialists).

In its endeavours to define – or construct – reality, each discourse has developed or appropriated a specific vocabulary through which it exerts its hegemony. An example is the first programme operating in the second discourse (the Young workers’ exchange programme), which was described with a term from the first discourse as an ‘exchange programme’ as the second discourse at that time was not well enough established to set up its own terms. Similarly, at a later stage, we can experience the vocabulary of the fourth discourse invading the territory of the youth programme. The following excerpt is taken from an official evaluation of the European

Voluntary Service (Amorim et al. 1999, p. 9), which is an action in the Youth programme, and thus normally falls within the discourse on exchange:

‘... young people can learn about taking responsibility and being involved in a team. The programme hopes that as their skills develop and they confront the challenge of living in a different culture, their self-confidence and independence also increases. This non-formal education is seen as a means for motivating young people to develop their skills not only at a personal and social level, but at a professional level as well. As a result, the voluntary service wishes to provide a complement to an individual’s formal education and training allowing him/her to take a more active role in determining his/her future integration into the labour market and society’.

This quotation also demonstrates an important aspect of discourses – they are primarily analytic constructs, and are seldom found in their pure form. Statements using language from several discourses are the rule more than the exception, but the researcher uses discourse analysis to get below the surface value of these statements and to understand where the real significance lies. Someone in the second discourse may thus happily agree that increased intercultural understanding and international and personal skills for use in the domestic labour market are important outcomes of a placement abroad, and may even mention these prominently in documents. However, they are perceived as by-products, and not as the real reason why we should undertake such activities. Similarly, someone from the first discourse may see the fact that a participant in a placement project later goes abroad to work as a genuine achievement for the project; not because the participant is now working abroad, but as the proof of a successful intercultural learning process. Discourse analysis as a tool has thus helped us understand the real rationale for the activities, and identified the actors and stakeholders in the process. Even though we have examined and discussed the findings of research and evaluation projects in relation to each discourse, the aim has not been to establish which is right and which is wrong; but merely to define and describe how people perceive the phenomenon.

Discourse analysis has also helped us understand why the cumulative experience of the many programmes and initiatives involving placements abroad since the Second World War has not lead to a more sophisticated pedagogy for the activity. Hegenbarth et al., (2001, p. 11) writing as practitioners on the issue of placements abroad note that:

‘A reason why our efforts have had so little impact may also be traced back to the fact that there has been, so far, no pedagogy of transnational education, that appropriate curricula are not available, or tried out models not disseminated and therefore not openly accessible.’

The discourses are at different levels of development and have different theoretical complexes attached to them. Similarly, attached to each discourse is a specific notion of what practice in the field is – or should be – about. Each discourse has its own perspective on this, which may be more or less compatible with the others. It is interesting, however, that there seems to be very little permeability between practices in the various discourses. This is most visible in the fourth discourse, where very little is taken on board from previous discourses, and a new practice is developed more or less from scratch. These watertight compartments between the practices as developed within each discourse is partly a consequence of the fact that each discourse has its own domain, or, as it were, ‘community of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1999) where it holds sway: within youth organisations, labour market authorities and experts, national ministries, and proponents of the ‘knowledge economy’. However, it can also be explained perfectly well with reference to the theory underlying discourse analysis and social constructivism. Each discourse represents a specific way of seeing reality, and determines the way in which the world – or a portion of it – is construed by the individual. Therefore they are mutually incompatible and elements cannot be transferred from one to the other without being redefined into this worldview.

1.8. General conclusion, part one

In this first part, we have focused on the empirical manifestations of the phenomenon of placements abroad. We have tried to define it and outline the quantitative scope of it, and we have identified and described four discourses on (or rationales for) placements abroad. It has been established that the phenomenon reaches far beyond the Leonardo da Vinci programme and other dedicated programmes and initiatives, and involves a significant number of people annually. It represents considerable investments, both directly (through funds earmarked for the activity) and indirectly (through the working hours spent organising and overseeing the activities). The four discourses represent the interests of different stakeholders, who are trying to ‘colonise’ the phenomenon; i.e. establishing their hegemony over activities by claiming the right to define their ‘real’ purpose.

Despite the significance of the phenomenon, it has not been the subject of much dedicated research, and especially the pedagogical aspects of it have not received much attention. Programmes and initiatives constitute a mysterious process where no-one is able to establish convincing explanations for the success (or the lack of the same) of the activities.

CHAPTER 2

Theoretical issues and pedagogical implications

The concept of placements abroad as a didactic tool is, as seen from the empirical material, a relatively new phenomenon, largely developed over the last decade or so. There is no pedagogical theory dedicated to it; and the aim of the following section is to develop one, or at least the beginnings of it in the shape of a series of hypotheses on the learning process. Sceptical minds may question the use of such an exercise, and ask whether it would not be better to focus attention on matters of more immediate practical concern. But this is actually a case where a good theory may be of immense practical value.

It is more than an analytical tool for reflection. It allows us to interpret meaningfully the data we have (or any new data that we gather), to fill gaps in incomplete data, and to make predictions and explanations where little or no data is at hand. One of the observations of the empirical study was precisely that the 'craft', or practice, of organising placements abroad (as judged by the few publications extant) seems to have become stuck at the level of good practice, where results of projects are described disjointedly and without any accompanying framework of explanation. Basically, they can tell us something about what worked for a particular group at a particular moment and under particular circumstances (e.g. social, financial, geographical, etc.); as such they can be read as useful inspiration by first-time project organisers. But they do not provide them with a global overview that can help them decide whether this particular practice will also produce good results in their situation, or even reliable indications as to how they can be adapted for other target groups and under different circumstances.

Once we have a plausible theoretical framework, we can begin to make the transition from isolated examples of good (or even 'best' as it is sometimes maintained) practice to a coherent pedagogy of placements abroad. In a separate section in this part, we will try to set out some of the pedagogical implications of the theoretical insight thus reached and couple this with information gleaned from various publications concerned with the practical aspects of organising placements abroad.

2.1. What theory is needed?

Learning in the context of placements abroad is a complex phenomenon that integrates several different learning processes. It is necessary to make some choices and priorities in our treatment of the subject.

All of the four discourses focus on different outcomes in term of learning, and even though the medium (placements abroad) is the same, the rationale used nevertheless has consequences for practice. There is, however, a common denominator for the learning in the four discourses; namely the concept of change. All these deal with change in one way or the other: in attitudes to other cultures, to the idea of living and working in another country, to increased foreign contacts at work, and to new career paths and different forms of work organisation. Piaget (2001, pp. 8-10) distinguishes between two types of learning: assimilative learning, in which new elements are incorporated into already existing structures of meaning, and accommodative learning, in which the already existing structures of meaning are changed to accommodate new elements that don't fit into these. Mezirow (2000, pp. 7-8) uses a similar division, but employs the term transformative learning to describe the latter mode. Transformative learning he defines as '... the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action.'

Within the four discourses, only the third (internationalisation) is concerned with assimilative learning, i.e. trying to fit new elements (change) into existing structures of meaning (vocational identities and national educational systems). The three others deal with learning of the accommodative (or transformative) kind. In the following, we will focus on the potential for accommodative learning in placements abroad and leave the third discourse out of the picture. This choice should not be taken as a judgement implying that this discourse is 'wrong' while the others are 'right'. Discourse theory is not concerned with 'objective' statements about what is right or wrong, but describing how different groups perceive the same phenomenon in different ways. The notion of learning in the third discourse (at least in its pure form) is the most mechanistic. However, it is basically about identifying gaps in the national provisions in terms of international and vocational skills and on providing appropriate opportunities abroad where these gaps can be filled.

Therefore the 'programme theory' (Vedung, 2000) underlying the notion of learning in this discourse is less complex and more immediately accessible. Probably many actors and stakeholders in the field who describe their activities under an overall heading of 'internationalisation' will react against this simplistic way of representing learning within this discourse. But discourses are not meant to be mirror images of a concrete lived experience: they are analytic constructs, which we employ to help us understand a phenomenon in its manifestations, and not to explain it rationally. Discourses are not about logic and rationality, and they exist in unstable relations to one another, especially in periods of change. The exact borderlines between discourses may be difficult to delineate, and there may even be 'hybrid discourses' (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999, p. 27) which incorporate elements of two or several discourses at the same time. When we choose to work with Piaget's notion of accommodative learning and Mezirow's notion of transformative learning as 'meta-theories' to capture the nature of the learning in placements abroad, it is because this is where the perceived need for further development lies. Neither, however, can give us more detailed guidelines that may help us capture and describe concrete learning processes. For this, we must turn to other learning theories. But which theories are these?

In the absence of any already existing theory with the issue of placements abroad as its subject, we must look to adjacent fields. There are theories that deal with workplace learning, and there are also theories that deal with learning in intercultural environments (e.g. the work of Amir, mentioned in 1.7.1), but a synthesis of these does not exist. A theoretical treatise of the phenomenon of placements abroad must therefore draw on both and somehow try to establish a synthesis. When we compare a placement abroad to an ordinary placement (i.e. a placement within the national border), it differs from this in two respects: geographical distance and (national) cultural environment. Distance is not necessarily a characteristic of a placement abroad. Distances within national borders can be considerable, but normally placements (at least in initial vocational training) are found somewhere in the local or regional environment. In a placement abroad, however, the participant will, in most cases, be a long way from home, a fact which must somehow impinge on the learning process.

For many participants, the placement will be the first time they are away from their normal environment. They will not have their usual network of family, friends and teachers to offer instruction and examples on how to solve the various problems presented by everyday life, in and outside of their placement. They will consequently have to devise ways and means of doing

this themselves, and assume responsibility for parts of their lives where they could previously rely on their surroundings for meaning and support. At the same time, many of the challenges will be new and be of a nature where they cannot draw on past models for their solution. On the other hand, the fact that they are alone in this new environment also means that they can act in an atmosphere free from the expectations of others and can experiment with aspects of their personality that are normally not activated.

These are important aspects of the total learning process in a transnational placement and have significant implications for planning and implementation of concrete projects. They also constitute core elements of a total theory of learning (or, rather, the learning potential) in placements abroad as a pedagogic practice. These processes are fairly straightforward in nature, and we need not necessarily have recourse to grand learning theory to come to grips with them. We may achieve similar outcomes through other methods that do not involve sending people abroad. What we are interested in exploring are the learning processes that are dependent on crossing borders for their effect, and that are peculiar specifically to placements (and not just any type of stay) abroad. Transposing the learning process to another national setting makes the concept of ‘culture’ – or rather cultural difference – central to the theme, both as an object for learning (‘learning about culture’) and as the general framework in which learning takes place (‘learning through culture’).

2.2. Learning in placements abroad

The task set in the following is to present some building blocks for a theory (or at least a set of hypotheses) on learning in placements abroad, and to explore how they might possibly fit together. The first block in this is to define what we mean by the concept of ‘culture’; the second to explain the term ‘learning’ in a cultural context. The third is to describe in general terms how we learn in a situation of cultural diversity and the fourth to elucidate how this may happen in more detail and specifically in the context of practice. In doing so, we will use relevant ‘high theory’ (i.e. established academic theory) to explain particular aspects.

2.2.1. The concept of ‘culture’

There are many ways of defining ‘culture’ according to the angle from which one approaches the issue. The aim here is not to give an exhaustive enumeration of the various definitions or theories, but to select the one that is most appropriate for our purpose, and to apply it to the theme. The theory

developed by the Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede (Hofstede, 1997) seems particularly suitable because it has been developed especially with a view to explaining differences between cultures. It is, so to speak, at the same time a theory of culture and interculturality. Hofstede's approach to culture has been called the perceptual or subjective approach (Lustig and Koester, 1999, p. 29), because it focuses on the way people perceive the world through their culture – or, in other words, how culture functions as a prism through which they define reality (or at least the man-made parts of it). Culture is 'mental software', or 'collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another' (Hofstede, 1997, p. 5). Culture in its concrete manifestation ('a culture'), Hofstede (1997, p. 180) defines as a 'unit of mental programming'.

The point of departure for Hofstede is his axiom that all cultures face the same basic challenges. Where they differ, is how they react to these challenges. Hofstede originally defined four of these challenges – or, as he calls them, dimensions – to culture:

- (a) power distance – how does society cope with the fact that some have more power and wealth than others?
- (b) collectivism versus individualism – what is the relationship between the individual and the group?
- (c) masculinity versus femininity – where is the balance struck between (male) assertiveness and (female) caring for others?
- (d) uncertainty avoidance – how does a culture react to situations of uncertainty or ambiguity?

A number of geographical and historical factors in a complex interrelationship determine the ways in which a culture positions itself within these dimensions. These positions are the values on which the culture is based or, to use Hofstede's term, the 'mental programming' of the people who belong to this group or category. These values are seldom directly observable. Instead, they express themselves through practices in all aspects of life. Not just through art and religion ('high culture'), but through even the minutest details of everyday actions and artefacts.

Hofstede's findings with regard to the four dimensions of culture are concrete and operational, and are worthwhile examining in detail, especially in their implications for education and the labour market. Each of the dimensions can be viewed separately as a line, along which the various national cultures position themselves according to the way in which they deal

with the various issues. At either end of the line, we find the extreme positions, which are analytic constructs and do not correspond to any particular country or culture.

Power distance concerns the issue of human inequality. Different cultures have different ways of deciding who has more than another; in some cultures, status and superiority is measured by wealth, but in others it may be physical strength, birth, age, gender, occupation, education and a host of other characteristics. An important element is also how this inequality is viewed. Are hierarchies seen as a natural phenomenon, or is the ideal that 'all men are created equal'? Are the decisions of those in power accepted unquestioningly or is their authority challenged?

In an education and training setting, small power distance means that students/trainees treat teachers/instructors more or less as equals and see them primarily as experts who transfer impersonal truths. Large power distance, on the contrary, means that teachers and instructor are treated – and expect to be treated – with respect from students/trainees. They have a status as gurus who impart personal wisdom, and initiatives from students/trainees are easily perceived as insubordination. In the labour market, the ideal boss in countries with small power distance is the resourceful democrat, who consults his subordinates in difficult matters. Decentralisation is a distinguishing trait of the organisation. In countries with large power distance, the archetypal boss is the authoritarian father figure, and subordinates expect to be told what to do. The organisation is characterised by centralisation.

Individualism versus collectivism concerns the position of the individual in relation to the group. Any society is a system of individuals. These individuals must be able to live and interact together in order to ensure the survival of the culture but, in doing so, a certain balance develops in the relationship between the individual and the group, which changes from culture to culture. Some cultures emphasise individual autonomy, and people are encouraged to be individualist and independent. In other cultures, the group is the most important element, and people should show allegiance to the group and conform to what is seen as the common good rather than following their own inclinations.

The femininity versus masculinity issue is concerned with the importance attached to what we could call care and assertiveness respectively; the balance between 'soft' and 'hard' values, such as care for others and quality of life on the one side, and acquisition of wealth and power on the other. In the context of education and training cultures dominated by feminine values,

the average student/trainee is considered the norm and failing in school is a minor incident. Teachers/instructors are appreciated for friendliness. In cultures dominated by masculine values, the best student is the norm, failing in school is a disaster, and teachers/instructors are appreciated for their brilliance rather than their friendliness. In the labour market, managers in feminine cultures use intuition and strive for consensus, and try to solve problems through compromise and negotiation. In cultures dominated by masculine values, managers try to be assertive and decisive and handle conflict with aggression.

Uncertainty avoidance refers to the level of tolerance for ambiguity and change in a given culture. Some cultures feel threatened by this and will try to establish structures and mechanisms – rules – to minimise uncertainty and ambiguous situations. Other cultures are more relaxed in this respect. At one end difference and diversity is curious; at the other end, it is perceived as dangerous and threatening. Students in cultures characterised by weak uncertainty avoidance are comfortable with open-ended learning situations and concerned with good discussions. It is OK for teachers/instructors to admit they do not know anything about a specific subject. Conversely, in cultures characterised by strong uncertainty avoidance, students/trainees feel more comfortable in structured learning situations, and their concern is with getting the right answers. Teachers/instructors are supposed to know the right solution to any problem.

Hofstede's work is based on a large empirical study involving the employees from over 50 countries in a worldwide multinational company. His concern is therefore primarily with national cultures or, in other words, the nation as a 'unit of mental programming' where specific historical, geographical and linguistic factors (in the widest sense of the terms) condition a specific programming process in its denizens. This programming process is very powerful. It is evident how deep-seated the differences are, and how they will affect almost any area of human activity. Practices in the labour market are likely to differ significantly from one unit of mental programming to another, even when they build on the same perceived needs and technology. Hofstede's categories offer a dynamic and operational analytical tool for explaining these cultural differences. They provide a framework for the interpretation of culturally determined behavioural patterns that can be used to explain or pre-empt clashes that have their root in different values. As such, his theory has been used extensively in connection with the training of staff in multinational or internationally active companies, for business relations with foreigners or in preparation of overseas

placements ⁽³⁴⁾. In this capacity it can also be used in connection with placements abroad, both in a preparation phase and generally as a tool for structuring learning about other cultures and how to see them in relation to one's own.

It is worthwhile, however, to return from the practical/operational level and the issue of differences in national cultures to Hofstede's original definition of culture as 'the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another'. There is nothing in this definition that limits it to national cultures. Hofstede himself has studied the phenomenon of 'organisational culture', which he defines – in analogy with the above – as 'the mental programming that distinguishes members of one organisation from the other' (Hofstede, 1997, p. 180). Culture, according to the elasticity of the above definition, is not only a phenomenon belonging to a nation or an organisation, but to any structure that merits the description 'unit of mental programming' ⁽³⁵⁾. These memberships are not mutually exclusive, nor are they necessarily to be seen as a system of concentric rings with the national culture as the outer rim. We may all belong to different 'units of mental programming' – an organisation, a certain lifestyle (subculture), a gender, an interest, or a profession – but with the national culture as the overriding one. Some may even cut across national borders (e.g. being an employee in a multinational company), but even here we are deeply marked by our different national cultural characteristics, as Hofstede's study shows.

Our concern in the following is with two levels of culture that are inherent in the concept of placements abroad; these are national culture (since the phenomenon involves crossing borders and living in other nations) and professional culture (since the phenomenon is situated at a workplace, in a professional context). The term national culture is challenging, as it is a historical rather than an anthropological concept. The nations of Europe, in their present form, are ultimately political constructs, created in a specific historical context and maintained, to a certain extent, through discourse (see e.g. Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 1999, pp. 169 et seq.). For some nations, this is more evident than others. The example that springs most

⁽³⁴⁾ Many others are active within this field, and one may even talk of a particular school within business and management studies that purports to provide 'intercultural competence'. The most popular books have attractive titles such as *The art of crossing cultures* and *Riding the waves of culture*.

⁽³⁵⁾ Hofstede himself compares his definition of culture with Bordieu's notion of 'habitus', which is not created to account for national cultures, but for common practices shared by groups or categories of people.

readily to mind here is Belgium, with its fairly recent genesis as a result of European post-Napoleonic power politics, and its composite nature with French-speaking, Flemish- (Dutch) speaking and German-speaking population groups. In other nations, this artificiality is a lot less apparent.

What we are concerned with here, however, is not the degree of overlap between national discourse and culture in the anthropological sense, but merely the fact that culture generally changes as we cross borders. We will, therefore, define a national culture as a unit of mental programming for people who share certain historical, political, geographical, social and linguistic conditions. In analogy with this, we can define a professional culture as the 'unit of mental programming' for people that share a profession; i.e. common conditions in the shape of certain technologies set within a certain mode of production, and a practice (or set of practices) linked to this. There is, of course, an interaction between the two, even though they may be said to occupy different fields. Hofstede's cultural dimensions – if we accept the validity of these – will affect the professional culture, as is evident from the descriptions above. Differences in deep-seated values will (in conjunction with differences in technology due to factors such as climate, etc.) differentiate a professional culture from that of another country both in terms of practices and work organisation, even though they are in the same occupational field. Being a bricklayer in Denmark may not be the same as a bricklayer in the UK ⁽³⁶⁾.

2.2.2. Acquiring a culture

Most of us are born into a national culture, whereas professional culture is one that we more or less consciously choose. The way in which we are mentally programmed into our specific group or category of people – i.e. the way in which we acquire culture – is basically the same, however, and is known by cultural anthropologists as enculturation. Enculturation is understood by anthropologists as a learning process that takes place both at a conscious and a subconscious level. A popular textbook on cultural anthropology states that 'every person begins immediately, through a process of conscious and unconscious learning and interaction with others, to internalise, or incorporate, a cultural tradition through the process of enculturation' (Kottak, 1994, p. 40). This insight has been formulated into a more general theory on learning by the American anthropologist Jean Lave, who, together with Etienne Wenger, has introduced the term 'situated learning'.

⁽³⁶⁾ Which, of course, it isn't. A Danish bricklayer traditionally spans four different British occupations: roofer, tiler, plasterer and bricklayer. Moreover, there are significant differences in the way training is delivered and work organised.

Lave and Wenger use the term situated learning to point out that learning does not only have a cognitive aspect, but is also to be seen as a social activity. It always takes place (is situated) within a particular socio-cultural context, which contributes to why learning takes place: why we learn some things and not others; what is learned; and how. This context involves a 'community of practice', by which they mean the practitioners who are active within a specific context, or field. This community of practice is not necessarily local, but encompasses all those who are active in the practice, i.e. the bearers of the culture of which the practice is the concrete expression. Learning takes place in this community of practice as newcomers are allowed to follow, observe and work with the more experienced practitioners within the community. Gradually – through a process of identification and imitation – they move closer to the centre of the community until they are eventually accepted as full members. This movement (or 'trajectory of participation') they call legitimate peripheral participation.

An illustrative case study concerns apprenticeship among tailors in Liberia (West Africa), demonstrating how apprentices gradually acquire the skills of the trade until they one day can set up as master craftsmen themselves, i.e. as full members of the community of practice. It is important to note, however, that Lave and Wenger are not just concerned with what we may call formal apprenticeship; they sometimes use the term apprenticeship in a loose sense as a synonym for situated learning. Other case studies involve communities of practice of anonymous alcoholics, meat cutters, quartermasters in the US Navy, Yucatec midwives, and, in a later study by Etienne Wenger (Wenger, 1998), insurance claim processors in a large US insurance company. Other researchers using their approach have applied it to the training of sales representatives, performers of classical music, and even to the process of becoming a researcher (see Nielsen and Kvale, 1999). The notion of the personalised 'master/novice' relationship, which is central to other theories of apprenticeship, and where the novice learns from the master through imitation and identification is, to them, only one of several ways of organising the asymmetrical relationship between learner and the full member(s) of a community of practice.

Lave and Wenger's theory is about how learning is used within a specific unit of mental programming to transmit its practices and the embedded values to newcomers, and thereby ensure its continued existence. Because of this emphasis, Lave and Wenger's theory has been criticised for not being a theory of learning, but a theory about socialisation (Munk, 2002). There may be a certain amount of truth in this, depending on where the emphasis lies

and how we define learning. Here we will see this activity (socialisation) as a specific form of learning that is applicable to a situation where a culture is acquired. The strength of this type of learning lies in the close relationship between culture and identity. By acquiring the practices of a trade, learners not only acquire the skills necessary to practice this trade, but also a vocational identity as a member of the community of practice, which forms an important part of their personal identity. They are not merely learning a specific set of technical skills, but constructing their identity and establishing their position within a community of practice and within society as a whole. This can be a very powerful motivation for learning, especially for young people. The reappraisal of this fact has led to a revival of interest in apprenticeship in Europe over the past 20 years.

In traditional apprenticeship, which was entirely work-based, apprentices learned from a master craftsman through imitation and identification. This ensured the perpetuation of the professional/vocational culture, but it also made it unreceptive to new technology and different methods for organising and repartitioning work tasks; unreceptive, in other words, to change. This was not a major problem before, where a person acquired a trade or a profession and could expect to make a living out of the knowledge acquired during the enculturation phase for the remainder of his or her working life. In the course of a lifetime, one or two innovative practices might be introduced from the outside, but change was slow and incremental. This is no longer so. The pace of development – of change – is much faster, and a person can no longer expect lifetime employment within the same workplace or even within the same occupation. Occupational profiles are changing on an almost constant basis, and individuals may even have to change career several times over in their working lives. Occupations and skills profiles are, in the words of the Dutch sociologist Frans Meijers (in Bartholomeus et al., 1995, p. 15) ‘undergoing the same fate as the church tower: both have lost their significance as landmarks’.

Enculturation, which to a large extent is a subconscious process, is about how we select certain positions and practices as ‘the way we see the world’ and ‘the way things are done’. It is how we get to define what is normal, how we construct our reality and our identity. This also, by definition, implies leaving other things out of the picture. Not fitting into the concept of ‘normalcy’, other practices and ideas may not be seen as merely different, but as strange, ludicrous or even positively dangerous. In a context of nationalism, this mechanism can be used to stir sentiments of hatred and distrust to other nations or races.

2.2.3. Learning through cultural diversity

The history of Europe is also the history of conflict and strife between nations, especially in the 20th century, with the world wars which each killed millions of people, soldiers and civilians alike. The idea that we might learn to live peacefully together through short stays in other countries (exchange) was first mooted after the First World War, but gained particular currency after 1945. A particular expression has been coined to describe what happens with (young) people during an exchange: intercultural learning. This is a kind of learning that is different in nature from the one described by Lave and Wenger in that it presupposes that an enculturation already has taken place, that we have acquired a culture (in this case, a national culture). What we need now is to learn to look beyond the taken-for-granted knowledge and attitudes of this, and to understand that there are different ways of seeing and doing things.

The Swiss educationalist Peter Stadler (Stadler, 1994) has worked with the concept of intercultural learning and described what he sees as the four different levels – or modes – in the process. These he labels rejection, containment, networking, and integration ⁽³⁷⁾. It is important to note that these four levels do not necessarily form a coherent process. There is no automatic progression from one level to the other, and people can enter at different levels. They each represent ways of reacting to - and coping with - the diversity that is experienced during a stay abroad ⁽³⁸⁾.

The first of these – rejection – is when there is no learning at all. Stadler further identifies two positions within this level. Ignorance is when the need for intercultural learning has not been recognised, or is not deemed relevant. This state is more of a mental construct than an actual state of learning in contemporary society in Europe, but would have been adequate in, for example, 18th century rural districts. Rejection proper presupposes some kind of awareness of intercultural issues, but these are consciously rejected. Stadler himself gives the example of the attitude of colonialist powers to the native cultures. They are acknowledged to exist, but are deemed inferior and must be dominated by and subjugated under the culture of the colonial power. It is not very difficult to find instances of this attitude in participants in

⁽³⁷⁾ *Zurückweisung, Isolierung, Vernetzung and Integration.*

⁽³⁸⁾ There are other definitions of the term. They are, however, similar to Stadler, albeit less developed. Hoopes and Pusch (1997) have thus stated that intercultural learning 'may refer to either (1) learning the principle characteristics of another culture, or (2) the way in which a learner progresses from ethnocentrism to an acceptance and appreciation of another culture'. It is interesting to compare these definitions to Bateson's four levels of learning, Argyris' and Schön's notion of zero, single, double and triple-loop learning, and Luhman's system-theory with its first and second-order observations.

exchanges, especially short ones. Participants experience a culture shock and react by rejecting everything in the host country. Their perception becomes selective and they end up seeing what they want to see; they return with a firm conviction of the superiority of their own values and with prejudices confirmed rather than dispelled.

Containment denotes a situation where some sort of intercultural learning is happening, but where it is compartmentalised and kept apart from the physical and psychological life of the learner. It focuses on the 'exotic' and the 'foreign' through the collection of facts about historical, geographical and cultural aspects. Containment may be depicted metaphorically as a small box where lots of disparate facts about foreign culture are gathered, with each culture having its own little box⁽³⁹⁾. Containment is what we all experience when we encounter other cultures through newspapers and geography and history lessons at school. Containment is a common phenomenon in connection with stays abroad. It can often be observed at work, even during preparation courses prior to departure, where participants are given factual, culture-specific lists of dos and don'ts in the host country. Even participants in long-term stays often do not progress beyond this level, and sometimes develop what Stadler calls 'double ethnocentrism' (1994, pp. 212-213), a kind of extra identity, that makes them uncritically embrace everything from the host country without necessarily relating it to their own culture and values.

The third level is called networking because – in contrast to the previous level – it involves an understanding that different cultures are linked to one another, and that there are many connections and parallels to be found between them. Learning about a particular country or culture is not a goal in itself, but is an example that can illustrate broader, more general points about culture. The goal at this level is a general awareness of cultural contexts and what they mean. The emphasis is not on rules about what to do and what not to do in specific cultural contexts, but on connections and system-oriented descriptions. Stadler mentions the example of the experienced international development specialist, the 'expat'⁽⁴⁰⁾, who regularly works abroad and who gets assignments done through an awareness of cultural differences and their manifestations. The learning remains external to his (or her) personality, however, in the sense that it can be described as technical know-how about adaptation processes in foreign cultures. It does not enter as part of a personal development process.

⁽³⁹⁾ See Werner and Lenske's (2000) concept of 'intercultural factual knowledge'.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ Short for expatriate, the term used for professionals who are posted in another country by their employer to work on an assignment.

Only at the fourth level – integration – is there a direct influence on the personality of the learners, where elements of another culture become an integral part of their identity. The previous levels involve an observer who, with increasing degrees of sophistication, observes foreign cultures and gathers information about these. The observations are all made from the vantage point of the observer's own cultural background, however, and are all ultimately ethnocentric. At the integration level, the observer also includes the self as an object for observation, and is able to discern the culturally determined background for actions and attitudes in him- or herself. Stadler sees a radical difference between this level and the previous levels. With a foothold in constructivism, Stadler points out (in analogy with Hofstede) that cultures are, in fact, different prisms through which to look at – or even construct – reality. It is through culture that we create our sense of identity, of belonging. Learners at the first three levels – albeit very different in their ability to cope with cultural diversity – are all ethnocentric in the sense that they see this diversity (when they see it at all) through the prism of their own culture. Intercultural learning is a method for self-reflection. Learners become aware of the cultural specificity of their own attitudes and actions, and this allows them to incorporate (integrate) elements of other cultures in their own identity, where these are more pertinent. They can react in an open and uninhibited way since their perception is not blocked by conscious and subconscious preconceived ideas of 'how things are'. According to Stadler, the time after the homecoming is especially important for integrating elements of another culture, acquired abroad, into the personality of the learner/participant.

Stadler's primary concern – as with the whole tradition of intercultural learning – is with national cultures. But there is nothing that prevents us from transposing the theory to all kinds of learning that happen through exposure to cultural diversity (or just diversity) ⁽⁴¹⁾. If we apply it to the level of professional culture, we could construct the example of the traditional carpenter, used to working exclusively with wood and very proud of his woodworking skills, who is introduced to the new material (and practice) of gypsum boards, which challenges his taken-for-granted attitude to what carpentry is about (i.e. his enculturation as a carpenter). He may react to this new practice in different ways: 'This is no good' (rejection); 'Some people use

⁽⁴¹⁾ Stadler, to do him justice, is himself open to such an application of the theory: '... the international experience should ultimately lead to a situation where students are able to cope better with changes generally, to a deeper understanding of themselves and their own and other cultures, and altogether develop a broader world view' (translated from the German) (Stadler, 1994, p. 213).

this, but they are not real carpenters' (containment); 'Some carpenters use this, but it is not my way' (networking); and 'This seems to be the new way houses are built, and I'd better adapt to it and include it in my skills' (integration).

Anthropologists have a term for this also: it is called acculturation, which denotes the process that takes place 'when culturally different groups come into continuous first-hand contact, and incorporate elements of each other, but otherwise remain intact' (Kottak, 1994, p. 56). It is what happens when our taken-for-granted knowledge and habituated actions are challenged by new elements that do not fit into our mental picture of how things are. Jarvis' (1999) formulation of this is that learning processes begin with an experience of disjuncture:

'I do not learn from my experience if I can presume upon it and act in a taken-for-granted manner. But if there is a disjuncture between my biography (the sum of my experiences, both conscious and unconscious) and a particular experience, I might seek to learn to close it. For instance, when I am introduced to a stranger at a party, I will put out my hand and shake hands – I will do this automatically and unthinkingly. Naturally, I expect the stranger to whom I am being introduced to do the same, but if he does not, I have to think quickly about how I am to behave. My learning begins from this situation; in a sense, all learning begins with an experience of disjuncture' ⁽⁴²⁾ (Jarvis, 1999, p. 38).

A textbook example of acculturation in a vocational context is afforded by the journeymen of medieval times, where many guilds prescribed that no-one could set up as a master craftsman unless he had travelled and worked abroad for a stipulated period of time. During that period, they had to stay away from their place of origin, and were not even allowed within a specific radius of it. This was a mechanism for ensuring development and innovation within the trade through contact with different ways of doing things, seen and experienced in another cultural environment. Today, however, technological developments happen at an incredibly faster rate, and the methods for dissemination ensure that they can be brought to the attention of the community of practice almost instantly. Acculturation, in a professional/vocational context, takes place continuously and vocational cultures are under constant pressure, as in the example of the carpenter above. Some professions even disappear altogether, locally, regionally or

⁽⁴²⁾ Whether disjuncture is an element in all learning can be discussed. Disjuncture does not appear in enculturation, which would then, according to Jarvis, not qualify as learning, in analogy with Munk (2002).

nationally, as they are replaced by automated industrial processes or 'relocated' to other parts of the world where wages are cheaper.

Even though national cultures (at least in the anthropological sense) are a lot less volatile, the mechanism is the same. It is about coping with diversity and difference in a constructive manner; being open to change instead of closing one's mind to other ways of doing things. It is about tolerance and openness in a multicultural society, and flexibility and adaptability in the labour market. The stay abroad is used as a didactic tool to this purpose as a way of artificially inducing disjuncture, by placing people in an environment where diversity and difference is massive, present at all levels, and hence cannot be ignored. It may be argued that the impact of such an experience is more marked if it happens at a time when the enculturation process is not completed. This would explain – and justify – the insistence on sending out young people in some programmes.

2.2.4. Introducing disjuncture in a VET enculturation phase

Exactly how we learn through disjuncture – exposure to diversity and difference – in a professional/vocational context has been explored by Donald A. Schön (1983, 1987). His work is particularly interesting in that it takes into account modes of reflection that are not conscious (in the sense that they are verbalised) which he sees as peculiar to the notion of practice.

Schön's point of departure is his observation of what he sees as a discrepancy between what is taught in (American) institutions of vocational education and the tasks that the students from here will encounter in the course of their later professional career. Problems out there do not fall neatly within the boundaries of the technical rationality of their profession, but constitute a 'swampy lowland' of 'messy, confusing problems' in 'indeterminate zones of practice'. He continues: 'It is just these indeterminate zones of practice, however, that practitioners and critical observers of the professions have come to see with increasing clarity over the past two decades as central to professional practice' (1987, pp. 6-7).

Schön's concern is with how practitioners within a given field achieve what he calls 'professional artistry'. To this end, he sets up an epistemology of knowledge, where he distinguishes between the knowledge acquired in the educational establishment (which he describes as a mainly theoretical knowledge, rooted in a tradition of positivist technical rationality) and a different kind of knowing, acquired through practice and basically assumptional in nature, which he calls 'knowing-in-action'. Knowing-in-action is an important part of a profession; professionals 'know' what is right in a given situation, and they carry out skilful judgements, decisions and

actions without being able to state the rules and procedures they follow. Schön's examples of knowing-in-action range from simple, everyday actions, like the ability to ride a bicycle, to very complex and specialised situations, as in the ability of a skilled physician to diagnose a particular disease in a person the moment he or she walks into his consulting room. Knowing-in-action is similar to Polanyi's concept of 'tacit knowledge', knowledge that eludes capture in words but which is nevertheless recognised by practitioners within a community of practice and forms part of their conception of normalcy within their field. The culture of a profession is composed of what we may call 'canonical knowledge' (Seely-Brown and Duguid, 1991) – i.e. rational, verbalised, and conscious knowledge of the kind that is taught in educational establishments – and this knowing-in-action. Schön's point, however, is that these two elements are not enough to constitute professional artistry.

In the swampy lowlands of real practice, professionals will encounter problems that fall outside their conception of normalcy, problems that present new and unknown features that cannot be dealt with using the habituated responses of their knowing-in-action. This encounter leads to a surprise (Jarvis' disjuncture), that again leads (or may lead) to a process of experimentation and reflection. Schön is primarily concerned with a particular form of reflection, which he sees as peculiar to practice and calls 'reflection-in-action'. Reflection-in-action is not the same as scientific reflection (which Schön calls 'post-mortem reflection'). Like knowing-in-action, reflection-in-action is not necessarily verbal, and practitioners who have performed a feat of reflection-in-action are often at a loss to explain in words what happened (Schön uses the example of a jazz-musician improvising during a jam session). The practitioner may then later reflect on his reflection-in-action in order to produce a good verbal description of it, just as he may turn 'knowing-in-action' into 'knowledge-in-action' by verbalising it. The outcome of reflection-in-action may be new instinctive understandings of phenomena, new ways of framing problems and, ultimately, a restructuring of his or her strategies for action. It is a way of reacting, almost instinctively, to change and diversity encountered in practice – experimenting, fiddling with new solutions – instead of rejecting it outright and sticking to the solution model offered by canonical knowledge.

Schön is concerned by the failure of educational establishments to develop the capacity for 'reflection-in-action' in students. These are, in his view, exclusively concerned with knowledge in a technical-rational perspective. To remedy this, Schön proposes to expose students to diversity during their course. His solution is the introduction of a *practicum* into the

curriculum; a period where would-be practitioners are allowed to try their hand with problems from the messy and indeterminate zones of real practice, under the guidance of an experienced practitioner. This experienced practitioner – the coach or mentor – will introduce them to disjuncture and help and guide them in their development of a capacity for reflection-in-action during the placement. These are not to be equated with traditional placements in companies, however. Schön notes that ‘most offices, factories, firms and clinics are not set up for the demanding task of initiation and education. Pressures for performance tend to be high; time at a premium; and mistakes costly’ (1987, p. 37). Instead he introduces the ‘reflective *practicum*’. By this term he means a context, which approximates the real world but in a special setting which is designed for the task of learning a practice. In his own words it is a ‘free space’ i.e. ‘... a virtual world, relatively free of the pressure, distractions and the risks of the real one, to which, nevertheless, it refers’ (1987, p. 37).

The notion of the *practicum* may not have a lot in common with the ordinary industrial placement, but there are interesting parallels with the placement abroad. First, both concern a period of time away from the usual context. In Schön’s *practicum*, it is a period of time away from the educational establishment; in a placement abroad, it is a period of time spent outside of the national education and training system. Both place the student/trainee in a new setting, more or less starting as a *tabula rasa*, and consequently able to bring new aspects of personality and ability into play. It is a place for experimentation. Both groups learn from being exposed to diversity, although the way in which this happens is different.

Schön’s students, who have no experience of working life and the ‘swampy lowland’ of the problems encountered here, are exposed to different professional cultures (‘zones of practice’) through complex tasks that defy technical rationality within their field. Participants in placements abroad experience known problems, but in an unfamiliar setting. There are other important differences as well, however. Schön is concerned with a target group coming from higher education, and the examples he gives are taken from academic areas such as architecture, design, classical music and psychoanalysis. These will have had an overwhelmingly theoretical education, and are difficult to place in a real company precisely because they have had so little exposure to practice. This is not normally the case with trainees with a VET-background, at least not those who come from alternance-based systems. Provided they are sent out relatively late in their course, they will have had extensive exposure to practice (and correspondingly less to theory), at least if they come from an alternance-

based VET system. This, and the nature of the tasks they will be performing, means that pressure will be reduced and the cost of mistakes lower. A third year apprentice baker may successfully accomplish many tasks in a commercial bakery, even without constant supervision. This contrasts with a student of psychology, who cannot, for both ethical and practical reasons, be allowed to undertake real practice in the clinic.

The fact that the trainees coming from the VET-system will have had more exposure to practice also means that a larger degree of the total sum of their skills will be based on knowing-in-action – or tacit knowledge – rather than theoretical knowledge. This knowing-in-action will be acquired mainly through of imitation and identification; as part of their identity-building process, and in analogy with the theory of Lave and Wenger as described above. In the major part of his book *Educating the reflective practitioner*, Schön is describing (through case studies) how reflection-in-action can be developed in the course of a *practicum*. The master or instructor plays a key role here, and Schön describes the kind of coaching that is necessary in order to bring the student to develop knowing-in-action and, ultimately, a capacity for reflection-in-action. It is time-consuming and requires a close interplay between the student and the master. It is clear that the processes described by Schön cannot be emulated in a real company, let alone for a trainee from abroad in the lower echelons of the educational ladder. But, in comparison with the student, the trainee with a VET-background has the advantage of already having been exposed to practice, and having developed a knowing-in-action that the student lacks. This knowing-in-action also constitutes their conception of normalcy within their practice. In the course of a placement abroad, they will inevitably be exposed to new angles of approach and new methodologies within the same practice. Schön himself comments on this situation: 'Learning by exposure and immersion ... often proceeds without conscious awareness, although the student may become aware of it later on, when he moves into a different setting' (1987, p. 38). The exposure to these new angles on his practice is not just a matter of the trainee having to adapt. It is also – and far more importantly – a point where the trainee has to develop his capacity for reflection-in-action in order to accommodate this new situation, as well as becoming aware of his tacit knowledge and starting to reflect on his knowledge-in-action as well as reflection-in-action.

2.3. Towards a theory of learning in placements abroad

If we were to describe the learning in placements abroad in one phrase, a good effort would be learning through exposure to diversity. Here, the term diversity refers not just to linguistic and general cultural diversity, but also – and in particular – professional diversity. But the full significance of the phenomenon cannot be captured in one simple sentence. The journeymen of medieval times and later who were travelling all over Europe to practice their trade were learning through exposure to diversity. At that time, however, the pace of change was slow, and new developments could be assimilated by the individual over a lifetime. The twin processes of globalisation and accelerating technological development are causing change at a much faster pace than before, that change being paradigmatic rather than incremental in nature. Professional profiles change dramatically, and some professions disappear more or less overnight as new technologies are introduced or whole lines of production are moved overseas by multinational companies in a cost-cutting exercise.

Individuals may have to change career – and thereby also professional culture and identity – several times in the course of their working lives. The requirement is not to cope with the occasional new development in technology or work organisation, but to cope with the effects of change itself. In the words of Piaget, one could say that the process of adaptation to change is now becoming accommodative rather than assimilative. It is not just the question of fitting new elements into an existing framework of understanding (identity or culture), but of reconceptualising the framework itself to accommodate a new reality that has outstripped the former. This can happen not just once, but perhaps twice or three times during an individual's working life. Vocational education and training – whose task it is to prepare people for the demands of working life – must own up to this reality and the new skills needs imposed, which means finding ways and means of equipping people to cope with change. A placement abroad, by relocating participants to a different national culture, puts them in a context where these different notions of reality are perceivable. Participants can take the first steps in a learning process that – besides equipping them with other international and personal skills – ultimately may equip them with a capacity for adjusting and redefining their (culturally determined) identities.

Participating in a placement project abroad does not simply mean being exposed to different techniques for doing things that one might take home and incorporate into domestic practices. It means exposure to a whole new

framework of understanding that cannot be exported, either in part or in its totality, because it ultimately rests on different, and very deep-rooted, values. It gives the participant a practical demonstration of what ‘change’ may imply in a sense that is impossible to replicate within a national context. Even though it is possible to practice some kind of ‘boundary-crossing’ here (for example, by introducing alternance-based training) this will still happen within the same conceptual framework, and cannot bring home to the student or apprentice what ‘change’ actually implies. A placement abroad may demonstrate in a very forceful way to the participant that a carpenter or a bricklayer is not just a carpenter or a bricklayer, but may imply some quite substantial differences. This challenges professional identity or culture and – by showing that things can be different - opens it up to new developments. This exposure to diversity may encourage the learner not to accept and preserve the professional identity that he or she is presented with during enculturation, but to incorporate other elements and thereby ultimately create his or her own version of it. This ability to create and recreate professional identity allows them to cope with change – not just reactively, but also proactively, by not being tied to a specific context.

Placements abroad is this, and more. Summing it up, we can say that learning here happens by exposing the participants to an experience of diversity that is so massive (see Hofstede’s four cultural dimensions) that it cannot be repressed and ignored, but which they are forced to relate to in a constructive manner in order to ‘survive’. Through this, they will develop and train their capacity for reflection and reflection-in-action. Moreover, it may be argued that participants are most receptive to this learning if undertaken during the vocational enculturation phase (which is not necessarily identical to initial vocational training).

2.3.1. Learning situations

Learning during a placement abroad has been something of a mysterious process for actors in the field. Participants entered at one end and appeared some time later at the other, and, on the way, something had happened to them. Most of the times this was something positive, but not always. Sometimes the learning processes go wrong, and at other times, we are clearly not exploiting the full potential of the tool. In order to improve the output, we must try to shed some light on the process, breaking it down into more manageable and operational entities. We will call these entities learning situations. The term learning situation denotes the specific conditions – or circumstances - under which learning takes place during a placement project abroad. Building on the insights acquired from reading of theory, we will

postulate the existence of four of these, which form our theory of learning in placements abroad. They are:

- (a) immersion, i.e. that participants are entirely surrounded by, and submersed in, the culture of the host country;
- (b) responsabilisation, i.e. that participants are on their own in a new and unknown environment, a long way off from family and friends, and must learn to cope with this;
- (c) relativation, i.e. that participants experience that common, everyday practices are done differently from what they are used to in their home country;
- (d) perspectivation, i.e. that participants have the opportunity for reflection on their experiences, and possibly may incorporate elements of this in their own arsenal of this they 'can do'.

It should be noted, in passing, that the words used for situations two, three, and four respectively – responsabilisation, relativation, and perspectivation - do not exist (as yet, anyway) in any dictionary of the English language. They have been coined especially for this purpose, partly to avoid confusion, partly for want of better terms.

The first learning situation – immersion – can be more precisely defined as the degree of proximity to, and interaction with, another culture and mentality. The rationale behind this is not very sophisticated: the more participants are exposed to the foreign environment, the more they are likely to acquire in terms of language skills and intercultural skills. Conversely, if they remain mostly with their fellow countrymen (as is quite often the case in mobility projects involving groups staying in the same area) and are not properly integrated in the work processes at the company in which they are doing their placement, the learning outcome will necessarily be limited.

The second learning situation - responsabilisation - denotes the space that is available to the participant for autonomous decision making in the living and working environment. Responsibilisation does not necessarily require a stay abroad in order to succeed. It is possible to construct similar learning situations inside the borders of a country, or within the confines of a particular culture or society. The intercultural element provides a forceful learning potential, however. For many participants, this will be the first time they experience 'standing on their own feet'. They will not have their usual network of family, friends and teachers to offer instruction and examples on how to solve the numerous problems of everyday life in- and outside of their placement. They will have to devise ways and means of doing this

themselves. At the same time, many of the challenges have cultural causes and will be of a nature where they cannot draw on past models for their solution. On the other hand, the fact that they are alone in this new environment also means that they can act in an atmosphere where they are free from the expectations of others and can experiment with aspects of their personality that are normally not activated (Schön's 'free space'). In this situation they will stimulate the development of their self-confidence, their self-reliance, their creativity (to help them solve unfamiliar problems) and their entrepreneurship (since they have to take initiatives themselves to overcome these problems).

Relativation - defined as the opportunities presented for experiencing familiar objects and practices through the lens of a different cultural setting - is a tricky concept. It is a normal, and in fact, inevitable occurrence during stays abroad (at least in the initial phase) that participants see and experience (and judge) different objects and practices through the lens of their own cultural setting. Here the tables are turned: relativation is about seeing how familiar objects and practices are used or done differently in another (cultural) context. The difference is an important one. The focus is not on foreign, but on own practices, and the observations open up to reflections on how these might be changed and improved: they are no longer taken for granted and unalterable. There is a fundamental difference to immersion. Immersion is primarily adaptive: participants learn about another language and different practices, and this knowledge enables them to get by in - or, in other words, to adapt to - a specific cultural environment other than their own. Relativation is not about specific knowledge, but about change. It is about accepting that normal artefacts and practices are not necessarily the only possible ones in a given situation; that there may be other ways of doing things. In their attempt at constructing a taxonomy for mobility, Teichler and Gordon (2001, p. 400) have called this type of mobility '... horizontal and contrastive. The learners move from one place to another, which are more or less similar in quality. The value of this mobility rests in the opportunity for experiencing a contrasting educational and social environment and to broaden one's horizon by noting that things can be different than what one had taken for granted at home'. It is perfectly possible to imagine a stay abroad where this does not happen, or happens only to a very limited degree. This is the case when the participants are placed in an environment, which is almost completely alien to them, and where most of the practices they encounter are new and bear little or no resemblance to what they know from home. In that event, everything is seen as strange and exotic and perceived as having no relation to the world the participant knows, and does not give

rise to reflection and introspection. The participants must be placed in an environment which overlaps with their own in key points in order to enable them to contrast and compare. In a placement situation, this means that participants and placements must be closely matched; in other words, that the placement must be within the field where the participant possesses a fully or partly developed professional/vocational culture.

Perspectivation is defined as the possibility for reflection and follow up on experiences of disjuncture. It is not always that reflection comes along by itself. Schön stresses the importance of the mentor (or the coach) in the process of developing reflection-in-action during the placement, whereas Stadler emphasises the time after the stay abroad as an important moment for helping and stimulating these processes of reflection and integrating their outcomes into the personality of the participant. According to Stadler (1994, pp. 210-214) this should happen through organised seminars, where participants are given the space to express themselves and to discuss their experiences and feelings with guidance counsellors and ideally also with others who have been in the same situation.

As is evident from the descriptions, these learning situations represent a potential, which can be fulfilled to various degrees in any given project. This potential can be wholly or partly unfulfilled if: participants socialise with their fellow-countrymen only; if they are 'mothered' by an accompanying tutor and not given the opportunity to solve problems on their own to the extent that they are actually capable of; if the work placement in the host country has little similarity to their professional profile; or if they are left to their own devices both during and after the placement. It should also be stressed that these learning situations are analytic constructs and, to a certain extent, overlapping. If participants are not immersed in the workplace environment, they will not have the experience of assuming responsibility for work processes and solving related problems. If they are not allowed to participate in work processes, they will only superficially be acquainted with different cultural practices and only to a limited degree face the disjunctures that form the necessary precondition for reflection and hence learning. Finally, it is worth noting that these learning situations are, to a significant degree, operational and quantifiable. We can identify them in a concrete placement situation and thus assess the learning potential in this. These learning situations can be used for the planning, implementation and evaluation of mobility projects; an aspect which will be further elaborated on below.

2.4. Pedagogical implications

The aim of this section is to try to work out the practical pedagogical implications of the learning theory presented above, and couple these with the available material on pedagogical aspects of placements abroad. The raw material for this comes primarily from a number of publications on practical issues of organising placement abroad, which mainly exist in the form of ‘grey literature’: project reports and material developed in projects (notably Leonardo da Vinci pilot projects, where a number of these have tackled issues of pedagogical relevance to placements abroad), conference reports, information material developed by placement organisers and programme administrators, etc. The total sum of material available across Europe is not very large, and much is reiterative and therefore of limited value. To compensate for lack of material more directly focused on the placement issue, experiences and material from related fields and discourses – youth exchange and postings abroad in business and industry – have been incorporated where appropriate. Generally, the overall level of consciousness about pedagogic issues in placement abroad is still developing. Success criteria are often given as numbers of participants and in terms of organisational issues rather than in terms of learning outcome. Put very crudely, this somehow seems to imply that as long as participants are sent out and come back in one piece, the placement has been a success. An inordinately large amount of work has thus been done on legal and administrative barriers to mobility, whereas pedagogic issues hardly register.

The evaluations that have been identified and used as the basis for the statements made in this study seem, nevertheless, to indicate that these projects do deliver in terms of skills acquisition. However, there are no evaluations that have focused exclusively on skills acquisition and, in most cases, this is merely one of several aspects under scrutiny in a summative evaluation exercise commissioned by programme sponsors to justify continued expenditure. The questions asked are generally not very precise and leave room for interpretation as to how and why skills were acquired. They can thus be used to say something about the learning potential, but not really about the extent to which this is reached in individual projects. A useful concept here is the term ‘zone of proximal development’ coined by the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. The term is used here to denote the space that exists between the actual learning outcome of a given project and the optimum outcome possible. In other words: we know that placement projects often produce positive learning outcomes but are we exploiting the full potential of the tool? How big is this ‘zone of proximal development’ in

each of the learning situations, and how (if at all) is it possible to narrow it down and reach better results? This is the subject of this chapter. However, a more rigorous approach would require a number of dedicated evaluation projects that build on a more precise theoretical understanding (or hypothesis) of learning in placements abroad, and which use different (qualitative) evaluation techniques than the ones used so far.

2.4.1. General implications of learning theory

If we accept the analysis of the learning potential afforded by the theories applied in the preceding chapter, we may infer a number of general implications for the pedagogy of placements abroad. Moreover, we may, from the empirical material available and the literature search, highlight a number of specific practices that can help us in turning these implications into concrete operational guidelines.

2.4.1.1. Placements abroad must be seen in a learning perspective

Seeing placements abroad in a learning rather than an organisational perspective implies going beyond the actual period of time spent abroad. It means defining the process in a broader framework that also comprises a point in time before and after the event, which we can call the preparation and the follow-up (or debriefing) phases. From Hofstede we can infer how cultural differences can be deeply disruptive if the participant is not aware of their existence and can pre-empt or defuse conflicts. Stadler makes the point about the time after the placement (which we will call the debriefing phase) as the point where the experiences acquired are integrated into the personality of the participant and become learning. If we only focus on the period spent abroad, we may involuntarily widen the 'zone of proximal development' and reduce skills acquisition.

2.4.1.2. Learning through diversity and disjuncture

The learning that occurs during a placement abroad, (and that cannot be replicated in the home country) is caused by the exposure to diversity, known as disjuncture. This disjuncture provokes reflection and thereby learning, but it is a double-edged sword. If the feeling of disjuncture is too overwhelming, it can turn into discomfort and frustration, and ultimately hostility towards the host country and its inhabitants. People who are angry, frustrated, stressed and under pressure are bad learners, and the learning process may be seriously impeded. In some cases it can even turn to rejection, leading to negative learning. The amount of disjuncture experienced must stand in proportion to the capacity of the target group.

2.4.1.3. *Different realities that must match*

An important part of the learning – namely that which has to do with the ability to cope with diversity and change – happens through relativation; i.e. the experience that common, everyday practices are done differently from what the participant would consider right and normal. It follows from this that there must be at least some kind of overlap between the situations that the participants are exposed to abroad – both in and outside of working hours – and what they know from their home country. If the gap between these is too wide, the risk is that the whole exercise will be experienced as an exotic adventure or a pointless excursion having little or no relation to their world. Transposed to a VET-context, it is not the case that any work placement will do; it has to be within the profession where the participant is training, and the level must be appropriate. Drilling holes in a piece of iron or making coffee and photocopying will not do.

2.4.1.4. *Placements abroad as a free space*

Placements abroad may function as a ‘free space’ (like Schön’s notion of the *practicum*), where participants can experiment with parts of their personality that are not normally brought into play, and thus represent a potential for personal development. One reason why (young) people may be afraid of trying out new things and changing is the expectations of their surroundings. This can be an argument against sending participants out in groups that can be together both in work and leisure time ⁽⁴³⁾.

2.4.1.5. *Placements abroad as legitimate peripheral participation*

Lave and Wenger’s notion of learning as ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ is very apt in relation to placements abroad. Participants start at the outer rim of the periphery in the first period of their placement and only later will they work their way towards a more central position and hence to an involvement in more demanding and challenging tasks (immersion and responsabilisation). A crucial term, however, is ‘legitimacy’. If the presence of participants is not perceived as justified by the community of practice, it can be extremely difficult to make any movement at all from the rim and inwards. They may well spend the time peering over the shoulders of busy colleagues instead of being involved in tasks that are conducive to learning. It is, therefore, important to establish this legitimacy from the beginning.

⁽⁴³⁾ Some participants, in contrast, may need the reassurance of not being alone in new and alien surroundings but this is an issue to be reflected upon during the planning phase.

2.4.1.6. *Placements abroad as an integrative learning platform*

Placements span different learning modes ('reflection-in-action' and reflection) and different 'subjects', and happen through specific learning situations: immersion, responsabilisation, relativation and perspectivation. Organisers may choose to place more emphasis on one at the expense of the others, or external factors (like financing) may place restrictions in terms of duration, choice of host country, resources available for preparation and follow up, etc. Also the nature of the target group may impose similar restrictions; in some countries, apprentices/trainees are not allowed stays abroad beyond four weeks and certain types of disadvantaged groups may not be capable of extended stays for psychological reasons. Therefore, it is not possible to make general normative statements about the didactics of placements, but merely to point to issues that should be considered.

2.4.2. **Important moments in the learning phase**

The material available on pedagogic aspects of placements abroad, coupled with the insight achieved from the theoretical readings, brings us to an appreciation of the following elements, which we will call important moments:

- the placement agreement;
- preparation;
- mentoring and monitoring;
- debriefing.

In the following, they are all streamlined in accordance with the learning theory developed above. The coherence between them is crucial: a good placement agreement establishes the foundations for learning; good preparation sensitises to learning; good mentoring facilitates learning; and good debriefing visualises the learning process for the participants afterwards, and helps them act upon the outcomes.

2.4.2.1. *The placement agreement*

The placement agreement ensures that there is a clear consensus between project organiser/trainee on the one hand and the host company/mentor on the other on the exact nature and scope of the role and the tasks that the trainee will perform during the placement. There are basically two types of project placement agreement: the first is used primarily for trainees in initial vocational training or with low skills levels; and the second is used for students in higher education or young workers with some experience, who possess skills beyond initial vocational training.

The first contains references to a list of routine operations that the trainee must undertake in compliance with the curriculum. In a Leonardo da Vinci project undertaken by partners in Denmark, Germany, France and the UK ⁽⁴⁴⁾, an interesting methodology for facilitating the negotiation of training in placements abroad was developed for a target group of (young) people in initial vocational training. When negotiating the placement, a three-step procedure is involved, each step supported by specific written information material in the shape of printed leaflets. The first leaflet gives the general conditions for the placement; remuneration, working hours, health and safety, industrial injuries insurance, and all other practical conditions that must be fulfilled in order to comply with legal and administrative obligations. The second explains the background for the placement, the types of tasks and the level of responsibility expected, and a general description of conditions in the relevant sector in the home country of the participant. The third leaflet contains a long list of all the practical tasks that trainees must master within the profession where they are training. On this list the host company can tick off the tasks that they can offer during the placement and, for certain tasks, also at what level. This list serves initially as an information instrument and a basis for negotiation of the training contents of the placement with the company. In the next round, however, it is used as the basis of a training agreement between host company and project organiser concerning the individual trainee, and signed by all parties involved. The model is used by the appropriate bodies in Denmark as an instrument for recognising a given placement as an integral part of an individual's training curriculum.

The second model – which requires a certain skill level from the trainee – concerns the definition of a particular project that the trainee assumes responsibility for carrying out. This is a model that is used extensively by students in higher education, such as the placements organised by IAESTE and AIESEC. It is a condition that trainees are capable of directing their own work (to a certain extent) and possess the necessary skills to carry it out.

2.4.2.2. *Preparation*

The preparation phase has two important purposes. The first is to help ensure that disjuncture does not turn into discomfort, and thereby imperil the learning process. The second is to ensure that immersion can begin as quickly as possible, so that valuable time is not lost in trying to get access to the community of practice, thereby reducing the overall learning potential of the placement. This is particularly important for short-term placements.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ Project title: Quality assurance and certification of work placements abroad (www.leonardo.cec.eu.int/bp/).

Discomfort in placements abroad is closely linked to the notion of culture shock. Hofstede defines culture shock as ‘a state of distress following the transfer of a person to an unfamiliar cultural environment. It may be accompanied by physical symptoms’ (1997, p. 260). Culture shock is a state of stress compounded by several factors: cross-cultural encounters going wrong because of different views on what is right, normal and natural; the helplessness induced by the feeling of not being able to do even the simplest things because of ignorance of how things work; feelings of frustration and inferiority because of the limited ability to communicate in a foreign language; being overwhelmed beyond saturation point with new impressions and experiences; and feelings of loneliness and isolation. It is a transition phase, and one that most go through in some way or the other, but the length and intensity can vary considerably. A very common reaction to culture shock is hostility towards the host country and the inhabitants, avoidance with everything and everybody connected to it, and of negative prejudices being confirmed (or even new ones being created) (Storti, 2001b, pp. 47-63). Since the learning situations in a placement abroad are dependent on the character and intensity of encounters with people from the foreign culture, it naturally follows that this may have grave consequences for the learning process. It may even lead to what one might call negative learning, a rejection of the foreign culture and everything it stands for, and a bigoted ethnocentrism. This culture shock and the discomfort caused by it can largely be alleviated by preparing and training the participant before departure.

Appropriate preparation may also be used to speed up the process leading to immersion. The crucial factor in immersion in placements is the acceptance of the community of practice. This is partly dependent on the degree of overlap between the professional identities of the participants and the community of practice they are trying to gain entrance to but also on the degree to which they can function with colleagues despite differences in language and general outlook. Even given plenty of goodwill from both parties, it is not difficult to imagine possible barriers to understanding that can obstruct and delay immersion. At least some of these can be tackled during a preparation phase prior to departure.

Preparation has three functions (Schultz-Hansen and Kristensen, 1997). Besides preparation proper, it is motivation (to ensure that trainees to whom the idea of a learning experience abroad comes less naturally are encouraged to participate), and selection. The last function serves to ensure that there is a correct match between participants and the type of venture they are about to embark on. Not everyone is ready to be sent out individually on a long-term placement to a far-away place, and this should be taken into

account. Preparation proper has five aspects:

- (a) linguistic preparation, to ensure that participants have at their command a reasonable proficiency in the language of the host country, also with regard to the terminology of the workplace;
- (b) cultural preparation, to ensure that the participants have an awareness of cultural differences, both as a general phenomenon and concerning specific differences between host and home country, particularly at the workplace;
- (c) vocational preparation, to ensure that participants are aware of the places where professional profiles of the home and host country differ, for example that a bricklayer in Denmark corresponds to four different profiles in the UK, and to point out differences in working methods and work organisation;
- (d) practical preparation, to ensure that participants are aware of practical matters in connection with matters such as social security, transportation, accommodation, residence and work permits (if applicable), safety, insurance, etc.;
- (e) psychological/mental preparation, to ensure that participants are aware of the symptoms of culture shock and can combat and alleviate this to avoid it finding expression in avoidance and hostility towards the host country.

There is a degree of overlap between these aspects (e.g. between the cultural and vocational aspects) and almost limitless possibilities for combining various aspects in the preparation work (e.g. by conducting cultural preparation in the language of the host country, etc.). There are various means of carrying out this preparation, according to the nature of the target group and the resources available. Within the field of youth exchanges, the preparation issue (in particular cultural preparation) has received much attention, both in the context of European (EU) programmes and within the Council of Europe. Also the Franco-German Youth Office has produced studies and material on the subject of cultural preparation. For placements abroad, however, a small study carried out by Carpenter, Eglöf and Watters in 1995 and funded through the Petra and Lingua programmes marks the only European-level effort so far.

2.4.2.3. *Mentoring, monitoring and tutoring*

During the placement period, the trainee is basically left to his or her own devices; this is an important and necessary precondition for learning. Preparation and the agreement with the host company about tasks to be carried out and training aims are meant to ensure that the challenges

encountered are perceived as meaningful and will serve to develop and enhance the skills of the trainee. However, a stay abroad will always include a number of imponderables – or an element of risk – that no amount of planning and preparation can eliminate. All organised placement projects abroad, therefore, operate with some degree of supervision so that adequate measures can be undertaken should a contingency arise which threatens to destabilise the learning process and which the trainee cannot deal with alone. This supervision may be passive (one or more persons that the trainee can contact on his or her own initiative when and if the need arises) or active (one or more persons following the trainee on a regular basis ready to intervene if they deem it necessary). A number of terms are used to denote this activity: supervision, monitoring, tutorship and mentoring. These words are used indiscriminately. They often create confusion as to what they actually cover and whether they are basically synonymous or denote different practices. For the purpose of this publication, these terms have been assigned the following meanings.

Supervision and monitoring are general terms used synonymously to denote activities whereby project organisers ensure a level of preparedness in relation to problems that a participant may encounter during a stay abroad, both inside and outside of the placement.

Tutorship and mentoring are specific terms that denote the accompaniment of learning in connection with the placement. Tutorship is used when this function is undertaken by somebody outside of the enterprise, whereas mentorship is when the function is undertaken by a person from the host enterprise.

The word mentor originates in Greek mythology, more precisely from Homer's *Odyssey*, where Ulysses entrusts the responsibility for the upbringing of his son to his old friend Mentor before he sails away to take part in the siege of Troy. Mentoring can be described as a process whereby educated and experienced persons facilitate learning and the personal development of less educated and less experienced (younger) persons - the mentees - and support, guide, encourage and look after them to help them develop professionally and/or personally. The term is used in this sense in connection with the Europass-certificate⁽⁴⁵⁾, where the description of tasks carried out in the host company has to be signed by the mentor of the trainee, a person employed in that company.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Europass is a uniform European certificate, developed by the European Commission to certify placements abroad that form an integral part of a recognised training course. The Europass-document is issued by one or more national contact points (NCPs), and has to be filled in by the host company abroad and signed by the mentor. The Europass was launched by a decision of the European Council of 21.12.1998 (1999/51/EEC).

The traditional relationship between the master craftsman and his apprentice may be described in terms of a mentor/mentee-relationship, but mentoring in education and training is a concept that is known particularly in connection with groups of young people with problems of adaptation, e.g. with difficulties or disorders of a social or emotional character ⁽⁴⁶⁾. There are certain parallels between this group and young people participating in a placement abroad. The latter are also disadvantaged in the sense that they have problems with both language and customs at the workplace, and therefore experience difficulties of adaptation. There are also important differences, however. A participant in a placement abroad is, in most cases, otherwise well-functioning and stable, and does not need a role model for imitation and identification or an example to follow ⁽⁴⁷⁾. The problems of adaptation are of a transient nature, and not a feature of their personality. The mentor/mentee-relationship is of a limited duration, and there is usually no time for a deeper relationship to develop. Moreover, pressure arising from the fact that the enterprise is engaged in real production will usually prevent a mentor/mentee-relationship as envisaged by Schön. Developing the needs are, therefore, more of a practical than an affective nature.

The exact role and function of the mentor in the context of a placement abroad has not been the subject of any research and development work. Even in the Europass-document there is no further description attached to the term, and the host company is left to its own conjectures as to what this function actually implies. Again we must resort to 'examples of good practice' for any information, but this is usually not very detailed and, in many cases, limited to some general hints about the need for mentoring/tutoring/monitoring, without specifying any details about who and what ⁽⁴⁸⁾. With a point of departure in Lave and Wenger's concept of 'legitimate peripheral participation' into 'communities of practice', however, we may make certain statements about the function. Mentors may or may

⁽⁴⁶⁾ See e.g. the publications on this issue produced in connection with the Youthstart-initiative: *Vejle Kommunale Ungdomsskole [Mentoring young people ...]* (2000).

⁽⁴⁷⁾ This is different with disadvantaged groups, where specific didactic measures must be used.

⁽⁴⁸⁾ Ray (1995, p. 13) has the following to say about the issue under the heading *Monitoring and Evaluation*: 'Both the trainees' personal welfare and training/work placement should be adequately monitored. Aspects to be considered include:

- will there be designated people in the host Member State responsible for monitoring?
- will the trainees be accompanied by a supervisor for the duration of the placement?
- if the trainees are in a number of locations, how will the tutor ensure that their placement is being properly monitored?
- during the placement, will trainees be monitored and advised as a group or individually?

not be the ones with whom the contract or agreement concerning vocational aims is concluded. But they are the ones who monitor its everyday implementation at the workplace, and who can negotiate any necessary adjustments with the trainee when and if needed. More importantly, however, participants in a placement of a limited duration will, in most cases, not have the time to get properly integrated into the community of practice if left to their own devices. Such participants will need active and continuing assistance to establish and maintain the legitimacy of the position. As a consequence, the mentoring role could therefore imply the following tasks:

- (a) acting as a contact person in the company;
- (b) discussing any problems the trainee may have and put them into perspective;
- (c) initiating the participant into the community (or communities) of practice at the workplace;
- (d) ensuring integration into work processes;
- (e) mediating the contact with colleagues and ensuring the legitimacy of the trainee;
- (f) helping sort out any problems at the workplace;
- (g) monitoring progress and carrying out evaluation talks at regular intervals.

In order to carry out these tasks successfully, the mentor should possess the following knowledge and skills (partly after Vejle Kommune Ungdomsskole [Mentoring young people], 2000):

- (a) knowledge of the work functions that the trainee is carrying out;
- (b) the necessary status in the enterprise so that he or she can ensure integration into the community of practice and intervene with authority in the event of interpersonal problems;
- (c) the ability to relate constructively to young people who wish to learn;
- (d) the desire to help young people to develop and mature;
- (e) an open mind and a flexible attitude, and an awareness of intercultural issues;
- (f) the necessary time and willingness to establish a relationship with young people;
- (g) the ability to see possibilities instead of limitations;
- (h) the ability to guide and support without controlling and directing.

Tutorship in the above definition – i.e. somebody outside the company accompanying the learning process – suffers from a number of immediate disadvantages when compared to mentoring. Tutors are often either accompanying teachers from the home institution of the trainee, or teachers from a partner institution in the host country. These will not be able to follow the process continuously to the same degree, and they may not have the necessary knowledge of the work functions that the trainee is carrying out. The major disadvantage, however, is their lack of status in the enterprise when it comes to ensuring integration into the community (or communities) of practice at the workplace. External tutors may be used when nobody at the host company is willing or able to undertake a mentoring function (or organisers are simply afraid to ask), or when it is necessary for the trainee to be accompanied by somebody with a particular relationship with him or her (e.g. for certain groups of ‘disadvantaged’ young people). A Swedish Leonardo da Vinci pilot project⁽⁴⁹⁾ has developed a model for teletutoring; i.e. an electronic system where students on placement report continuously to a tutor in the home institution via e-mail according to predefined criteria.

2.4.2.4. *The follow-up or debriefing phase*

The follow-up (or debriefing) phase is a subject that has not received much attention. A search for literature on this phenomenon yields meagre results, even in comparison with the sparse literature on placements abroad in general. One of the few to have been concerned with this is Craig Storti, who, albeit writing about a different target group (expatriates returning from postings abroad), remarks:

‘With the front end of the overseas experience so well discussed and documented, it’s surprising to find that the back end, coming home, has received relatively little attention. After all, most of the people who go overseas eventually come back. Yet, few books on readjustment are available, and training seminars on the subject are still very much the exception rather than the rule’ (Storti, 2001b, p. xiii).

This is all the more surprising since this phase, if we follow the argumentation of Stadler, is a vital element in the learning process, as this is where the experience acquired during the stay is integrated into the personality of the participant/learner. Storti’s book on the subject of the returnee is not written from the point of view of an educationalist, but of that of a business consultant. His concern is consequently not with learning, but

⁽⁴⁹⁾ Project title: SuperPro (www.leonardo.cec.eu.int/bp/).

with readaptation: how returning expatriates are successfully reintegrated into the company after their period abroad. A major point is also valid in connection with a discussion of learning aspects; namely that of the 'reverse culture shock' (which also Stadler treats to some length).

Reverse culture shock is (as the words imply) a process that is very similar to that of the culture shock experienced by participants upon arrival in the host country. It has to do with the disenchantment often experienced by the returnee after the first rush of joy upon homecoming (the 'honeymoon period' in Storti's words) has subsided and given way to more mixed feelings. It has to do with a feeling of alienation; of being different, and full of an experience that one cannot share with anyone around. The situation is also connected with a keen sense of loss: on the one hand, the loss of the positive aspects of the stay abroad but, on the other, also of the unreflected ethnocentrism and consequent naturalness with which one previously moved around in the environment (Stadler, 1994, p. 207). In this perspective, the reverse culture shock is, in a sense, a positive thing, for it shows that the participant has undergone a learning process abroad; that he or she has not been unaffected by it.

It can be a difficult and stressful period to live through, though, and is alleviated through much the same means as its counterpart at the other end of the experience. Most importantly, it often helps immeasurably to know that it is a general symptom, and not an affliction that the individual in question is alone to experience. This information should be given well in advance of the homecoming, so that the participants can start anticipating the situation. General methods for combating stress also come in useful; keeping up regular habits, getting physical exercise, and maintaining a varied and healthy diet, etc. Participants must be given the opportunity to talk about and discuss their experiences in a more structured and legitimate way, e.g. by meeting other returnees and/or by giving talks about their time abroad to peer groups (Stadler, 1994, p. 210). The reverse culture shock is a transitional phase, and eventually participants will settle back into the rhythm of life of the home country again. The important thing here is how this happens.

Stadler (1994, pp. 212-213) points to two negative consequences of an untreated reverse culture shock: the 'shoebox effect' and 'double ethnocentrism'. The shoebox effect describes the situation, where the experiences of the stay abroad are stashed away in a remote attic of the mind and where the participant resumes life in the home country more or less as before departure. Double ethnocentrism is a kind of split personality, where the participant has absorbed values from the host country uncritically and fails to make any synthesis of these and those of the home country. Both are, in effect, containment strategies where the experiences are kept apart

from life back in the home country and not allowed to interfere with this. In both cases, valuable lessons may be lost.

In a learning perspective, we may identify two other, potentially even more important aspects of the homecoming phase than alleviating reverse culture shock, and where pedagogical assistance is absolutely crucial.

One concerns the process of reflection. To put experiences into perspective and to transform them into learning requires reflection, and this reflection process presupposes that they first and foremost be given form and expression. Often they exist as instinctive feelings and impressions of a fleeting nature that are very difficult to put into words. To do this requires a level of insight and an ability for abstract thinking that not all participants have at their command at this particular time. Moreover, psychological barriers may come into play here and put obstacles in the way of the reflection process, for example an unwillingness to admit to weakness, both to others and to oneself. Further, often pertinent observations are construed in the wrong way for want of crucial pieces of knowledge about cultural issues. Therefore this process should be helped along by a facilitator who can ask the right questions, and give assistance in verbalising the experiences and putting them into the right perspective. It would seem, however, that this process often goes unaided. Most mobility programmes require that participants write some kind of report upon homecoming, but do not go beyond this in their requirements for a follow up to the actual placement period abroad. No material was found during the research phase that could support this reflection phase, either in the form of practical hints or through a more theoretical treatment.

The second aspect concerns guidance, and follows after, or alongside, the reflection process. Participants should receive assistance to act on the acquired insights and developments to continue the learning process or pursue it in other directions. This may be very simple, as in help to find courses or identify situations where they can use and improve their foreign language proficiency (or at least prevent it slowly withering away). It can also involve more complex and drastic choices such as change of profession or training course. In the evaluation of the Danish PIU programme, over 50 % of the apprentices returning the questionnaire stated that they had changed training course or enrolled in a higher education course afterwards (Sølvmoose et al., 2000, pp. 29-30); this might suggest that this is a common effect of a long-term stay abroad. If this is so, then guidance and counselling becomes a very important link.

CHAPTER 3

Conclusions and wider perspectives

If placements abroad are the answer, what, then, was the question?

Sociologically, placements abroad as a didactic tool in the context of VET should be seen in connection with a labour market characterised by an unprecedented rate of change. This change is brought about by globalisation, technological developments and new market demands, and profoundly affects the skills needs of the labour force. In order to cope with change, workers must possess international and personal skills, and moreover develop a capacity for redefining their professional and personal identities, in tandem with the change in (and in some cases complete disappearance of) professional profiles.

Pedagogically, these new skills are not of a type that can be taught by traditional methods but they can be acquired – learned – within specifically designed frameworks. Placements abroad have proven learning-conducive in this respect. They are, therefore, used in VET-systems, both formal and non-formal, as a didactic tool to this purpose. Despite having reached quite considerable proportions over the last decade, the use of this tool is still unevenly developed, and few European countries have incorporated it as a recognised part of their VET-systems. As these systems are changing themselves in order to deliver the skills required, placements abroad are likely to find their way into most VET-systems in one form or the other as a regular feature.

Before this happens, however, we need to understand the tool better in order to get real value for the money invested, or, in the words of Vygotsky, narrow the zone of proximal development. There is a very basic confusion at the heart of this, which is tied to the four different propositions on mobility that were identified through the empirical study. As long as the subject is shrouded in political rhetoric, or in a teleology that is not primarily set in a VET-context, we will not be in a position to formulate operational pedagogic strategies for the use of the tool.

A further requirement is that we develop our understanding through reflections based on the application of adequate tools taken from learning theories, and that we test this understanding against reality through

evaluations of learning aspects in order constantly to improve practices. Some of this understanding can possibly be gleaned from other areas, where there is an established tradition for research in intercultural learning. This is the case for exchanges within a general context of youth, where there is a rich European tradition, nurtured, amongst others, by the Franco-German Youth Office. Similarly, an interesting research environment exists in the USA around the theme of study periods (i.e. school stays) abroad.

At a much more mundane level, we need to set up structures and devices for getting more precise information about the quantitative aspects of placements. As it is, our knowledge is sketchy and, in some cases, nearly non-existent. One example of good practice that could be emulated elsewhere comes from the Netherlands, with its BISON monitoring committee, and the comprehensive view of 'formal' mobility within VET that this presents us with. A necessary prerequisite for keeping tabs on the otherwise notoriously elusive phenomenon of spontaneous mobility is that we agree beforehand, at European level, on a number of joint definitions and indicators in order to ensure that we get robust and comparable data.

Introducing placements abroad as a regular feature of VET-systems in Europe may have some quite far-reaching systemic implications. To demand a standardised period of placement abroad from all students/apprentices would not be feasible. Placements can (and should) vary in duration, degree of monitoring, host country, etc. according to the needs and abilities of the target group; for some such an element might not be a suitable and relevant proposition at all. Consequently, learning pathways must be made more individualised to be commensurable with this didactic tool. Such an integration of placements could happen both *ex ante* – with placements abroad available to students/apprentices as a standing offer – and *ex post*, in the form of accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) of individually organised placement periods abroad. This necessitates the development of – and agreement on – quality criteria for placements abroad that allow us to decide whether a given placement can be recognised in the context of the participant's course.

The phenomenon should not be seen in isolation. It inscribes itself in a general movement of reform in education and training in Europe – more advanced in some countries than others – as part of a series of shifts. These include: from teaching to learning; from education as a once-and-for-all proposition taken at the beginning of one's career to lifelong learning; from narrow qualifications to broadly based skills; and from classes where everybody learns the same to more individualised educational careers. Put succinctly, we may describe placements abroad as a didactic tool existing as

one within a range of tools in the framework of a constructivist pedagogy that is emerging in the wake of the knowledge society and superseding the traditional behaviourist pedagogies of the industrial age. It is important to emphasise, however, in response to the rhetorical question at the beginning of this final section, that placements abroad constitute one possible answer to these new challenges, and not the only answer.

We earlier defined the practice as ‘learning through exposure to diversity’, and if we apply this concept to the whole system, it follows that placements abroad as a practice in its own right can only be one element in a diversified range of didactic tools. As an integrative learning platform it offers an interesting option in a period where systems are already straining under ‘curriculum overload’, and it can be varied in terms of duration, preparation, monitoring and debriefing in order to accommodate a series of different target groups. But it is not likely that it will ever be a mandatory requirement in VET, nor is this necessarily desirable. What is desirable, however, is that all those engaged in vocational education and training at least be given the opportunity to undertake a placement abroad, if they so wish. However, this possibility is still some way off.

List of abbreviations

ACIU	Arbejdsmarkedets Center for Internationale Uddannelser <i>The Danish centre for international education and training programmes (now Cirius)</i>
AER	Arbejdsgivernes Elevrefusion <i>The employers' reimbursement scheme</i>
AFS	The American Field Service
AIESEC	Association Internationale pour l'Échange des Étudiants de Commerce <i>International association for the exchange of students of trade and commerce</i>
ANPE	Agence Nationale pour l'Emploi <i>National employment authority, France</i>
APEL	Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning
BAND	Bilaterale Austauschprogramm Niederlande – Deutschland <i>Bilateral exchange programme the Netherlands - Germany</i>
BISON	Beraad Internationale Samenwerking Onderwijs Nederland <i>Committee for international cooperation in education in the Netherlands</i>
BMBWK	Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Kultur <i>Federal ministry for education, science and culture, Austria</i>
CIMO	Centre for International Mobility, Finland
CINOP	Centrum voor Innovatie van Opleidingen <i>The national Centre for the Innovation of Education and Training in the Netherlands</i>
DEL	Danmarks Erhvervspædagogiske Læreruddannelser <i>The Danish Institute for Educational Training of Vocational Teachers.</i>
DFJW/OFAJ	Deutsch Französisches Jugendwerk/Office Franco-allemand pour la Jeunesse <i>The Franco-German youth office</i>
EPEAEK	National operational plan for education and initial vocational training, Greece
EURES	EUropean Employment Service
EVS	European Voluntary Service

FOREM	(FORmation et EMPloi) Service public wallon de l'emploi et de formation professionnelle
GNVQ	General National Vocational Qualifications <i>National labour market authority, francophone part of Belgium</i>
IAESTE	International association for the exchange of students of technical experience
IKAB	Institut für angewandte Kommunikationsforschung in der außerschulischen Bereich <i>Institute for applied communication research in non-formal education</i>
IFA	Internationale Fachkräfte Austausch <i>International young workers' exchange</i>
ISFOL	Istituto per lo Sviluppo della Formazione Professionale dei Lavoratori <i>National institute for the development of vocational training, Italy</i>
NA	Leonardo da Vinci national agency
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NVQ	National Vocational Qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Petra	Partnerships in education and training
PIU	Praktik I Udlandet <i>Placement abroad</i>
VET	Vocational education and training
YWEP	Young workers' exchange programme
ZAV	Zentralstelle für Arbeitsvermittlung <i>National employment authority, Germany</i>
ÖAAD	Österreichische Akademische Austauschdienst <i>Austrian academic exchange service</i>

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Learning by leaving

**Placements abroad as a didactic tool in the context
of vocational education and training in Europe**

Søren Kristensen

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'Transnational mobility' has climbed steadily upwards on the agenda for vocational education and training policies in Europe over the past decade or so, and is set to advance further in the coming years. It is estimated up to 175 000 persons annually go on a placement abroad within the EU and EFTA countries; a figure the European Commission is now proposing to increase dramatically with the new generation of education and training programmes. Despite its significance, the phenomenon has primarily been approached from a practical angle, receiving only scant dedicated research. Many important questions remain unanswered, and much of what passes for knowledge is based mainly on assumptions, lacking a proper scientific basis.

The study *Learning by leaving* treats placements abroad in Europe both quantitatively and qualitatively. First, it attempts to assess the European, national and regional scope of activities across Europe. The main European mobility programme in VET -Leonardo da Vinci-only represents the tip of the iceberg. Many transnational placement activities are carried out under other EU programmes and initiatives (notably the structural Funds), but major national and regional input complements and extends Commission efforts. Second, it tries to gauge the learning potential of placements abroad through a theoretical analysis of practices. It concludes that placements abroad can be a powerful didactic tool in VET, notably for developing individuals' capacity for managing change in career, technology and work organisation. However, this learning potential will not unfold automatically through physical presence at a workplace in another country. The study identifies and describes the pedagogical aspects both before, during and after the stay and gives examples of good practice.

Søren Kristensen

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Placements abroad as a didactic tool
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