

Learning abroad: Current status and prospects of cross-border mobility

► In Germany there is a broad consensus among the partners involved regarding stays abroad during the individual's vocational training. Stays abroad are considered the ideal way to acquire the international occupational competence which is needed for many jobs today. Despite the importance attached to stays abroad, it had not however been known to date how many persons undergoing initial vocational training complete a phase of their learning in another country per year. A study conducted on behalf of the Education for Europe – National Agency (NA) at BIBB examined this question. The following article presents key findings from this study. It also examines what action would have to be taken so that the widely-accepted practice of completing a phase of learning in a foreign country can be incorporated into the vocational education and training field as a normal, integrated learning segment.

Stays abroad undertaken during initial vocational training

The Mobility Study (see FRIEDRICH/KÖRBEI 2011) commissioned by the Education for Europe – National Agency (NA) at the Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB) showed that during the period from 2007 to 2009 an average of 23,500 persons a year completed a stay abroad. This is 50 per cent more than previously assumed and represents three per cent of all persons undergoing initial vocational training. This study thus makes it possible to describe for the first time the phenomenon of cross-border mobility using more than the figures that were already available from existing funding programmes. The study revolves around a survey of nearly 21,000 persons completing their final year at a part-time vocational school. Mobile persons, enterprises and external training centres were also surveyed (see Table 1).

Titled „Hidden Mobility in Vocational Education and Training“, the study ‘revealed’ first and foremost that 39 per cent

Table 1 Study profile

Title	Hidden Mobility in Vocational Education and Training – Ascertaining stays abroad which are undertaken during initial vocational training outside the framework of the EU's Lifelong Learning Programme and bilateral exchange programmes of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine the absolute and relative amount of mobility during initial vocational training in Germany. • Ascertain the benefits that mobility brings from the participants' point of view. • Ascertain the benefits and challenges from the enterprises' point of view.
Scope of the survey and method used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20,949 persons in the final classes at part-time vocational schools were surveyed using questionnaires that were distributed for circulation in the individual classes. • 502 mobile persons undergoing initial vocational training were surveyed regarding the benefits of stays abroad. This information was obtained using an online questionnaire. • 785 enterprises were surveyed using a questionnaire. • 625 providers of extra-company training were surveyed using a questionnaire.
Period	2009 – 2011
Conducted by	Wirtschafts- und Sozialforschung WSF, Kerpen
Further information in German	www.na-bibb.de/uploads/allgemeiner_bereich/studie_verdeckte_mobilitaet_kurzfassung.pdf



BERTHOLD HÜBERS

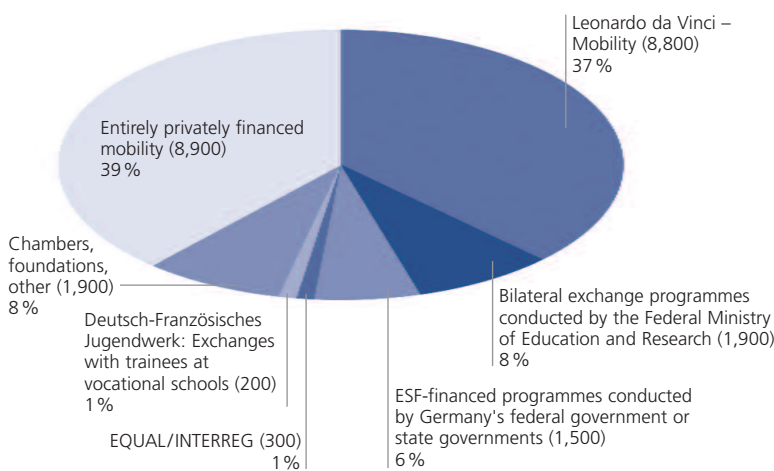
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of all stays abroad undertaken during the individual's initial vocational training (8,900 persons) each year are undertaken without any financial assistance from the public sector. Thus the level of cross-border mobility during initial vocational training is much higher than was previously assumed. The largest funding programme by far in this area is the Leonardo da Vinci programme. It represents 37 per cent of all mobility in this connection. The bilateral exchange programmes which Germany's Federal Ministry of Education and Research conducts together with France, The Netherlands, Great Britain and Norway together account for eight per cent, as do the programmes sponso-

red by foundations and chambers. Programmes from other sponsors constitute the remaining eight per cent (see Figure 1).

Ninety per cent of the stays abroad are undertaken in Europe. The major European and national funding programmes are limited to this region. Consequently, at ten per cent, extra-European mobility is surprisingly high. The USA accounts for four per cent, making it the seventh most important destination country. Thus, one of the first key findings from the study is that stays abroad undertaken during initial vocational training are more common, longer, more global and more 'dual' than was previously assumed, even by the National Agency at BIBB.

Figure 1 Average number of persons participating in mobility programmes during initial vocational training, 2007–2009 (n = 23,500)



Benefits from the participants' point of view

From the participants' point of view, the greatest benefit from mobility arises in those areas which entail personal, social, foreign-language and professional skills. In addition, participants expect a stay abroad to improve their chances when seeking employment in the future (see Figure 2). According to the participants, their stays abroad are primarily documented using the Europass – Mobility (29%). The second most important form of documentation is a traineeship certificate (23%). However, 21 per cent of the respondents said that they had not received any document at all. A marked difference can be seen here between participants in the Leonardo da Vinci programme and the bilateral exchange programmes of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research on the one hand and the other programmes on the other hand. Only six per cent of the former group had not received any document, compared to 30 per cent of the participants in the latter group.

Figure 2 Benefits of stays abroad from the participants' point of view (100-point scale, multiple answers possible; n = 502*)



* Respondents in the online survey

When trainees and students at vocational schools are asked about the overall benefits of their stay abroad, the first impression is a high degree of satisfaction. The majority of all respondents (79%) considered their stay abroad to have a „large“ or even „very large“ overall benefit. The level of satisfaction was even higher (87%) among participants in the two major types of programmes – the EU's Leonardo da Vinci programme and the bilateral exchange programmes sponsored by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research – than among persons in other programmes (73%).

Findings from the company survey

The company survey conducted as part of the study showed that only some seven per cent of the companies surveyed send trainees abroad on a regular or intermittent basis. Based on the responses of the 785 participating enterprises, it can be expected that this figure will rise in the coming years. Six per cent of the surveyed companies said they „definite-

ly“ and 33 per cent „perhaps“ wanted to send trainees abroad in the future. Running contrary to this trend however, 61 per cent still report that they „tend not to“ or „in no way“ allow their trainees to undertake a stay abroad.

The level of mobility among trainees in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is surprisingly high. Sixty-nine per cent of mobile trainees come from enterprises with fewer than 500 employees (see Figure 3). Although such enterprises seldom conduct projects themselves, many trainees from SMEs make use of offerings organised through schools or chambers.

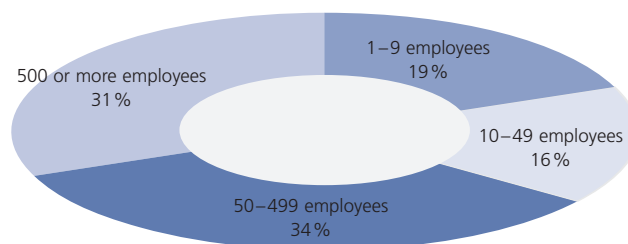
Enterprises which do not allow their trainees to undertake a stay abroad cited the actions listed in Figure 4 as necessary to producing greater mobility. It is striking that recognition of stays abroad as being part of a vocational training programme continues to be perceived as an urgent problem, although strictly speaking this problem was solved with the amendment of the Vocational Training Act in 2005. It appears that there is still considerable uncertainty and a sizable need for information in this connection. In addition, inactive enterprises clearly stated a desire for organisational support.

Future development of cross-border mobility

Fundamental factors currently favour the growth and progressive development of mobility. Four factors that foster mobility and two that inhibit mobility will be briefly outlined in this section. Increasing *globalisation* leads to concrete changes in the workplace which require workers to have undergone vocational training (see HALL 2007). Enterprises and vocational schools are responding to this and are increasingly integrating instruction in international competences into the training they provide. Enterprises are also incorporating learning phases abroad into the in-company vocational training they provide in order to make it more attractive – a trend which will grow due to the *demographics-driven decline in the number of training place applicants*.

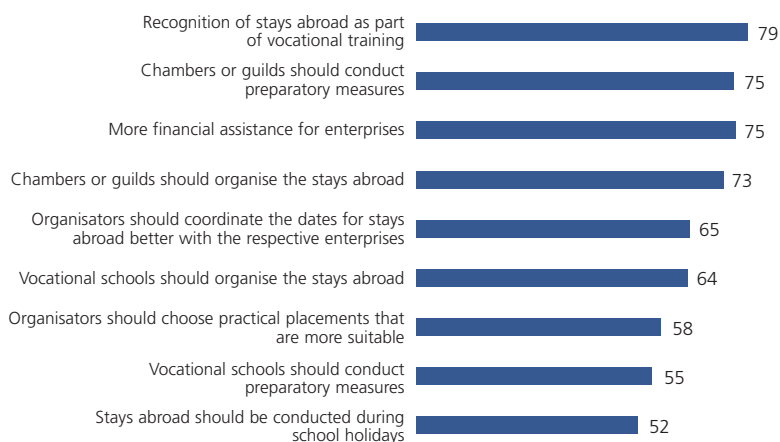
The *policy framework* for increasing and developing mobility during initial vocational training is favourable because guidelines and benchmarks have been formulated at national and European level. In this context, State Secretary HELGE BRAUN speaking at the presentation of the Mobility Study in April 2011 again stressed the importance of Germany's national benchmark: „An internationally-oriented economy needs skilled workers with international training. For this reason we want to double our already high level of outgoing mobility by the year 2015.“ The internationalisation of training regulations and a marked increase in longer stays abroad (six weeks to three months) – in addition to doubling mobility – were already laid down as objectives by the Federal Ministry of Educa-

Figure 3 **Mobile trainees, by company size** (n = 376*)



* Respondents in the online survey, without students at full-time vocational schools

Figure 4 **Action necessary to ensure higher levels of mobility from the enterprises' point of view** (in % of companies, multiple answers possible, n = 730*)



* Only enterprises which do not allow their trainees to undertake a stay abroad during their training

tion and Research together with the social partners back in 2007 in Guideline 8 issued by the Innovation Circle on Vocational Education and Training (Federal Ministry of Education and Research 2007). It appears that when mobility continues to increase at a rate of ten per cent a year as it has in recent years and the necessary funds are made available, it will be possible to achieve the ambitious target of doubling the mobility level by the year 2015. Raising mobility levels has been given high policy priority at European level as well. For instance, the European Council dedicated one of the seven flagship initiatives in its Europa 2020 strategy to boosting mobility in all fields of education (see European Council 2010). In the current generation of programmes under the EU's Lifelong Learning Programme, the Leonardo da Vinci sub-programme already has the goal of each year helping 80,000 individuals undertake a period of practical training abroad during their initial or continuing vocational training by the year 2013.

In addition to the above-mentioned trends and political priorities, actual conditions for mobility have also developed favourably. A variety of nation-wide mobility guidance services for enterprises has been available in Germany since 2009. For example, the Vocational Education and Training

Without Borders programme has 35 mobility consultants at chambers throughout Germany. These consultants are being financed by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs with funding from the European Social Fund. As a result, enterprises now have points of contact in their area who can meet their need for assistance. These contacts help enterprises apply for, prepare and conduct mobility projects. A number of states have had a similar set-up for vocational schools for many years.

Given these favourable factors, why isn't mobility increasing at a faster pace? The most important point to be cited here is the *additional work and expense* that arise in connection with integrating foreign venues as additional places of learning into vocational training. Although developments in recent years have brought legal clarity and reduced the amount of bureaucracy, preparing a relocation of the learning process to another country and conducting the requisite quality assurance entail additional work and expense despite funding programmes and support measures. For this reason, enterprises and schools will continue to carefully assess and weigh the additional cost and effort against the additional value offered by stays abroad.

The lack of *high-quality certification instruments* poses a further obstacle. Germany presently does not have a standardised certification instrument that is valid nationwide which would make it possible for trainees and enterprises to officially document additional competences that were taught/acquired during the individual's stay abroad. The Ausbildung Plus database (see AusbildungPlus) offers an overview of the certificates that are currently in use. As a rule, the international supplementary qualifications listed in the Ausbildung Plus database are documented by a certificate issued by the training provider or using the Europass Mobility. Germany currently has only two models – at the level of chamber regulations for advanced training examinations – which offer a high-quality standard with at least regional scope. Although 23,500 individuals complete a stay abroad every year, Germany still does not have a standardised national certification instrument such as the certification instruments which could be established for supplementary qualifications that are earned during initial vocational training and are governed by the Vocational Training Act. Today, the lack of a standardised high-quality nation-wide certification instrument must be viewed as an impediment to mobility.

Implications for the progressive development of vocational education and training

Three per cent of all persons undergoing initial vocational training are internationally mobile. The question of whether this is considered a lot or a little depends primarily on whether the focus is on the level at which mobi-

lity in the vocational training field was 20 years ago or whether the focus is on how high the level of mobility should preferably be today. The amendment of the Vocational Training Act in 2005 served two important purposes for cross-border mobility. Firstly, it legitimised the some 10,000 stays abroad that had been undertaken to date as a component of vocational training. Secondly, it sent a strong signal for expanding mobility in the vocational education and training field. The number of stays abroad has more than doubled in the ensuing years. This raises the question of how stays abroad could be systematically integrated into Germany's VET system as a desirable, normal element. There are six core areas of activity to be mentioned in this connection:

1. Anchor a national standard for certification in regulations

on a modular basis: Given that every year 23,500 trainees and students at full-time vocational schools undertake a stay abroad as part of their training, a regulatory concept is needed so that international occupational competences acquired abroad can be appropriately certified on the basis of a national standard. The supplementary qualifications that are provided for in the Vocational Training Act but have been made little use of to date (see also BÖHLE in BWP 4/2011) are one example of a possible means for this. A modular approach could be chosen that makes additional competences which the individual has acquired quite visible without putting at a disadvantage enterprises and trainees who do not strive for the particular supplementary qualification.

2. Ensure 'mobility windows':

Mobility among university students in Germany has declined in the wake of the introduction of bachelor's and master's degree programmes (Federal Ministry of Education and Research 2010). This has been due primarily to the fact that these degree programmes in their current form usually do not foresee stays abroad and therefore essentially sanction them even though one of the intentions of launching the Bologna Process was to facilitate mobility. The vocational training field must learn from this that training programmes need 'mobility windows' during which it is possible and intended that individuals complete part of their training abroad. In light of the use of extended examinations, windows of time, in other words, phases when there is less pressure to learn, predestining their use for completing a stay abroad, are also disappearing in the VET field.

3. Expand financing:

Due to the above-mentioned conditions, it is to be expected that the demand for stays abroad during vocational training will continue to grow. Mobility projects require core financing from the public sector in order to activate additional private funding. Budget plans at European and national level must take this increase in demand into account.

4. Mobility and the ECVET: The Federal Ministry of Education and Research has decided to test the European Credit Transfer System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) in Germany, starting in the area of cross-border mobility (see KÜßNER/DREWS in BWP 4/2011). The first mobility projects which are geared to fundamental elements of the ECVET were launched in 2010. The credit transfer system offers many opportunities for encouraging mobility. It is important to organise this longer-term transition process to be open and to take into account the enormous need for information among the project sponsors and in the VET field in general.

5. Internationalisation of learning venues: The international elements in vocational education and training will increase. Mobility among learners is just one aspect in this connection. It would be helpful if the institutions involved were to define their internationalisation strategies with regard to their aims, activities and resources and incorporate them into their mission statements and concepts. This applies to all VET facilities because even the training departments of international companies do not automatically have an international focus in their training activities.

6. VET professionals: An education system's level of internationality is determined by the skills and competences of the actors in the system. Vocational training can be internationalised only when the training/instruction personnel's international skills and competences are developed at the same time. The revision of the Ordinance on Trainer Aptitude has incorporated international aspects for the first time. However, it will additionally be necessary to improve VET personnel's language, intercultural and professional skills and create corresponding training products for this. Mobility programmes for VET professionals could make an important contribution toward this. ■

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Republication of the English article “Learning abroad: Current status and prospects of cross-border mobility”

This article dating from 2011 is being republished in the English language Special Edition in 2013 because key findings of the described study and the vocational education context are still applicable. The article is accompanied by the following information panel which provides a short update on recent developments.

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

The statistics given in the article refer to a study covering the period from 2007 to 2009. The background conditions and the structural findings continue to be applicable. To bring the content up to date, attention need only be drawn to two key developments and to the current figures, which have risen markedly.

ECVET: The mobility projects launched to pilot elements of the European Credit System in Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), which were first approved in 2010, have now been concluded. The results of these and other ECVET projects have flowed into the drafting of the common European instruments for formalising credit-transfer partnerships (ECVET Memorandum of Understanding) and expected learning outcomes (ECVET Learning Agreement). In 2013 almost 1,000 applications were submitted under the LEONARDO DA VINCI mobility programme for training periods abroad complying with ECVET standards.

Attractiveness of vocational education: The decline in applicant numbers in the vocational sector resulting from demographic change has led companies to redouble their efforts to offer attractive initial vocational training schemes, particularly with a view to recruiting young people of high ability. Therefore companies are now also seeing the attractiveness of training periods abroad as an important factor alongside the benefits to individuals and companies pointed out in the study. The following table gives an overview of the statistical development of training periods abroad and targets for the initial vocational training segment.

	Stated in article	2012 (2013)
Mobility rate (Percentage of persons in initial vocational training which includes a placement abroad)	3%	4%
Placements abroad during initial vocational training under the LEONARDO DA VINCI mobility programme	8,800	14,358
National benchmark for international mobility	Doubling of international mobility by 2015	“By 2020 at least 10% of trainees should be able to gain experience abroad during their initial vocational education and training”. (Bundestag Decision of 17.01.2013)
European benchmark for international mobility	80,000 persons in the year 2013	“By 2020, an EU average of at least 6% of 18- to 34-year-olds with an initial vocational education and training qualification should have had an initial VET-related study or training period (including work placements) abroad”. (Council Conclusion of 15.11.2011)