

Mobility Among Social Education Students at the University of Girona: Taking Stock of a Decade of Fieldwork Practice Abroad

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Abstract

The following article is divided into five sections, each one with a specific objective. The first section briefly presents the student mobility experiences obtained basically through the fieldwork practice course in social education studies at the University of Girona. The second section delves more deeply to explore the value of the exchange and the student mobility experience over one semester of intensive fieldwork practice. The third section presents data about the students who have participated in this experience in all ten of the graduating classes. The fourth part offers an assessment of the experience and reports which aspects are considered essential to a good student mobility experience. Finally, various actions to be taken to improve these educational experiences within the social education studies at the University of Girona are specified.

1. Mobility in the Social Education curriculum at the University of Girona

University studies in Social Education in Spain have had a relatively short period of development. In 1991 studies leading to a Diploma in Socio-Educational Care Work were established in Spain. The University of Girona (UdG) first offered the diploma during the 1993-94 academic year, in an attempt to integrate the debate between the professional world, the School of Specialised Educators existing at the time in Girona and the University.

The first graduating class in social education entered the labour market in 1996 and this year, 2005, the 10th graduating class will do so. The thirteen academic years from 1993 until 2005 have helped consolidate a stable core of teachers who have worked together during this period to improve various aspects of the studies and how they are taught, especially concerning the practical training. First, a specific model of practice has been defined and implemented. Known as “Transversal Practice”, it favours group learning and goes more deeply into specific issues related to the work of social educators. On the other hand, a model of *Fieldwork Practice and Study* which is strongly committed to interdisciplinary work and to the integration of the theoretical and practical contents and practices of the different subjects contained in the studies has been designed and implemented.

The fieldwork practice makes up the core of the third-year training. It is introduced at the point in the studies where theoretical training and professional practice meet, given that it is training provided by the university, but connected to and carried out in the professional world, alongside social education professionals. The fieldwork practice, organised intensively throughout the first semester, is an important way for the students to prepare themselves for the transition to working life. It has also become a place where they obtain general knowledge in addition to more specific knowledge about the relationship existing between professional and social realities and the university as an

institution. In this sense, the fieldwork practice brings university education closer to the professional world, but it has also created a suitable forum for reflection and criticism originating in the practical experience which can be incorporated into the educational curriculum. Fieldwork practice thereby becomes a privileged scenario where social agents can participate in educational activities and where collaboration and communication can take place between the university and the professionals whose responsibilities include responding to various social situations and problems.

Practically all the mobility experiences have taken place in the third year, concentrated in the first semester, and their main objective has been completing fieldwork practice at a placement site. In the following section we will focus specifically on explaining how the social education studies curriculum strengthens the mobility experiences resulting from fieldwork practice abroad.

2. Fieldwork practice as the core of the mobility experiences of the students of social education

Fieldwork practice provides privileged knowledge of the professional reality for students as well as for professors and for the university as an institution in general. This activity brings the reality of social and educational institutions closer to the university, and becomes a scenario stage for the participation of employment generating agents and of social educators in education, promoting new situations that allow knowledge to be shared and a variety of collaborations to take place. As for the students, the intensive nature of the fieldwork practice throughout the first semester of the third year provides practical experience in preparation for the transition to working life.

In this context, it is not accidental that almost all the mobility experiences focus on fieldwork practice, the purpose of the Training Plan being to use this experience to specifically promote different types of learning that enriches the training of future educators and social educators.

Above all, it specifically promotes student learning of various professional competencies, specific ones as well as those of a more generic or transversal nature. With regard to the latter, we have seen how fieldwork practices in a geographical and cultural context which is different from their homes provides students with meaningful learning opportunities related to interpersonal skills (critical and self-critical capacities, the capacity to integrate themselves and to communicate with experts from other areas and in different contexts, recognition and respect for multicultural and other types of diversity, personal skills and ethical commitments). Likewise, competencies such as learning to adapt to new situations, learner autonomy, creativity, initiative and entrepreneurial spirit, and being open to lifelong learning are strengthened by these experiences. And, obviously, communicating in a foreign language is a competence that is worked on in a very basic way in those mobility experiences carried out in non-Spanish speaking countries.

It must also be taken into account that this training experience is enriching for the participants (for students as well as for professors who supervise them and for the professionals of the centres where the students complete their fieldwork practice). In-depth knowledge of how professional fieldwork practice is carried out in a cultural,

social and geographic context which is different from their own provides the participants with new social education perspectives. When they return to their home education centres, these new perspectives are transferred and analysed with the help of companions, professors and service professionals. To the extent that these experiences are not isolated but rather that students have new every year, the professional knowledge in their home regions is enriched.

These experiences also allow participants to learn about other training models and other ways of facilitating learning in future educators: new technologies, activities, assessment models... In short, they help by providing professors with the elements necessary to better analyse the training model and to help them take decisions about the training curriculum. Specifically, the social education curriculum of the UdG includes contents based on the knowledge acquired through the mobility experiences (for example, commitment to social causes and development education, artistic education, physical education, crisis intervention, aspects related to the supervision of educational fieldwork practice, etc.).

In the following section we specify the characteristics of the mobility experiences of the last ten years of fieldwork practice within the studies.

3. Ten years of mobility experiences in the Social Education studies at the University of Girona

There have been numerous mobility experiences throughout the 10 years of fieldwork practice. Table 1 presents them indicating the name of the institution with which there was an agreement, or bilateral contract in the case of the Socrates Programme, the country and the number of students participating in each experience. For each academic year we differentiate between the experiences of fieldwork practice according to whether they were completed in European countries or in countries of Central and South America and Africa. Basically, the first experiences occurred in exchange programmes with European institutions (Socrates Programme), while the second ones took place within cooperation and development education programmes.

In all, 124 students of social education at the UdG have benefited from these one-semester mobility experiences, almost always intensive fieldwork practice in a specific service, project or centre of social education. In other words, approximately 22.5% of the UdG students who started from the beginning of the programme have completed a semester of training (one sixth of the total) in a different geographical context. Of those 124 students, 12 chose to stay in European countries, taking advantage of the Socrates programme, through which the Social Education programme at the UdG has received a total of 31 students from Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy.

Table 1: Mobility experiences of the students of Social Education at the UdG, 1995-2004.

	Mobility experiences – Social Education (UdG)				
	European countries			Central American, South American and African countries	
	<i>Institution</i>	<i>Students that came</i>	<i>Students that went</i>	<i>Institution</i>	<i>Students that went</i>
Year 95-96	Jean Gailhac Association, Beziers (France)		1	Instituto de Promoción Humana (INPRHU) Nicaragua	7
Year 96-97	Perpignan City Hall (France)		1	INPRHU (Nicaragua)	12
	Aycliffe Young People's Centre, Copelow (England)		1		
Year 97-98	Hogeschool Brabant Breda (The Netherlands)		1	INPRHU (Nicaragua)	7
	Katholieke Hogeschool, Limburg (Belgium)	2	1	Polisario Front, Camps of Tinduff (Western Sahara)	2
	Haute École Provinciale de Charleroi- Univ. du Travail, Marcinelle (Belgium)		1		
Year 98-99	Hogeschool Brabant, Breda (The Netherlands)	2		INPRHU (Nicaragua)	5
	Katholieke Hogeschool, Limburg (Belgium)	2	1	Fundación Mensajeros de la Paz (Ecuador)	3
	Haute École Provinciale de Charleroi- Univ. du Travail, Marcinelle (Belgium)		1		
Year 99-00	Hogeschool Brabant, Breda (The Netherlands)		2	INPRHU (Nicaragua)	8
	Katholieke Hogeschool, Limburg (Belgium)	2		Fundación Mensajeros de la Paz (Ecuador)	3
	Haute École Provinciale de Charleroi- Univ. du Travail, Marcinelle (Belgium)	1	1	Fundación Ramon Munita (Chile)	1
Year 2000-01	Hogeschool Brabant, Breda (The Netherlands)	2		INPRHU (Nicaragua)	13
Year 2001-02	Hogeschool Brabant, Breda (The Netherlands)	2		INPRHU (Nicaragua)	6
	Katholieke Hogeschool, Limburg (Belgium)	3		Fundación Mensajeros de la Paz (Ecuador)	3
	Università degli Studi di Bologna (Italy)	2		Comunidad de Padres Escolapios de Saraguro (Ecuador)	4

Year 2002-03	Katholieke Hogeschool, Limburg (Belgium)	2		Nueva Segovia Literacy Campaign 2002 (Nicaragua)	16
	Università degli Studi di Bologna (Italy)	2		Fundación Mensajeros de la Paz (Ecuador)	4
				Colegio de Jalisco (Mexico)	2
Year 2003-04	Hogeschool Brabant, Breda (The Netherlands)		1	Asociación de Educación Popular Carlos Fonseca Amador (AEPCEFA) Palacagüina (Nicaragua)	4
	Katholieke Hogeschool, Limburg (Belgium)	3		Fundación Mensajeros de la Paz (Ecuador)	3
	Università degli Studi di Bologna (Italy)	3		Colegio de Jalisco (Mexico)	
Year 2004-05	Katholieke Hogeschool, Limburg (Belgium)	2		Asociación de Educación Popular Carlos Fonseca Amador (AEPCEFA), Niquinohomo (Nicaragua)	6
	Haute École Provinciale de Charleroi- Univ. du Travail, Marcinelle (Belgium)	1		Fundación WAMPRA (Ecuador)	3
Total		31	12		112

We can see that the mobility experiences in countries of Central and South America outnumber those had in European countries. The linguistic proximity and the Catalan tradition of cooperating with Central and South America have meant that the majority of the mobility experiences are carried out in countries in America. Among them, the experiences in Nicaragua predominate, given that some of the professors connected with the studies are closely involved in development cooperation and literacy projects there. The ongoing experience of fieldwork practice in development cooperation in Nicaragua has consolidated this fieldwork practice as a possible, enriching alternative for students of Social Education at our university.

As for the types of services in which the students have completed their fieldwork practice, in the European countries they have been centres of special needs education while in the countries of the South the work of recent years has focused, basically, on literacy and adult education (in Nicaragua) as well as on community education processes.

Alongside the mobility experiences in which the students have taken part, professors of the programme have also had mobility experiences, specifically in the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Nicaragua, the Western Sahara and Mexico.

4. Assessment of the mobility experiences

The diversity and quantity of mobility experiences provides us with valuable information about their benefits. Although only 5 students from among the more than one hundred who have had mobility experiences over the last ten years returned before the end of their stays, not all the experiences have been positively assessed by the participants. On some occasions the students have returned disappointed with them. An analysis of these experiences allows us to highlight some elements that, by themselves or in interaction with others, could have influenced these negative assessments:

- The characteristics of the project which they have joined. At times students have been assigned to projects which were not very suitable for foreigners.
- The difficulties had by students to find meaning in the fieldwork practice carried out in a cultural context in which the work culture is very different from that of their home countries. Some of the students who were placed in Central and South American countries had this experience.
- The difficulties they had to follow the experience. Some of the students found that they were not very well accompanied during the fieldwork practice training process, which made it difficult for them to learn well from the experience.
- The lack of a clear definition of the role of social educators in the host countries, especially when the mobility experience took place in countries where this professional profile is markedly different from ours.
- The lack of institutional support and reception in the host country.

An analysis of the experiences provides us with information about some of the most important conditions favouring student mobility, listed below.

- **Establishment of institutional relations between the educational centres involved.** It is necessary to carefully select “partners” for mobility exchanges. Experience shows that personally knowing those responsible for the exchanges

is very important and, in the case of exchanges carried out in very different contexts such as countries of the South, it is necessary to know the socio-cultural context where the fieldwork practice is developed, the socio-educational project itself and those responsible for it. We believe this condition to be indispensable in guaranteeing the suitability of the project training objectives for the student.

- **Clearly define the contact persons.** It is essential that the two clearly-established contact persons (the supervisor in the host centre and the tutor in the home centre) function to really help the student analyse the experience, lead him or her to reflect on it and accompany him or her in the learning process. In the cases of fieldwork practice in South American countries where there usually is not any host educational centre, students join a social education project in which often it is not well defined who is the contact person. In these cases, the key to the success of the experience is the tutor from the home centre, who must have excellent knowledge of the placement context, who knows the project and the people who direct it, and who is sufficiently accessible to the student despite the distances.
- **A good reception and clarification of the commitments made by each of the parties involved (institutions, professors, tutors and students).** It is necessary for the host educational centre to assure the student is well received and that, from the beginning of the experience, it is absolutely clear who the person functioning as a reference throughout the fieldwork is, and that he or she informs the teachers of the host centre as well as the students themselves what is expected of them as students. Specific information about what they will be asked to do for evaluation purpose (exercises, tutorials, interviews, tests, etc.) must be provided. Therefore, it is important to stipulate clearly what each one of the parties involved agrees to and commits to (beginning and ending dates of the experience, tasks, functions and expected responsibilities, lodging, etc.).

It is also important to assure that the students involved in the mobility experience have the same rights enjoyed by the students of the receiving centre (access to the library, e-mail address, etc.). These elements contribute to making the student feel welcomed and accepted at the centre.

- **Selection of the placement taking into account the student profiles.** One must be especially careful when assigning fieldwork practice projects to students who come from other countries. Appropriate ways to promote a balance between the student expectations and the project characteristics (objectives, target groups and functioning) must be found so that the student can really learn from the experience. The exchange of information and close coordination between the professors at both the home and the host centres are indispensable to adapt expectations to the training necessities and to the student characteristics, and to use these elements to find the ideal centre for each student to complete his or her fieldwork practice.

Therefore, it is very important that the contacts required to choose the centre be established as early as possible, so as to give the host centre time to locate appropriate services. At the same time, the sooner the specific placement site is known, the sooner the students can begin to prepare themselves by collecting information about the service and the characteristics of its institutional context.

- **Provide information for the students about the mobility experience.** It is important that the students who show interest in mobility experiences receive information beforehand, from as realistic a perspective as possible, to know the experience's potential regarding their personal and professional training. That means that they should also be provided information that allows them to assess their personal resources and to be able to face, in a positive way, situations that might make them uneasy in a foreign country far from the home centre. This is especially important because the placements are in different cultural contexts in which the students have to learn to use specific strategies and resources in the area of social education as well as in life itself.
- **Adapting the process of incorporating the students into the fieldwork practice centre or service.** Where possible, the process of incorporating students into the fieldwork placement must be flexible and therefore adaptable to each person. It is often a good idea to allow some time for each person to adapt to the new linguistic and cultural contexts and to incorporate themselves little by little into the project, gradually assuming their responsibilities.
- **Student knowledge of the characteristics of the countries where the mobility experience takes place.** Work culture difference (in terms of resources and, often, the rhythm of work itself), especially when students have their mobility experiences in countries of the South, creates great anxiety in the students. Pre-placement training to equip them with the strategies they will need to develop and to teach them some aspects of life in the host country is very important. It is also basic, in all cases, that they receive information about the socio-educational services of the host country as well as of the educational centres.
- **A student attitude which is open to learning cultural aspects of the host centre.** It is fundamental that the students have a good attitude and are willing to learn not only the foreign language but also cultural features regarding the functioning of the social education services of the host country. Although it seems obvious, experience has shown us how basic it is to insist on these aspects when choosing students who express an interest in mobility experiences.

5. Actions to take in the UdG Social Education Training Plan to improve the fieldwork practice mobility experiences.

Assuming the conditions presented previously, we present some of the actions taken within the Social Education studies at the UdG to assure that the students have positive mobility experiences.

- Before the placement:
 - Holding informative meetings specifically addressed to the students interested in these experiences.
 - Asking students about their motivations and their expectations concerning the socio-educational project they wish to join.

- Previous training in cultural and socio-educational aspects of the host country, which is a prerequisite for acceptance into the mobility programme.
- During the placement:
 - Student follow-up and guidance. Maintaining periodic e-mail contact with the student, as stipulated, to offer the support necessary for him or her to be able to independently confront problems that may arise, and afterwards to provide follow-up to the professional fieldwork practice experience.
- After the placement:
 - Special sessions to analyse the placement. Contrasting opinions of the professor tutor with professional experts in the analysis of the educational fieldwork practice.
 - Individual interviews with participating professors and students to evaluate the experience and assess its possible continuation.

Alongside these aspects care is taken to try to enhance the relations between institutions, encouraging the professors who act as tutors to be well informed of the exchanges in order to improve their knowledge of the host institution, of the training plan and of the socio-educational context. Along that line, it is expected that future actions will be directed at improving the exchange opportunities (congresses, international meetings, exchange programmes, etc.), the acquisition of first-hand knowledge and the possibility of collaborations.

Key words: Social educator, fieldwork practice, student mobility, cooperation

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