



## Learning Mobility to the Global South: the Need for Intense Follow-Up and Guidance of Students

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### Abstract

*In most countries and regions in the global North (U.S.A., Canada, Australia, UK, Europe) there has been an enormous growth in the numbers of students and young people in general requesting a meaningful cross-cultural experience. More particularly, over the last decade, one observes an increasing interest in so-called North-South learning mobility, between 'industrialised' and so-called 'non-industrialised' countries in the South. The University College Leuven anticipated this trend, organising an Advanced Bachelor 'International Cooperation North South' which consists of an intensive two-month preparation of students and a six-month work placement and research project in a (development) organisation in the South. Based on its long-term experience with sending students to the south, Leuven University College has elaborated a sound vision on North-South learning mobility of young people. It adopts a holistic approach by focussing on what are considered to be the fundamental aspects for organising qualitative North-South mobility: a good (substantive as well as methodological) preparation trajectory for outgoing students, close follow-up of students during and after their stay in the South; and sustainable partnerships with receiving organisations and institutions in the southern countries.*

*In this paper, the Advanced Bachelor 'International Cooperation North South' is presented as 'good practice'. As such, the paper aims at sharing expertise with other HEI involved or interested in organising Learning mobility of students with the South.*

### Background and context

In most countries and regions in the global North (U.S.A., Canada, Australia, Europe) there has been a dramatic growth in the numbers of students requesting a meaningful cross-cultural experience [1]. Since the late 1980's there has been an ever growing interest in, and support for, organised international learning mobility of students within HEI in Europe. More particularly, over the last decade, one observes an increasing interest in so-called North-South mobility, between 'industrialised' and so-called 'non-industrialised' countries in the South.

In Flanders in particular, within higher education, up to 1700 students travel to the South. Also outside the framework of higher education, the demand rises for so-called gap years, international experiences, intercultural tourism, and volunteering in the South [2].

The interest in this particular type of international mobility has been taken up in future European educational policies such as "Erasmus for all" (E4A) [3] and Horizon 2020. 'Erasmus for all' (2014-2020) has been launched by the European commission to facilitate "learning mobility of students with the purpose of strengthening the EU as an advanced knowledge society, with sustainable economic development, more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. To achieve these goals, E4A will increasingly promote learning mobility beyond European borders, with countries in the South.

Leuven University College anticipated this trend towards higher mobility as well as the demand for better prepared mobility to the South with the organisation of the 'Advanced Bachelor International Cooperation North South'(ICNS). This Advanced Bachelor programme consists of an intensive two-month preparation of students and a six-month internship in an organisation in the South. Students receive close follow-up during and after their stay in the South and particular attention is given to establishing long-term, sustainable partnerships in the South. Each year 60 students are enrolled in the programme.

Given the increased interest in organised learning mobility to the South, there is a growing need for developing sound knowledge and expertise in order to be able to organize this particular type of learning mobility in a qualitative way, assuring it to be a positive and empowering experience for students and guaranteeing that preconceived learning outcomes are achieved. In this paper, we present the Advanced Bachelor ICNS as 'good practice'.



## **Advanced bachelor International Cooperation North South**

The Advanced Bachelor is a one-year programme of 60 ECTS credits with the focus on a six month work placement in a country in the global South (Sri Lanka, India, Senegal, Cameroon, Benin, Guatemala, and Nicaragua). As such it aspires to offer students a long-term and in-depth South experience based on a clear vision and embedded in an accredited programme. It allows students to better understand the mechanisms of globalisation and to experience its effects on (local) communities in the South.

The Advanced Bachelor ICNS aims to:

- train skilled, critical and socially engaged professionals capable of working in a fast changing world and aiming to facilitate personal well-being and global connectedness for all
- be profession-oriented and with a strong base in the field of development practice in North and South
- facilitate personal growth of students
- contribute to social justice and a more equal, democratic and tolerant world with respect for its ecological limits

Related to the objectives above, the following learning outcomes for students are formulated:

- Develop critical insights in the economic, political and cultural aspects of globalization processes in order to contextualize North-South issues at micro, meso and macro level
- Develop a basic understanding of project cycle management and apply this understanding within the local work placement context in the South in order to formulate (small) sustainable interventions
- Contribute to capacity building within different areas (education, health, social work, etc.) by using personal skills and competencies for the empowerment of others
- Based on a respectful attitude grow into skilful intervention and participatory cooperation with individuals, communities and professionals in a multicultural context.
- Conduct practice-oriented research in English or in the commonly used language of the work placement: collect, analyze and interpret primary and secondary data (including the international literature)
- Reflect self-critically on personal growth and be aware of own frames of reference (norms and values) and the kinds of interaction with those of others
- Make explicit critical aspects of intercultural communication between different individuals, groups and organizations.
- Manage complex professional contexts by taking into account specific historical and socio-economic realities and cultural differences.
- Communicate in English and / or in the commonly used language of the work placement, taking into account local aspects of verbal and non-verbal communication
- Manage risk situations within an unfamiliar and unknown context.

As the learning outcomes make clear, for the Advanced Bachelor ICNS, during the work placement, students are not expected to train their professional competences since they are expected to function already as a professional in their field. Students are expected to acquire generic and specific competences beyond their professional competences allowing them to function professionally in any multicultural environment where themes such as migration, intercultural relations, development, diversity and poverty reduction are central elements.

### **Selection of students**

Students can apply for the programme from the start of the semester preceding the ICNS Advanced Bachelor programme, usually starting from the second week of February. The application procedure includes a motivation letter and a personal interview. Important selection criteria are: having obtained a first bachelor or Master degree, possessing an open and flexible attitude, possessing basic language skills of the country of destination. Students who lack basic language skills, but with strong profiles are encouraged to take summer courses to upgrade their language competence before the start of the programme. Accepted students are then further delegated to the responsible person for the country of destination for more information about the available work placements and for matching student profiles with hosting organisation needs and preferences. Finally, students send their CV and



a motivation letter (in the language of the country) to the hosting organisation, who finally decides whether the student is accepted or not.

### **Preparation**

The programme starts beginning of September with an 8 week preparatory programme. During this period students take the following courses:

- Culture and Religion (4 ECTS credits)
- Language (5 ECTS credits)(English, French, Spanish or Portuguese, depending on the country of destination, complemented with basic knowledge of local dialects such as Wolof, Hindi,...)
- Methods of Intercultural communication (4 ECTS credits)
- Project Management (3 ECTS credits)
- Globalization: Economy and Politics (4 ECTS credits).

These preparatory modules provide students with conceptual frameworks for understanding the South context.

Students are also assigned a personal tutor. The tutor is first of all a mentor with first-hand experience of the country of destination and familiar with partner organisations and projects. The tutor is responsible for facilitating and following-up of the critical learning process of the student before, during and after the work placement. Before departure, the student, supported by his/her tutor, develops an extensive personal development plan (PDP) reflecting on personal competences and learning goals and also linking them directly to the preparatory courses mentioned above.

The tutor also takes up the role of promoter of the student's bachelor test (see below)

### **The work placement**

Students and south partners are carefully matched, taking into account both students' and hosting organisations' needs and preferences. The placement generally lasts 22 weeks (30 ECTS credits). Students integrate in the day-to-day work of the host organization and in the local community evolving through different phases of getting to know the organisation and context and slowly taking up different tasks and responsibilities more independently.

During the work placement students develop:

- a work placement plan: after the first month, setting an agenda with tasks and responsibilities, and providing in depth -information of the hosting organization / project.
- A follow-up report: after three months, describing and critically reflecting on their learning and integration process (relating back to their initial PDP).

During their work placement, after about two months, the tutor visits the students and the hosting organisation for further follow-up (seeing everything goes well for both students and hosting organisation, mediating in case of problems and conflict, giving feedback on the learning and integration process of the student, counselling, follow-up of research process (see below), ....)

### **After return**

Students write a final evaluation report about their learning process and have a personal counselling session with his/her tutor in which they receive feedback on his/her learning process. They complete take home exams for all theoretical courses, including language. Furthermore, they defend their research and comprehensive bachelor test before a jury, including one external examiner.

### **Bachelor test**

During their work placement student also conduct (participatory) research (10 ECTS credits) on a topic which is relevant for both the hosting organisation (and its target group) and the student and in line with the vision and content of the Advanced Bachelor programme ICNS. Students write up their research in a bachelor test. Related to their research and bachelor test, students deliver a practical and sustainable output, which is a product relevant and of use for the hosting organisation.



## Partnerships

Developing sustainable partnerships is key for qualitative cooperations with South partners. The Advanced Bachelor develops long-term cooperations with the same partners. Before starting such a cooperation and sending a student to a South partner, a personal acquaintance programme ICNS, to get to know the South partner, verify its needs and preferences and to enhance good communication in the future. This means that not the student but the University College Leuven itself establishes links with south partners and matches the students with the south partners. At the end, each work placement is carefully evaluated with the South partners.

## E-learning

Learning in the Advanced Bachelor ICNS, in great part, takes place outside Leuven University College. Students do research, work on preparatory course assignments and write reports during their placement in the South.

To facilitate fluent communication with tutor and lecturers, an e-learning tool (e-portfolio) was developed on Toledo (Blackboard) for students. This allows students to continuously update their learning process online. (some students have difficult access to the internet which is, of course, taken into account).

## Conclusions

Research has demonstrated the absolute necessity of good preparation and follow-up of students for work placements in the South to be qualitative and real learning experiences [4]. Unique to the Advanced Bachelor ICNS is the in-depth preparation of students before they leave, and the intense follow-up during and after their work placement in the South. More particularly, students receive individual guidance and counselling of a tutor throughout the year, intensifying the learning process and the achievement of learning outcomes.

## References

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