

Krichewsky-Wegener, L. (2021). Exploring the learning potential of internships abroad in VET from a student's perspective. In C. Nägele, B.E. Stalder, & M. Weich (Eds.), *Pathways in Vocational Education and Training and Lifelong Learning. Proceedings of the 4th Crossing Boundaries Conference in Vocational Education and Training, Muttentz and Bern online, 8. – 9. April* (pp. 206–211). European Research Network on Vocational Education and Training, VETNET, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland and Bern University of Teacher Education. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4537043>

Exploring the Learning Potential of Internships Abroad in VET from a Student's Perspective

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Abstract

Context: International mobility for education and training purposes is high on the policy agenda of the European Union and its member states, and the number of VET students participating in mobility programmes has been increasing during the last decade in Germany. This raises questions about the objectives, the effects and the organisation of stays abroad, which have so far remained largely untouched by VET research. This paper aims to provide a better understanding of the learning potential of internships abroad in VET. **Approach/methods:** The analysis is based on qualitative interviews conducted with 12 VET students and apprentices having spent at least four weeks for training abroad. A qualitative content analysis based on a subject-centred learning theory was used to identify and understand the learning effects of international mobility. **Findings:** The analysis resulted in the construction of a typology of three figures of learners abroad: the expert, the trainee and the adventurer. Each of these figures describes a typical way by which learners develop learning objectives and strategies to exploit the learning potential of mobility. **Conclusion:** The findings illustrate and further develop existing theories on learning abroad and raise questions as to the role of pedagogical interventions to support learning processes in mobility projects.

Keywords

international educational exchange, intercultural learning, student mobility, qualitative research

1 Introduction

International mobility for education and training purposes is high on the policy agenda of the European Union and its member states. “Learning by leaving”, as Kristensen (2004) vividly depicts it, is a pedagogical idea which was already underpinning the journeyman years in the late Middle Ages, when young craftsmen wandered across Europe to perfect their skills and mature in their personality (Scheel, 2010, p. 114). The distance to familiar surroundings and the encounter with foreign practices and customs, according to this idea, put the learner in a challenging situation, thus triggering new learning processes. In a time when the concept of a “European community” seems to be more challenged than ever, international youth mobility is widely seen as a chance to foster intercultural learning and a sense of identity transcending national borders (Fahle, 2018). In the field of vocational educational and training (VET), a growing number of projects and programmes have been dedicated to international mobility since the 1990s. In its European Skills Agenda for 2025, the European Commission proposes to set a new target of 8% of all 18–34-year-olds with a VET qualification to have had a VET-related training period abroad from at least two weeks.



An increase in mobility figures raises questions about the objectives, the effects and the organisation of stays abroad, which have so far remained largely untouched by VET research (Krichewsky-Wegener, 2020). Based on the results of an empirical study undertaken in the framework of my PhD, this paper aims to provide a better understanding of the learning potential of studying abroad in VET, focusing especially on programmes including an internship. To this end, the student's perspective on learning abroad is analysed following three main questions:

- How do apprentices and VET students justify their decision to participate in a stay abroad?
- What are the learning effects of a stay abroad in VET?
- How do the learning processes taking place in the framework of a stay abroad look like?

Putting together the findings to these three questions, the results of the analysis will be discussed under the aspect of their theoretical and practical relevance for VET mobility.

2 Theoretical framework

The study is mainly based on Holzkamp's learning theory (1995), integrating also elements of situated learning theories (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and biographic analysis (Faulstich & Bracker, 2015). The theoretical approach underpinning this study does not attempt to explain learning as being conditioned by external factors, but tries instead to understand it from the inner perspective of the learner. Its focus on the perceptions and interpretations of the learning subject makes it particularly suitable for exploring the kinds of largely non-structured and experience-based learning processes taking place in the different contexts of a stay abroad – e.g. at the workplace, with a guest family, during leisure activities etc. Situational and biographical aspects of the learning process are integrated in the analysis insofar as learners ascribe meaning to their context and adapt their learning strategies to what they perceive as relevant factors, taking also into account their interests and past experiences. This subject-centred theoretical approach opens the “black box” of learning. It allows us to take a step further in exploring the potentials of mobility in VET, as compared to existing quantitative research on mobility impacts, based either on personality tests (e.g., Wern, 2018) or self-reported learning outcomes (e.g., Becker et al., 2012; Friedrich & Körbel, 2011; Kröll, 2018).

3 Methodology

The empirical study is based on the analysis of twelve semi-structured interviews with apprentices and VET students from Germany studying in different occupational fields (e.g., business administration, gardening, ICT, media) and having participated in a 4-12 weeks internship abroad in the framework of their VET training. Additionally, blogs and reports or other documents written by the interviewees were also included in the analysis, as far as they were available. A set of criteria identified by Kröll (2018) as having the greatest influence on the international mobility rate of VET students, such as occupational field, age, and type of VET program (i.e., school-based or dual), was used to build a sample as heterogeneous as possible. The problem-based interviews (Witzel & Reiter, 2012) lasting between 45 and 90 minutes were transcribed and analysed following the method of qualitative content analysis developed by Kuckartz (2014).

In order to reconstruct the learning processes having taken place abroad, a canvas was developed based mainly on Holzkamp's learning theory. It includes different categories, such as “object of learning /learning effects”, “learning impulse”, “biographical relevance and interest”, “situation and learning resources”, “learning strategies”. Starting from the identification of learning effects, the transcripts were analysed to find related information fitting in the other

categories. As a result, it was possible to reconstruct 36 “learning stories” revolving each around one particular learning effect, such as for instance “communicating with a client per telephone”, “speaking English more fluently”, or “dealing with home sickness”. The comparative analysis of these 36 learning theories provides answers to the three research questions and resulted in a typology of three figures of the mobile learner in VET.

4 Findings

4.1 Staying abroad in VET: a “free space” and a learning opportunity

According to the German federal VET Act (*Berufsbildungsgesetz*), particularly in §2 (3) on learning venues, up to a quarter of the total duration of the training in the dual system (maximum nine months) can take place outside Germany. A stay abroad can thus become an integral part of the training, provided that it contributes to the acquisition of the competences defined in the national training standards. The validation and recognition of learning outcomes from mobility, as far as they correspond to the national training standards, is carried out as part of the final examination at the end of the training course. Additional learning outcomes can be documented with Europass Mobility or certified with an additional certificate, but this is by no means mandatory and the initiative is left to the VET schools and training companies.

While there are little formal regulations to frame the learning experience in a stay abroad, it seems that VET schools and training companies in Germany do not take far-reaching measures to structure learning abroad either. None of the interviewees, for instance, was aware of a learning agreement or training plan regarding their internship abroad (see also Heimann, 2010, for similar findings). As a result, stays abroad can be compared to a “free space”, a world “relatively free of the pressure, distractions and the risks of the real one, to which, nevertheless, it refers” (Schön, 1987, p. 37, cited by Kristensen, 2004, p. 94).

Interviewees were found to seize the opportunity of such a free space to pursue their own objectives, which could be grouped into broadly four categories:

- Improving foreign language skills, especially to meet workplace requirements in an increasingly globalised economy;
- breaking out of daily routine and enlarging one’s views by meeting new places, new people and new cultures;
- gaining autonomy and taking a step out of the family environment;
- preparing for working abroad in the future.

With these four types of motivations, staying abroad appears to be seen by the interviewees as an opportunity for learning something about the world and/or about oneself, to develop new skills and prepare for a career.

4.2 Learning effects of international mobility

Not surprisingly, the learning effects identified in the interview transcripts correspond broadly to the motivations expressed by the interviewees. Looking at the details, however, they appear to be very diverse and differing hugely between individuals as regards for instance their breadth and relevance after the end of the stay. They can be broadly grouped into five categories: foreign language skills, intercultural learning, vocational skills, personal development, and living and working abroad. The learning effects found in these categories correspond well to the kind of learning outcomes identified for instance by the above-mentioned quantitative studies or by the few existing qualitative studies (e.g., Tourmen et al., 2014; Dupuis et al., 2012). The detailed analysis of the interviews reveals, however, that in many cases the learners also

experienced the limits of their learning. This is visible for instance in their hesitation as to how solid their newly acquired knowledge of the culture and the labour market of their guest country is: Is it merely anecdotal or does it reflect generally accepted evidence? In the case of foreign language skills, interviewees note that they have become more fluent, but except for one, they also point to the fact that they did not improve the grammatical correctness of their speech. Especially, interviewees regretted not having learned much in terms of vocational skills. This phenomenon of “not learning”, or learning less than one feels could have been, raises the question of how learning occurred and how it was constrained.

4.3 Three figures of the VET learner abroad

The analysis of the learning process examined how the learner constructs (or not) a learning problem, and the learning strategies developed under the given circumstances. The findings point to the essential role played by the interpretation that learners make of their stay abroad as a learning opportunity in determining the learning potential of international mobility. This interpretation finds its expression in the three figures of the learner which were identified through the qualitative analysis of the twelve in-depth interviews and 36 “learning stories”:

- The expert takes responsibility for his or her own learning. As part of the community of practice in his or her company, the expert learns but also shares his/her specific (also: German) expertise with colleagues. The expert consolidates his or her professional identity through the stay abroad, giving it an international touch;
- the trainee, leaves the initiative for creating learning opportunities to the company offering the traineeship. The trainee mainly takes on the role of an observer and an assistant and, as a special strategy for dealing with tasks which tend to underchallenge him or her, pursues learning interests beyond the professional sphere during the stay abroad;
- the adventurer is always looking for what is “special” and “extraordinary” around him or her. The adventurer looks for challenges in all areas of life, by which he or she can develop personally, gain new skills and further shape his or her personal identity.

Each of these three figures of the learner describes what position the learner takes when faced with a problem, when he or she decides (more or less consciously) to solve that problem through learning. Typical differences between figures occur for instance as to the way a learning task is constructed, how the learner interacts with others in the learning processes, the learning strategies he or she chooses and ultimately the learning effects which can be identified. Contextual factors, such as the match between the training occupation and the internship place, facilitate or hinder the process by which the learner acts as one or the other figure (Table 1).

In most cases, there is more than one figure emerging in a single individual’s narrative of a stay abroad. Interestingly, learners are found sometimes to modify the learning task and strategies which they derive from a concrete problem or situation, thus changing their position from one figure to another over time.

Table 1
Three figures of the VET learner abroad

Dimensions	Expert	Trainee	Adventurer
Motivation	learning for a career, building a professional network	language skills, vocational orientation, workplace experience	personal development, have fun
Biographical relevance	vocational identity already strong, focus on employment	vocational choices not yet clear, current training often seen as a step towards further studies	transition to adulthood, role models in the peer group, feeling marginalized in the home country
Learning impetus	tasks assigned at the workplace, disjuncture related to differences in national professional cultures	tasks assigned at the workplace and at school	disjuncture experiences related to cultural differences
Situations and context	trainer at the company gives responsibilities and complex tasks, colleagues are supportive, good match between internship and training	internship does not match the occupational training well, no responsibilities, colleagues show how they work but learner is not integrated in the work process	(self-)organized leisure, living alone or with other students, support by the peer group
Learning strategies	reflection, exchanges with colleagues, looking for work and taking initiatives to get interesting tasks, applying theoretical knowledge from training to new problems, seeking information on the web	asking questions, observing, reflecting	actively seeking contacts with locals, organising tours, self-reflection
Learning objects	vocational skills and knowledge, knowledge about the labour market of the country, technical vocabulary, professional cultures, professional identity	knowledge about an occupational field or an occupation, foreign language skills, knowledge about the culture and intercultural differences	foreign language skills, knowledge about culture and intercultural differences, personal development

5 Conclusions

A closer look at the learning processes taking place during a stay abroad in VET reveals how learners take advantage of the learning potential inherent to international mobility, in a context where institutions do not intervene much to structure the learning experience. The findings of this study provide empirical evidence to illustrate and further develop existing theories on learning abroad, especially regarding vocational and intercultural learning (e.g., Kristensen, 2004 or Weidemann, 2004). At the same time, the role of the learning subject and the importance of “non-learning” episodes in the interviewees’ account of their stay abroad can be understood as an invitation to further discuss the role of pedagogical interventions to support VET learners abroad to better exploit the learning potential of international mobility. Future research could thus explore whether other figures of learners emerge by further diversifying the sample, and whether pedagogical interventions can support learners to reflect on their learning and develop new strategies to better meet their learning interests.

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Biographical notes

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