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On the way to value international and intercultural experiences : PREPAMOBIE at the heart of student mobility

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ABSTRACT

The international mobility of students has been very successful in recent years. Numerous scientific works have reported on the fact that immersion in an intercultural environment promotes the acquisition of academic and non-academic skills, thus strengthening the employability of graduates. Nevertheless, we note that students who go abroad do not sufficiently value all of their acquired experience : obviously, they do not know how to do so. We propose in this paper to present the PREPAMOBIE programme which supports students in the valorisation of their international mobility.

Keywords: international student mobility, skills, valorisation

1. INTRODUCTION

The international mobility of students has been very successful in recent years. Travel for the privileged young people of the 18th century has become more democratic. France is the leading country of origin of European students in Erasmus mobility, with a 37% increase in outgoing students between 2010 and 2015 (Campus France, 2017). Financial aid as well as the legislative and institutional context partly explain this phenomenon. Moreover, profiles of young people who can speak several languages and work in multicultural contexts are appreciated by organizations. The immersion in an intercultural environment promotes the acquisition of academic and non-academic skills, thus strengthening the employability of graduates. Numerous scientific works have reported on this (Brandenburg, 2014; Potts, 2015; Tarrant et al, 2014). Abroad, students have a social life in a culturally different environment, which leads them to experience new situations in daily academic and/or professional life, giving them the opportunity to deploy intercultural competences (Deardorff, 2006) that are transversal skills valued by the labour market. These include relational skills, interaction management skills, organisational skills, the ability to manage emotions and show empathy, attitudes, etc. In recent years, tools measuring the achievements of international mobility have been developed. They help young people to position themselves before leaving and then on their return, so that they can assess their progress in terms of skills. And yet, despite these positive developments in taking mobility into account, we note that students who go abroad do not sufficiently value all of their acquired experience.

We propose in this paper to discuss how to support students in the valorisation of their international mobility. In order to do so, we will present the PREPAMOBIE tool (for *PREPARation de la MOBilité Internationale des Etudiants*). The objective of this programme is to prepare any student going abroad for an internship or a semester of study for international mobility first, and then to enhance the value of their stay. To do this, a completely distance-

learning support module has been offered to students since October 2019. It consists of three steps: preparation for mobility before departure, collaborative activities during the immersive experience, and an analysis of the skills developed on their return. In this paper, we will explain how the practical implementation of this programme accompanies the valorisation of the student's mobility which is currently underdeveloped.

2. A LACK OF VALORISATION OF THEIR INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY BY STUDENTS

The skills developed by students during academic (semesters of study) or professional (internships) periods abroad have been the subject of significant research in recent years (Brandenburg et al., 2014; Potts, 2015; Tarrant et al., 2014). In addition to language skills, cross-cutting skills have been identified even if they suffer from a lack of recognition (Blons-Pierre, 2016) and a lack of valorisation (Brassier-Rodrigues, 2016). These competences are highlighted in a few reference frameworks such as the AKI reference framework (for *Acquis de la Mobilité Internationale*) which results from a European project funded by the Erasmus+ Youth Agency and which contributes to identifying and valuing transversal competences developed in international mobility by young people aged 18 to 30 (AKI European Project, 2016¹). This reference framework, and the associated questionnaire, make it possible to assess the degree of competence in five areas: open-mindedness, adaptation to change, interpersonal skills, sense of responsibility and self-confidence.

The deployment of skills related to the student's life skills reinforces the understanding of mobility as a movement of both body and mind. By choosing to study or do an internship abroad, the student engages in a process of personal discovery, which will lead him/her to better analyse his/her own culture and get to know him/herself better through confrontation with a different culture (Hedjerassi & Razafindrazaka, 2008; Pleyers & Guillaume, 2008). Nevertheless, the reflective practice that this process induces is not spontaneous. It assumes "a distance and critical look at one's own functioning, but also an individual and collective analysis of actions and decisions taken in the course of action" (Lafortune, 2011, p. 3). It should allow students "to deconstruct their evidence, to rethink the relationship between the self and the other and to experience identity mobility" (Gohard-Radenkovic, 2009, p. 10). In fact, to deploy its full potential, this reflexive attitude must be guided. It must not only be prepared before departure, but it must be accompanied during the immersion phase and until the student's return. However, the preparation for the immersive experience and its enhancement upon return suffer from a lack of guidance.

Faced with this observation, a module to prepare for international mobility, entirely delivered at a distance, has been developed at the University of Clermont Auvergne. Funded by the Learn'in Auvergne programme as part of the I-Site Clermont, the aim of the PREPAMOBIE programme² is to prepare for international mobility first, and then to make the most of their stay, for any student going abroad for an internship or a semester of study.

3. PRESENTATION OF THE PREPAMOBIE PROGRAMME TO HELP STUDENTS TO ENHANCE THEIR INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY.

PREPAMOBIE assists students who go on study or work placement mobility throughout their cultural immersion: before, during and after the experience abroad. The presentation in Figure

¹ <https://www.aki-mobility.org/en/home-page/>

² This project was financed by the French government IDEX-ISITE initiative 16-IDEX-0001 (CAP 20-25).

1 highlights the way this support has been built, combining theoretical contributions and practical situations, by proposing the student to first become aware of and then say what he or she has experienced during the experience.

Figure 1 : The 9 steps of the PREPAMOBIE programme to support international mobility

BEFORE THE MOBILITY
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To be completed by the student : (1) Questionnaire on departure motivations, (2) Submission of the CV, (3) Competency Self-Assessment Questionnaire 2. Theoretical contributions : Preparation for intercultural encounters, awareness of transversal competences linked to international mobility. 3. Evaluation by the student of three learning blogs in order to identify their strengths and weaknesses in terms of reflective analysis. 4. Results of the self-assessment carried out and discovery, interpretation of the results by the student and choice of three skills on which he/she wishes to progress during the immersion phase
DURING THE MOBILITY
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Writing a learning blog with predefined parts : (1) Preparing for departure, (2) The stay (places, environments, contexts), (3) The activities carried out during the stay, (4) Skills developed during the stay, (5) The local educational culture, (6) The return 6. Collection of learning traces on the skills developed (photos, videos, documents, etc.) and filing of evidence to justify progress on these three selected competencies.
AFTER THE MOBILITY
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. To be completed by the student : (1) Modification of the CV in order to highlight the skills deployed, (2) Competency Self-Assessment Questionnaire 8. Obtaining the results of the second self-evaluation carried out and comparing them with the first results 9. Access to an online platform with a proposal of tools to enhance mobility (new forms of CVs, networks) and testimonials from professionals talking about how international mobility is seen in companies .

The objective of PREPAMOBIE is to allow students to first become aware of what they have learned, then to verbalize it and to value this learning. Throughout the module, the student has the possibility to contact a teacher for further information.

4. CONCLUSION: THE EVALUATION OF THE GAINS OFFERED BY THE PREPAMOBIE SCHEME TO THE STUDENTS

PREPAMOBIE was offered to students for the first time in October 2019. 49 students registered. An evaluation questionnaire was filled in anonymously by the students on their return from the mobility. The first results reveal several interesting facts. The pre-departure preparation step enabled the participants to approach their mobility in a more comprehensive way. Many confessed that they had only thought about the practical aspect of mobility (accommodation, living on site, etc.) without preparing for the cultural encounter they were going to experience and the change of environment it might bring, and without considering that they would be able to develop skills other than language skills. Most of the time they had been waiting for this trip since the beginning of their studies, thinking that this motivation and desire would be enough. During the mobility, the fact that they had to provide evidence of changes in certain skills did not necessarily lead students to do unplanned activities; however, it made them want to talk about them and make them more meaningful. For example, participating in the activities offered by the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) helps students to develop their sociability, curiosity, etc. Writing the blog was considered to be the most interesting activity: it

allowed students to maintain relations with their relatives in France, but also to tell about mobility, to narrate it with details. On their return, they feel more ready to make the link between their experience and the skills they have acquired. These initial results are exploratory, but they confirm the interest of guiding students in preparing and then promoting their mobility. This support should even be offered as soon as the student starts a degree which may lead him/her to international mobility as the preparation step is long. In this sense, internationalisation at home, designed as educational activities encouraging intercultural encounters and simulations, could usefully complete the preparation for physical mobility, also contributing to the development of hybrid mobility, the interest of which has been revealed by the recent health crisis.

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