

# Guidance for mobility



**What should guidance counsellors do and not do when assisting those who plan to go abroad, are away, or have returned from a stay? Soren Kristensen wrote this article for Euroguidance as a contribution to the debate on advantages and challenges that the Erasmus+ mobility scheme has opened up for guidance counsellors.**

Over the last decades, we have been witnessing an accelerated proportional shift in mobility activities away from individually conceived ‘adventures’ to more institutionalised programmes, involving new target groups, actors and modes of organisation and execution.

Many institutions and programmes now offer a stay abroad as an integral part of the learning trajectory. Often it is a “package” where practical issues are settled in advance and do not trouble either the participant or the guidance counsellor. This does not mean that the guidance counsellor has become superfluous in connection with learning mobility; rather the focus of the work is being moved to other aspects of these activities.

At a very general level, the shift in the nature of mobility has to do with its acceptance as a pedagogical tool in a broader context of education and training. This is indicated by the fact that in the last few years we have started using a term ‘learning mobility’, thereby positioning mobility squarely in the pedagogical landscape (rather than, for example, transnational mobility which relates it to geography).

Now we have evidence from research which has proved its versatility not just as a means of acquiring

intercultural skills but also in connection with the development of personal competences like innovation and entrepreneurship, adaptability, and self-reliance, as well as more hard-nosed educational and vocational learning outcomes. As a result, the formal recognition of knowledge, skills, and competences acquired during stays abroad has been made considerably easier.

## Where guidance counselling can make a difference

Until recently, mobility counselling has primarily been perceived as information provision – identifying opportunities and clarifying details about practical issues, like funding possibilities, accommodation, or insurance. With the internet and the increased acceptance of learning mobility as a pedagogical tool, this has changed radically. Mobility counselling, therefore, has shifted its focus to other concerns which fall into two major categories.

The first one is the *motivation of potential mobile learners for a mobility experience*. The adventurous and the career-conscious will come to the guidance office themselves to enquire about the possibilities, but by a surprisingly large part of the population a stay abroad – especially for an extended period of time – is not perceived as a realistic

option. It is seen as a leap into the unknown and associated with all kinds of fears and threats that the imagination can conjure up, and consequently rejected. Of course, nobody can (or should) be forced into participating, but we know from evaluations that the learning and developmental potential inherent in this activity can be astounding, especially for the so-called young people with fewer opportunities who can experience a widening of their horizons, which is at times life-altering. Opening up these minds to consider a stay abroad as a realistic possibility is a challenge that requires concerted action between several actors. Guidance counsellors can play a crucial role both as front-line staff, pro-actively suggesting participation to those who may not even have considered it, and as experts in a more downstream position, helping them to clarify options and lessen their concerns.

The second important field of intervention is connected with the quality assurance of the learning process. This springs from the realisation that in a stay abroad learning does not necessarily come by itself to the participants. If this were the case, all it should take to secure a meaningful learning experience would be to simply get them out and see to it that they return alive – a purely practical task where guidance counsellors do not need to get involved. However, we know from evaluations of mobility activities that this is not the case – participants may return (sometimes prematurely) without having explored the full learning potential of the experience or, worse, with feelings of dejection and defeat that leave them worse off than before departure. In order to minimize these risks, we need to work consciously with the qualitative aspects of learning mobility – not only during the actual time spent abroad but also before departure and after returning home which, from a learning perspective, is almost as important as the stay itself.

**Counselling before, during and after the stay abroad**

The pre-departure phase concerns preparation that enables the participants to cope better with some of the challenges they will encounter during the time abroad. This involves linguistic and cultural preparation, practical preparation, pedagogical preparation (defining and agreeing on learning objectives), and psychological preparation (how to deal with homesickness, isolation, culture shock, etc.).

This does not necessarily have to be guidance counsellors' work – in many projects and programmes these tasks are partly or entirely assumed by other staff members – but often guidance counsellors are involved in one or more functions, either consciously or by default. The same can be said about the time abroad when guidance counsellors may offer just 'a shoulder to cry on' when the going gets

tough, or liaise with foreign colleagues to solve more practical problems that the participants may have encountered.

This also works the other way around, as dealing with the challenges of incoming mobility (i.e. participants from abroad) may become a significant task for guidance counsellors in their home institution. The debriefing phase is often neglected or is restricted to writing a short report on the basis of some pre-defined questions, or participating in an informal meeting. But the time immediately after the stay abroad is crucial for the retention of learning outcomes. Participants – especially those who encountered difficulties while abroad – need to talk the stay through with others who can help them formulate, digest and evaluate their immediate experiences and put them into perspective with regard to their continued educational trajectory or career. Even negative experiences may hold valuable lessons that will only emerge in structured discussions with guidance professionals who can spot their potential relevance.

Another issue where the involvement of guidance counsellors can make a difference is avoiding the so-called shoebox effect when participants do not act on the outcomes of their experience but merely relegate them to the back of their mind and revert to the situation and mind-set they had prior to their departure; thus they fail to reap the rewards of their investment. Also – especially regarding long-term stays abroad – participants may experience a reverse culture shock and need assistance to reintegrate properly into the home environment that suddenly has become foreign.

**The necessity of overview**

Mobility counselling now covers a much larger and more diffuse area where boundaries among different types of professionals dealing with mobility are both flexible and highly permeable. Very rarely – if ever – is a guidance counsellor required to become involved in all the aspects of mobility. The precise content of the counselling process has to be negotiated in the particular context where some aspects will be something the mobility participants 'need to know' and others – something that would be just 'nice to know'. However, an overview of the individual phases of learning mobility as a holistic process is essential for every participant.



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