



International
staff mobility:
Adding value
beyond borders

Experts on staff mobility and professionalisation:

‘The two are inextricably connected’

At the Dutch Erasmus+ National Agency, professionalisation is a key topic. International experience is known to contribute to the professionalisation of educators, but what is the long-term impact of the staff mobility funded by Erasmus+? And what can be done to close the gap between national professionalisation policies and Dutch and international education practice? These were the main discussion topics at a meeting held at the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in The Hague on Thursday 30 November 2017. Besides Erasmus+ and Ministry representatives, the meeting included leading experts from four education sectors.





‘Returning home full of inspiration’

The meeting’s spotlight was firmly on the education practitioners: nine professionals in adult education, higher professional education, upper secondary vocational education and primary education, all with a wealth of experience in staff mobility. The impact of that mobility is by no means limited to the person who goes abroad, as the discussion, moderated by Joris Brekelmans and Eline van der Net of the Erasmus+ National Agency, revealed. True, that is where it starts, but as Ine Stahlmann, internationalisation officer at Arcus College, explained, ‘Colleagues who went on a staff mobility trip to London in January 2017 returned home full of inspiration. ‘I’m proud of my job again’, they said. They couldn’t wait to put their new experience to work in the classroom’. That is something Marly Gootzen, a lecturer in the

teacher training programme at Fontys University of Applied Sciences, knows all about. Her trips abroad have resulted in a collaborative partnership between Dutch and Turkish trainee teachers, but have also enabled Gootzen to see things from an international perspective closer to home. As an example, she describes how she pairs students of the physics, chemistry and technology teacher training programmes at Fontys with international artists to cook together at the nearby European Ceramics Workplace. ‘They get to talk about all kinds of things, from culture to politics. It opens up their world. By exposing these students to different cultures, I also hope to encourage them to build up international networks so that later on, they’ll take their own pupils abroad too.’ Gootzen’s efforts feed into a broader ambition at Fontys to make the acquisition of international and intercultural competencies standard for all students by 2020. ‘Not every student will be able to go abroad’, says the

school’s internationalisation adviser Elke van der Valk. ‘So it’s important that lecturers with international experience help to shape *internationalisation at home*, drawing on the experiences and competencies they’ve gained abroad – just as Marly is doing with the artists.’

Inspiration-frustration trap

Lei Ortman, a healthcare programmes coordinator at Arcus College, warns of the danger of the inspiration-frustration trap: ‘Teachers return from their foreign travels filled with enthusiasm, but when it proves impossible to transfer these experiences into concrete changes, then they wind up frustrated. That completely deflates the energy they came back with. I tried to address this by integrating staff mobility in our team improvement plan. Before they set off, I told teachers: ‘Think

about how you can translate your experiences in London into activities within your team plan.’ That made a huge difference. Now we have posters encouraging students to share their thoughts and input on the programme, copied almost verbatim from what schools are doing in London. England also gave us the inspiration to start a vocational training company where students from various programmes can work on their skills in the social domain. Besides what’s being achieved through the initiatives themselves, we’re also no longer stuck in the inspiration-frustration trap. Now, teachers can actually build on the inspiration they get abroad. Their own trips also open their eyes to the fundamental value of international experiences, which results in students who are eager to follow their lead and go abroad themselves.’

‘We’re no longer stuck in the inspiration-frustration trap’



At Jan Harmenshof primary school in Geldermalsen, staff mobility is integrally linked with early foreign language education. Starting from the very first year, children regularly have lessons in English. All the teachers are sent to England for a week to brush up their English. While there, they also have a chance to gain inspiration from their British colleagues – and to experience at first hand that the Netherlands is actually quite far advanced in many respects. These efforts are paying off. For one thing, despite operating in a region with a shrinking population, the school itself is expanding.

Moreover, in January 2017 it was awarded the Excellent School designation. ‘When we first introduced English school-wide many years ago, it was a massive change’, Hannie Kerkhof, the school’s deputy director, remembers. ‘Teachers were nervous at first, unsure if they could manage. But by transitioning gradually, with plenty of guidance, everyone was able to make the leap. Our teachers return from their trips abroad filled with enthusiasm and share what they have seen with the rest of the team.’ Teacher and internationalisation coordinator Rose Staritsky adds, ‘Teachers from both the lower

and upper years go together, which reinforces the learning experience and helps cement the team.’

Competency Cube

Ed Santman and Peter van Olmen are involved in ‘a very different line of work’: prison education. ‘The Ministry of Justice has no one specifically working on education in prisons, but neither is the topic within the mandate of the Education Ministry’, explains Santman, project coordinator of the Dutch division of the European Prison Education Association (EPEA). ‘So there’s no one to steer the people who are devoting themselves to the education of inmates. A single instructor may be in charge of schooling for as many as 300 inmates. Staff mobility is enabling us to expand our knowledge about prison education through conferences and training. It has also put us in touch with colleagues here in the Netherlands and abroad, which is very useful. With everyone working alone, we were all reinventing the wheel. We want

to use this body of knowledge to draw up a plan for education in prisons that we will present to the Ministry of Justice in 2019.’

Van Olmen, who heads the school at the Juvenile Correctional Institution in Lelystad, mentions the Competency Cube as a valuable product of staff mobility. ‘This is a European tool that we’re using to map non-formal learning. It provides an instant overview of a person’s existing knowledge, attitude and behaviour. After release, they can use it to show employers what they have to offer. Lelystad’s volunteering organisation has also adopted the tool to visualise non-formal learning among their volunteers.’

‘We’ve gained a wealth of knowledge’

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Making choices

The schools see staff mobility and professionalisation as two sides of the same coin. 'The central purpose of all my trips is professionalisation', Gootzen emphasises. 'In which field do I need more knowledge, competencies or contacts? The answer to that question tells me which partner university or conference to go to.' At Jan Harmenshof primary school, there is an explicit link between learning abroad and continuous professional development at home. 'We receive funding for ten mobilities every two years, but the team consists of twenty people', says Kerkhof. 'That means we have to make choices about who can go abroad and who can't. Things like improving English fluency get priority over teachers' personal projects.'

Ripple effect

Asked what helps to boost the impact of staff mobility, and what hinders it, participants cite a range of factors. At Fontys, the hindrances include HRM policy, which makes no explicit provisions for internationalisation, and the difficulty for teachers of clearing their schedules for a week. With their already busy timetables, a trip abroad can seem like a mission impossible. Occasionally, teachers are eager to go, but are worried about the quality of their English.

'Extending the reach of internationalisation requires ambassadors'

Lessons learned: effective ways to boost the impact of staff mobility

1. Act upon international experience. Ensure that teachers can actually draw on that experience in their daily practice. For example, by integrating staff mobility in institutional policy.
2. Have teachers from different disciplines travel together. Cross-pollination yields more results.
3. Get support from the management (at all levels). For example, by showing the results or by having members of the management team participate in staff mobility.
4. Invest time and money in staff mobility. The benefits will outweigh the costs.
5. If your school is too small or lacks the expertise needed to write project proposals, join forces with other schools in the region. Collaboration can pay off in other ways, too.
6. Merely observing and handshaking will not get you very far. Experience requires active participation.
7. Staff mobility is a two-way process. By inviting foreign teachers to be active at your school, you can introduce international approaches in your own environment.
8. Not every student can or wants to go abroad. Use your teachers' mobility experiences to internationalise at home.
9. Look for smart ways to combine internationalisation methods, such as KA1 and KA2 projects.
10. Look for smart ways to link staff mobility and national professionalisation policy.

'It's always a puzzle'

In Ortman's view, budget is not a major obstacle. 'The cost precedes the benefit. But many education managers struggle with finding substitutes when teaching staff go abroad, certainly when a significant part of the team all go at once, like we had this past January.' For Kerkhof, by contrast, the budget is just as much of a puzzle as getting substitute teachers. 'We've got to be creative. You can't just suspend classes for a week.' Staritsky, meanwhile, cites the challenge of finding enough time to apply for Erasmus+ project grants. 'That's something I have to do on top of my teaching duties, whereas larger schools would have a full-timer just for that.'

Size, then, is a key factor in how successful schools are at boosting impact. Another way to maximise impact, participants say, is to have teachers

from different disciplines travel together. Also vital is management's awareness and recognition of the importance of internationalisation. Experience shows that as soon as managers, school boards and even governors participate in staff mobility, they also see more of its advantages and why it is important for teachers to develop international and intercultural competencies. Arcus College inspired its school board by presenting concrete results. 'A young colleague of mine went abroad with two students', says Leo Meys, a teacher and internationalisation officer at Arcus College, 'and their enthusiastic account at the open day generated lots of new applications. That finally helped us to get the management team on board as well.' Extending the reach of internationalisation requires ambassadors, Gootzen observes. 'I want my stories

and activities to infect my colleagues and students with the internationalisation virus. And then if they do the same, you get a ripple effect.'

Where the professionalisation of educational activities in prisons is concerned, Santman says it is crucial to be a party

to transnational discussions.

'The previous chairwoman of the Dutch EPEA division is now chair of the European NGO, which also gives her a seat on the European Education Committee. That gives us a direct line on European ideas, and vice versa. It also boosts our status in consultations with the Ministry of Justice.'

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‘Get the international experience at home’

Job shadowing

The experts gathered can think of various ways to further improve staff mobility. ‘It would be great if the whole team could get experience through job shadowing at some point’, says Staritsky. ‘On a visit to a school abroad in May I got to shadow during lessons for my first time ever. That was even more inspiring and enlightening than the usual study trip, because it also gave me a chance to talk in depth with a foreign colleague.’

Van der Valk says he would like to see more mobility of foreign lecturers to Fontys. ‘To get

the international experience here at home; our students learn a lot from that. But you also need to create the right conditions to make real progress on this point. For starters, most communication is still in Dutch, which is an immediate obstacle for foreign teachers.’

Smart links

As the second part of the meeting revealed, internationalisation efforts and national professionalisation policy are often still worlds apart. The solution, the schools agree, is to highlight internationalisation as a constituent of professionalisation policy. ‘Many upper secondary vocational education students find a job at transnational companies’, Meys points out, ‘and especially in the border region, more and more

young people will be taking jobs abroad. This is a reality that educators have to respond to in their classes; it is what makes professionalisation and internationalisation so bound up with each other.’

Possibilities for forging smart links between the domestic and international spheres exist already. The designation of Excellent Schools, the national school governors’ summit, curriculum policy, the teacher development fund – these are but a few examples of potentially fruitful initiatives. ‘A new scheme of team grants for primary education could also be interesting’, says a primary education policy worker from the Education Ministry. ‘Such a scheme could support teams to pursue a development programme together. Doing that as a team would avoid the inspiration-frustration trap that Lei mentioned, since if everyone has been a part of the experience, it’s that much easier to apply lessons learned abroad to make structural changes at your school.’

Another Ministry worker, Sjoerd de Jong, suggests that schools within regional school alliances can provide mutual support with proposals for Erasmus+ projects. ‘That would lower the threshold for primary schools.’ Besides these possibilities, the Ministry is planning to investigate if procedures for primary schools can be simplified, as well as what can be done to clear obstacles surrounding examinations and international work placements in upper secondary vocational education. ‘We would really like to see the Ministry underline the importance of internationalisation in its communications’, Van der Valk adds. ‘A speech by the minister, an award; that makes a bigger impression on school governors than a teacher’s experiences abroad.’ Another tip she has to get management on board: ‘Emphasise that internationalisation activities increase your institution’s visibility in foreign networks, and therefore raise your profile as a school.’

Key Action 1 staff mobility grants awarded in 2018:

Sector	KA1 staff mobility
• primary/secondary ed.	€ 2.486.745
• upper secondary vocational ed.	€ 2.143.889
• higher ed.	€ 1.192.472
• adult ed.	€ 395.345

Energy

The participating educators all came away from the meeting feeling inspired, they said afterwards. The fact that colleagues in other education sectors are confronting the same problems and challenges validates their own concerns, but they also feel energised to tackle new initiatives. Van Olmen: 'I think it would be fun to connect with teachers in the Flevoland region who have gone abroad, to learn what they've gained by it. I'd like to borrow inspiration from them.' Van der Valk would like to share Fontys' Erasmus+ and internationalisation experiences with other schools in the region.

'Our education sectors are all operating on their own little islands. We need to prevent a situation where everyone's reinventing the wheel.' This kind of thinking aligns well with the Erasmus+ approach. 'This experiment, bringing representatives from different sectors and policy departments together, has been a success', concludes Ellen Hanselman, head of the Dutch Erasmus+ National Agency's upper secondary vocational education and adult education sections. 'We're going to make a point of organising more frequent opportunities to learn from each other.'

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In the spotlight

Representing the primary/secondary education sector:

- Hannie Kerkhof: deputy director of Jan Harmenshof primary school.
- Rose Staritsky: teacher and coordinator of internationalisation and early foreign language education at Jan Harmenshof primary school.

Representing the upper secondary vocational education sector:

- Leo Meys: teacher and internationalisation officer at Arcus College.
- Ine Stahlmann: internationalisation officer at Arcus College.
- Lei Ortman: healthcare programmes coordinator at Arcus College.

Representing the higher education sector:

- Elke van der Valk: internationalisation adviser at Fontys.
- Marly Gootzen: lecturer in the teacher training programme at Fontys.

Representing the adult education sector:

- Ed Santman: project coordinator at EPEA Nederland, a division of the European Prison Education Association (EPEA).
- Peter van Olmen: deputy director at Eduvier education group and head of education at the Lelystad Juvenile Correctional Institution.

Information

In the Netherlands, the Erasmus+ grant programme is implemented by two national agencies: the Erasmus+ National Agency for Education & Training and the Erasmus+ National Agency for Youth.

The two national agencies are jointly operated by Nuffic, CINOP and the Netherlands Youth Institute as mandated by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the Ministry of Public Health, Welfare and Sport.

Visit www.erasmusplus.nl for additional information, step-by-step plans and documents about the Erasmus+ grant programme.



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Contact

If you have a question about Erasmus+ funding opportunities in a specific sector, please contact one of the organisations below.

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primary, secondary and higher education

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Erasmus+ National Agency for Youth

extramural youth projects and work

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