

Making International Learning Exchange work for all young people in Wales

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"I felt that I was part of something special, which I never felt before....I learned about respect, I learned about loyalty. I learned about a lot of things which I thought never really existed when I was a kid...if I haven't had gone, I would probably be dead or in jail."

The Welsh Government's decision to launch the International Learning Exchange (ILE) means that life-changing experiences enabled by Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps (ESC) funding will not be lost to Wales.

First Minister Mark Drakeford highlighted the importance of non-formal education and learning as well as volunteering as vital, alongside studying and work placements, to broadening horizons and expanding key skills.

Volunteering for a local, non-profit organisation is particularly important as an alternative gateway for those who won't pursue careers through higher education and is an essential foundation for ILEP to become an inclusive pan-Wales programme.

For young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who find it difficult to achieve otherwise, the open nature of volunteering which values all levels of contribution and participation, provides a space for all to achieve. The opportunities are presented by learning through experience building key outcomes like resilience, confidence and relationship skills.

Callum's story



When he turned 16, Callum was getting into trouble with drugs and the police.

"I was prejudiced towards certain nationalities and was listening to older people who I treated as my idols - if they said they didn't like someone, I didn't like them either."

He was referred by his youth workers to take part in a project in Italy and did 2 weeks of environmental work.

"It was a real eye-opener and life-changing, because for a 16 year old boy like me, it was the first time being away from home on my own."

Callum continued to travel, spending 2 months in Poland then an 8-month volunteer placement in Lithuania. In this last project Callum was volunteering on a National Park before returning home.

"When I came back I was much more myself. I feel more spiritual in myself. I know me, I know what I like and how I would like to be treated. So I treat people that way. I generally felt that I was part of something special, which I never felt before...."

"I learned about respect, I learned about loyalty. I learned about a lot of things which I thought never really existed when I was a kid. I think EVS was the best cure for mental health - better than any drug, any therapist or doctor."

"I think the best thing I remember from projects is the feeling of happiness."

Volunteer projects aim for a common purpose, and participants experience team work, routines, new skills, achievement, pride and a sense of belonging.

This is particularly valuable for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who may find it difficult to achieve these gains otherwise - the open nature of volunteering (valuing all levels of contribution and participation) provides a space for all to achieve.

[Read Callum's full story>>](#)



Inclusive youth experiences

The ILEP is an opportunity to make sure exchange experiences are truly inclusive - that they address social inequalities through international educational experiences, challenge extreme and prejudicial opinions and build Wales' opportunities to be an outward-looking nation with globally responsible citizens.

Research has shown that children develop prejudice at a young age, and begin to exhibit gender stereotypes, racial prejudice and preference for their own race as young as three or four years old.

However intergroup friendships, that span race, gender and nationality, have been shown to enhance empathy and influence against prejudicial attitudes.

In a successful ILE Programme...

Non-formal learning experiences have an equal place

Non-formal education and learning is structured, organised and designed to deliver specific learning outcomes for the participants but takes place outside formal learning environments.

Youth work provides essential opportunities for young people to engage in meaningful, productive and profitable activities – essential components in the transition to adulthood and full(er) independence.

Non-formal education and learning is of particular and greater value to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds as their experiences in formal education and life opportunities may have been negative and severely limited.

Values, Knowledge and Skills underpin all international exchanges

Peace and solidarity have been the core values driving meaningful exchanges over decades.

"The idea of the peace camp was interchange: to talk with your compatriots and discuss a free flow of ideas... through visits and experiences you find out about the other person... in a non-artificial way of just presenting different points of view and allowing people to engage."

Just as values are driven throughout the design and delivery of Wales' new curriculum, we believe it's essential that attitudes and values underpin the design and delivery of ILEP activities. Young people can be taught the knowledge and skills to be ethical citizens, but will not be able to act upon these skills without the right attitudes encouraged.

ABOUT THE WCIA

The Welsh Centre for International Affairs (WCIA) is a registered charity that aims to inspire people to learn about and act on global issues so that everyone in Wales can contribute to creating a fairer and more peaceful world.

This is achieved through delivering an exciting and innovative global learning programme; inspiring communities and organisations across Wales to take global action, and building global partnerships that connect Wales and the world.

This paper is based on WCIA and our partners' decades of experience of running and participating in Erasmus+ and ESC projects, and through conversations with participants past and present, and reflects these conversations and makes recommendations to ensure the ILEP is a success for all participants, wider Welsh society and our partners around the world.

WCIA AND INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE

We have participated in Erasmus+ programmes relating to school and professional exchange for many years. In April 2020, we merged with UNA Exchange, the only organisation in Wales coordinating ESC projects and providing access to Alliance of European Voluntary Service Organisations workcamps.

Creating transformational experiences for young people in Wales is dependent upon strong partnerships and lasting friendships with overseas partners and volunteers; this is something we have been committed to for the last 47 years.

Group volunteering is a key component

Group volunteering is one type of non-formal educational learning activity and can provide a route for the successful participation of a wide range of young people.

It is a structured activity, organised in partnership with a local community/group, which over 2-3 weeks provides a set of common achievable goals for those living and working together

Participants gain a sense of belonging, within their team or group, and the chance to discover their own strengths and abilities – there are many roles to be fulfilled and every participant has a part to play.

With the right kind of preparation and support beforehand and during, the challenges that will inevitably arise can be met and overcome, challenging young people’s perspectives and narratives about themselves and their capabilities.

Centered on the individual: multiple gateways to exchange

Young people and the professionals who support them should be able to access an appropriate exchange opportunity, whether they are an individual or via schools, youth clubs, higher or further education.

“The experience of being a volunteer changed me. I have completely changed my plans for the future, thanks to the many things and skills I have learnt and discovered.”

Participating in solidarity-focused and community-building project activities has proven effective in reducing mental health difficulties through enhancing coping mechanisms, building resilience, and centering moral compasses, buffering the effects of insecurity and stress caused by the pandemic.



Inclusive to those without resources

Ideally placements are fully funded for all young people, and definitely for young people from marginalized and disadvantaged backgrounds.

“Diversity has a face. Diversity has a name. Diversity is my friend.”

SALTO-YOUTH, the EU’s training and support network, provides a helpful framework for understanding inclusion and widening participation.

SALTO focus on seven obstacles: Social, Economic, Disability, Educational, Cultural, Health and Geographical. Young people who face or experience limited opportunities as a result of one or more of these obstacles must be supported to overcome them in order to participate. A training cycle which can support young people before, during and after, with reflection and CV building lessons and internalization, is vital, both for the young people themselves, enabling deep intercultural understanding and to build equal relationships between peers.

