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## The Benefits of New Modes of Student Mobility: Work Experience and Service Learning

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### Synonyms

[International work placements](#); [International practicums](#); [International internships](#); [International volunteer programs](#); [Community outreach](#)

### Definition

Work experience and service learning are two distinct yet important and evolving dimensions of international student mobility. They differ most importantly in that service learning is academically supervised whereas work experience does not have to be. Service learning is a rather modern approach, officially established in 1969 when Peace Corps and VISTA officials together with university faculty members and students defined this new pedagogical approach during a conference in Atlanta, Georgia (Busch 2017).

Work experience as a part of a student's higher education is built on the idea that studying alone

might not prepare students properly for the tasks ahead, and that such experience might even help a student to determine whether the chosen academic path is the best for him or her. Work experience is usually developed from the perspective of the student, in that it provides students with practical experience. The interests of the work experience host are secondary, although the host can select the student and will normally do so on the basis of pragmatic arguments, such as the possible length of stay (often the longer the better for the company/organization) or the competencies the student brings to the experience.

The terms work placement and internship are often used interchangeably. However, a work placement will usually require more sophisticated work by the student while an internship more clearly focuses on the learning aspects for the student. While around the world work experience is not a commonly supported element of degree study, nor is it typically a credit-bearing activity recognized as an integral part of the workload for a degree program, there are striking examples of higher education institutions (HEIs) which use such experiences actively (e.g., Sheffield University 2017). One of the most comprehensive examples is certainly the dual degree program (*Duales Studium*) in Germany (German rectors' Conference 2017).

Meanwhile, service learning is a concept that purposefully and deliberately integrates work experience with academic learning (Berthold et al. 2010):

Service learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities (Learn and Serve America National Service Learning Clearinghouse). [...] Service learning is a process of involving students in community service activities combined with facilitated means for applying the experience to their academic and personal development. It is a form of experiential education aimed at enhancing and enriching student learning in course material. (Fayetteville State University 2017)

According to Fayetteville State University, service learning is similar to work experience (i.e., student-centered, practical experience) as a form of experiential learning but it differs in that it is built on a balance of interests between the community and the students involved. In other words, service learning serves society as well as the student. Moreover, it is always closely integrated into students' program of study and thus ensures that the experiences made and knowledge gained are applied to the academic learning. Also important, such programs usually include support from the academic institution before and during the experience, as well as post-experience guidance to enhance learning.

Work placements and service learning usually take place in a domestic setting, and frequently in the same locality where the student studies. However, these experiences can also be undertaken abroad, presumably with different effects on the student experience. Currently, service learning abroad is mainly a specialty of US institutions such as the University of Texas (University of Texas 2017) or the University of Iowa (University of Iowa 2017). Often also the big study abroad companies offer such programs, for example IES (IES 2017) or International Studies Abroad (International Studies Abroad 2017). However, some European universities also focus on this activity – e.g., the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria in Madrid runs special social engagement programs for students abroad (Universidad Francisco de Vitoria 2017b) and projects such as an action program in Guinea (Universidad Francisco de Vitoria 2017a). More broadly, the European Erasmus program made supported

such activities in the form of work placements and internships under the framework of the COMETT program in the period 1987–1994. COMETT served as the precursor of the LEONARDO program (Barblan 2010), which was subsequently followed by the Erasmus+ focus on traineeships (work placements and internships).

In most cases, it is taken for granted that service learning and work experience abroad will have positive effects on participants; however, only a few studies have looked into the measurable effects of such experiences. In the case of service learning, researchers usually look at the effects on intercultural competence development and the perceived impacts on host communities (Brandell 2016) and (Sauber 2012). Such studies typically rely on small samples (20–100 students) and usually show a growth in intercultural competence, either as perceived by the participants or measured using well-known instruments such as the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (IDI 2017).

However, the Erasmus Impact Study (EIS) 2014 (Brandenburg et al. 2014) conducted in Europe, and especially the follow-up regional analysis in 2016 (Brandenburg et al. 2016), looked at the effects of work placements and internships from a very practical perspective. EIS focused on the effects of work placement and internships in terms of participants' personalities and attitudes, as well as on their careers. The results were quite striking:

While students going on an Erasmus study abroad program are mainly interested in learning languages, to live abroad, and to meet new people, students going on work placements are more interested in boosting their career, especially abroad. The focus on career development might also be linked to the fact that students from non-academic family backgrounds were slightly more represented in work placements (50%) than in study abroad (46%) (Brandenburg et al. 2016).

EIS (2014) showed that work placements as well as study abroad through Erasmus have measurable effects on personality traits (Brandenburg et al. 2014, p. 86). The study also unearthed that

work placements have a measurable impact on the individual. The ability to work in teams and analytical skills were more often perceived to have been improved significantly through the international experience among students on work placements than on study abroad (Brandenburg et al. 2014, p. 17).

The EIS (2014) study further showed that the impact of work placements and internships on work life and career is also substantial. One in three students on work placements received a job offer from the host company, and students from struggling economies (i.e., from Southern Europe) received job offers at even much higher rates.

The Erasmus work-focused mobility experience also supports the entrepreneurial spirit. On average, more than one in four Erasmus alumni was interested in starting his or her own company and 7% actually did so. Eastern European Erasmus alumni were found to be particularly interested and Southern Europeans were especially eager to launch start-ups.

Finally, the EIS (2014) study found that alumni of Erasmus work placements abroad (as well as study abroad) were more often employed in managerial positions, earned more, worked in more international environments, and more frequently changed their country of residence than their non-mobile counterparts.

In light of a growing interest in program assessment and impact, the European Commission commissioned a project to assess the effects of the European Voluntary Services program which aimed to gauge the effects on individual participants (for example, with respect to personality, attitudes, and career), as well as impacts on the communities served (Brandenburg et al. 2017). Building on the previous EIS (2014, 2016) study models, an assessment is also underway of Erasmus + higher education mobility, with results of this analysis expected in late 2018 or 2019 (European Commission 2016).

Overall, the main conclusions from the studies conducted in this field so far – which are, admittedly, skewed toward European and North American experiences – are that international work and service-learning experiences are in many ways

beneficial for the participating students. Moreover, if integrated into a degree program – as service learning modules typically do – the benefits to the community as well as the home university and the nonmobile students involved in the degree program may even be higher.

Knowledge of differences in the impact of work experience and service learning abroad depending on the region in which they have been undertaken or experienced is scarce. We also know little about the different approaches in different regions of the world (such as Africa, Latin America, or Asia versus Europe or North America) to these experiences. In the light of the need for modernization of Higher Education Systems and also the question of preparing students for a globalized world, these approaches need careful adjustment to the cultural needs of the regions – both from the perspective of the employer as well as the student. A “one-size-fits-all” approach will not suffice.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Internationalization of Higher Education, Mapping and Measuring](#)

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