

CAROUSEL: A STUDY ON COLLABORATION WITHIN A SMALL INTERNATIONAL DESIGN COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE AND ITS IMPACTS ON DELIVERING ‘ONE WEEK’ EXCHANGE EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

To prepare students for their future careers in a globalizing society, several large-scale higher education student and staff exchange programmes focus on international collaboration. The organisation and duration of such programmes can often be a barrier for students and staff hoping to engage in global educational opportunities. This case study of Carousel, a recurring one-week exchange workshop, explores the potential and benefits of this shorter, international collaboration programme as compared to the longer-term Erasmus programme. The study shows that small-scale, repeated cooperation between a limited number of partner institutes can have a large impact on international and cross-cultural awareness and professional competence for both students and staff. Short communication lines between teaching staff from each Carousel partner makes the organisation of visits and workshops flexible, easy, and fully adaptable to the educational needs of students. As a result, students become much more internationally engaged and are introduced to different design cultures and methodologies. In some cases, participation in a Carousel workshop has led to a subsequent longer period of institutional exchange. Carousel also offers an opportunity for academic staff to collaborate in the workshop with their students and host an academic team and to experience different approaches toward design practice and educational delivery. Due to the informal character of Carousel, working relations between staff have tended to be of a much more personal nature. This had lead, in some cases, to a collaborative ‘ongoing’ research culture between participating academic staff and has generated new teaching and learning methodologies.

Keywords: International collaboration, design community, workshops, exchange programs, cultural understanding.

1 INTERNATIONALISATION AND GLOBALISATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Internationalisation and globalisation have gained an increased emphasis within European higher education programmes (HE)[1]. Presoto et al. [1] describe the internationalising of HE curriculum as providing students with global perspectives of their discipline and giving them a broader knowledge base for their future careers. Furthermore, they state that this develops cultural competence, such as “intercultural competencies” or “cross-cultural capabilities.” Nuffic [2], in the Netherlands, has defined international competencies as “competencies relevant to interaction with people from other countries.” Similarly, intercultural competencies are defined as “social skills and forms of behaviour relevant to interaction with people from other cultures” [2]. Furthermore, they demonstrate that programmes devoted to internationalisation can also yield standard learning outcomes such as professional knowledge or personal skills. One way to work toward these goals is through exchange programmes. This study is about how our institutes develop, offer, and deliver international exchange experiences within HE product design study programmes. Specifically, we focus on the impacts of Carousel, a small revolving one-week international exchange workshop and discuss this in the context

of EU's longer and much larger Erasmus student exchange programme, which operates with a three-month minimum length.

2 MOBILITY CHALLENGES

If globalisation, cultural competence, and international competencies are a goal for HE [3, 4], it seems obvious that a large number of student and teacher exchanges are necessary. The main barriers for student participation in the Erasmus exchange programme are: lack of awareness of the programme and possibilities for travel, Erasmus conditions (regulations and administration), financial barriers, HE system compatibility, and lack of personal motivation [5]. To increase the number of students studying abroad, institutions have implemented many successful initiatives, ranging from compulsory years abroad to the promotion of language learning and improved student services abroad [5]. One idea relevant to our case study is discussed in an EU education and culture research paper [5] concerning ways to improve participation in the Erasmus Programme; this paper suggests a reduction in the length of study abroad periods. Exchanges of shorter duration are increasing [6], but one challenge with exchange periods under three months is that they yield lower benefits than longer periods in relation to the development of skills and global awareness [7]. However, short-term mobility models may encourage and enable more students to engage in international travel experiences.

2.1 Focus area

In HE, international collaboration has become a key factor within many institutes' development strategies. International experience is considered an important part of both academic learning and students' personal development [4, 5]. Programmes such as Erasmus encourage academics to travel on short international mobility exchanges, typically between two and nine days, while students attend longer trimester exchanges of approximately three months' duration. All participants have the opportunity to experience different teaching approaches and develop collaborative research links, while being exposed to new cultures and institutions. Several studies discuss Erasmus and its impact [2-5]. However, there is less research on the impact of shorter student exchange programmes. In this article, we explore the potential and benefits of shorter, more frequent international collaboration programmes with limited participant numbers per exchange as compared to the Erasmus programme.

3 A CASE STUDY OF CAROUSEL

This line of inquiry was researched through a case study [8] of a small international design exchange community named Carousel. This case study was chosen because of the nature of the research question and due to our experience with this case over several years. Carousel is an international collaborative student/staff workshop initiated in 2013 by three HE product design/engineering partners to provide short and intense international experiences to their respective students. In four years, it has grown to include seven HE product design/engineering partners representing schools across Europe. Each institution exchanges up to 15 visiting students and up to two members of the teaching staff with one partner each academic year; each subsequent year, every institution exchanges with a different partner institute, moving around the carousel, so to speak. Each carousel exchange has the duration of one week. The workshops mix student teams from both institutes, who then jointly engage in design briefs, often related to local culture and/or corporations. This case study is based on several visits over a four-year period, investigated through participatory research [9], interviews, and a questionnaire and is discussed here through theory on exchange programs.

4 FINDINGS

The findings of the study reveal many advantages to working with smaller student cohorts. Students enjoy these short visits and emphasise the new learning skills and working methodologies they have learned, the cultural understanding they have gained, and the teamwork skills they have strengthened. The nature of the workshop, lasting only one week and having the characteristics of a "pressure cooker project" with a level of expectation that is higher than is justified by the time available, also benefits students in several ways. Students report that the short and intense period is very different from the programmes to which they are accustomed at their home institutes; the workshops force rapid decision-making and, therefore, quicker concept and creative idea processes. Students noticed differences in approaches toward problem-solving methodologies and differences in design skills used, such as CAD software, prototyping, and sketching processes. The students experienced fewer

differences in the way teachers from different Carousel partners guided them through the workshop. When asked what they learned from the workshop, most students mention the cultural differences, resulting in different approaches to problem-solving and ideas which they believed produced richer project results.

Another key finding from this study investigating the building of a limited community of institutes, composed here of seven members, is that interactions and collaborations between members occur more frequently. This has led to an international collaborative research culture between some members of the Carousel teaching staff, as well as networking opportunity for students. Carousel has proven to be especially valuable to staff members by increasing staff contact between institutions. While it is not the main aim for Carousel workshops to lead to establishing longer Erasmus exchange agreements, the workshops have led to several long-term Erasmus agreements. Through Carousel workshops, institutes get to know new European partners, their design programme, and their staff. Therefore, it seems that Carousel primarily functions for students as an alternative to experiencing a learning situation in a foreign country, and it secondarily leads to more students going abroad for long-term Erasmus exchanges or foreign master's studies. However, this increase caused by students' Carousel experiences is not large, but definitely noticeable.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Staff experiences on Carousel and organisation structure

The fact that the main organisation of the Carousel exchanges lies with the actual teaching staff makes it less time-consuming and more flexible. It also makes the nature of the cooperation both very relevant for the curriculum and more personal. Some workshops offer opportunities for staff to work and collaborate more closely with students and their projects for an extended and/or uninterrupted time, compared to the more fragmented module structure and timetable at their home universities. It is also important to note that staff who engage in the exchange are removed from the day-to-day administration of their home institutes, which gives them more time to fully immerse themselves in the teaching and learning experience while abroad. Participating staff have commented that they have been 're-energised' when they return to their own institutes; this also corresponds with experiences from Erasmus teacher exchanges and is not unique for Carousel. However, the important point about this is that, within a Carousel workshop, the staff and students engage in a complete project experience from start to finish; this is different from longer-term exchanges in which staff may not visit the exchange partnership, or, if they do visit, they only see a very small part of a larger project. Often students and staff returning from Carousel prepare a presentation and share the experience with their home institute after they return. Feedback from participating staff reveal that the workshops provide a place for reflection; they gain the 'head space' to think about their own programme away from the day-to-day administration duties, which often require 'hands-on' management concerning programme development, staff line management, and general management of the programme.

Carousel has built a strong community of practice between participating staff, which in some cases has forged ongoing international research collaborations. An important consideration when considering developing and maintaining international connections is the size of the participating Carousel members, which impacts the frequency of repeat visits to those institutes. Carousel has seven member institutes, which has led to frequent visits between the same institutes and enabled participating staff to follow-up and develop ideas and discussions from previous trips. It is our experience that this model of working creates advantages for sharing best practices, developing programme content, and disseminating and testing fresh pedagogic practice and research. An example of this is a staff research community working under the title 'Work on the Move' [10], which was developed to capitalise on the opportunity of having participating academic design staff all together during Carousel week. Put simply, the students are assigned a design task, so why not do the same for the staff?

One of the challenges mentioned in regard to Erasmus is HE system compatibility [5]. This is clearly less challenging for a one-week exchange programme. However, from an organisation perspective it might be challenging to find time for Carousel visits due to tight schedules. One of the participating institutes noted the issue of organizing their workweek to accommodate a visiting workshop. The main problem was that their programme runs within a structure of shared modules with other programmes, which requires the cooperation and support of a number of different module leaders. As mentioned in the findings, Carousel workshops enable institutes to get to know new European partners and facilitate

greater opportunities for sharing and broadening university international contacts. One example is the development of more formal, long-term Erasmus exchange agreements based on some of the new programmes introduced by Carousel. This would suggest Carousel also offers an opportunity for institutes to run a 'trial' of a new exchange partnership before committing to a larger or longer-term agreement.



Figure 1. Carousel in action in Zwolle, Nantes, Edinburgh and Oslo

5.2 The student experience and learning

One challenge for students when considering a long-term exchange is the difficulty in organizing the travel around part-time jobs and renting out their accommodations while they are absent. This is the major factor stopping students from participating. Within the Scottish institute, the international mobility model has been set at a target of approximately 800 places, thereby increasing the current key performance indicator of 200. In an interview with the institute's global mobility manager, a number of challenges to long-term mobility engagement were identified, based on feedback from their students, including students' concerns about having to give up part time jobs, caregiving responsibilities for family members, separations from partners, and funding challenges. On average, the cost of the Carousel workshop is approximately 400-500 euros for flights, accommodations, and any expenses for transport, access to museums/cultural events, and personal spending money. Students have commented positively on the value of the trip for the cost, as the trips are organised by the host to include a range of academically, culturally, and socially beneficial activities. The 'value for money' argument might seem a bit superficial, but it is an important consideration, because, regardless of country, financial issues are the most commonly identified barrier to long term studying abroad [5]. Around 29% of students withdraw from the idea of a long-term exchange because they think the level of funding provided by Erasmus grants is insufficient [5]. Barriers can also include difficulties like moving away from home or the home country for the first time; because the Carousel programme is only one week long, these challenges are easier to manage and are not a factor in preventing students from attending. As described in the findings, it seems that, to a large degree, Carousel is accessible to students and often functions as an alternative to experiencing a longer-term learning situation in a foreign country. However, in several cases Carousel has stimulated longer exchanges. The students also talk to students at home about their Carousel experiences and this can affect whether or not other students wish to commit to a long-term stay at the institution. In the Scottish product design program, Carousel was initially offered to 3rd year students, with a few spaces open for both 1st and 2nd year students; this structure had the benefit of helping to promote and stimulate interest in the workshops earlier in the programme. Within the Scottish programme, we found that students who engaged in the workshop in earlier years were much more likely to engage in longer overseas exchanges when they were offered in students' 3rd year. A significant factor for this increase in participation was that returning students gave a presentation to their cohort about their experiences, which in turn supports the participants' social media feeds when they are away. That short stays can lead to longer exchanges corresponds with findings from research on the Erasmus programme [5] that states that students who have participated in short (1-3 weeks) international programmes are more likely to attend a longer exchange later in their studies. Furthermore, a survey related to Erasmus [5] shows that students might have been keener to participate in mobility programmes if they had been introduced to the opportunities at an earlier stage in their education. One example from Carousel is the following quote from a Scottish 3rd year student who is currently on a longer five-month exchange but initially engaged with Carousel in her second year: *"Good to do short Carousel experience in 2nd which give me confidence to apply for longer Erasmus trip in third year. One of the main reasons for this was*

Carousel which was the first time I was away from my parents and friends, which gave me confidence to know I could do it for longer.”

Furthermore, interviews with two Norwegian students showed that the Carousel trip had made them more aware of options for studying abroad and, as a result, they are currently applying to foreign MA studies.

There is little doubt that a long-term stay will increase the impact of the experience [5, 7]. Moreover, it is not likely that the students' experiences from one or two international one-week workshops will grant cultural competence and international competencies that equals those of Erasmus exchanges. However, these workshops produce results, and certainly they contribute far more toward international and cultural competencies than if the students had stayed at home. One student noted: *“I think the most important thing I learned this week was how to come to a compromise in a project where people have different opinions because of their different nationalities.”* Another said: *“I learned that it can be very different to work with foreign people than expected. They have their own way of working [and] approaching a problem or perhaps even their visions on the world.”*

It is also important to mention that the nature of a Carousel visit differs quite a bit from a regular study trip due to its workshop character and cross-international focus. To strengthen the effect of these competencies, it is important to structure the Carousel week to offer both studio and external industry visits as well as social events. This makes the week a diverse and rich experience with greater access to insights into working and living in another culture. Observations showed a noticeably richer cultural and international design awareness to their subsequent design project due to students' exposure to international travel, collaboration with older students, and cultural events organised with the host universities. Furthermore, students gained a perspective on their host institutes' learning and teaching styles to help them put their own experiences into context and see the opportunities their own institutes offer them. For example, different institutes may use different design methodologies, place more focus on physical workshops, or push prototyping using 'quick and dirty' design methods or digital moving image. One student said: *‘It was at a much higher tempo than we usually do projects.’* Observation also showed the different 'pace' of learning between institutes, and that, in the context of a one-week project, the process was more important than the outcome. Here, students had little time to think about failure and were empowered by having to make decisions quickly and act on them.

Students have also noted the benefits of collaborating with students with different skill sets from different institutes and different approaches to learning. One student said: *‘I think this [different knowledge and skills] is one of the best aspects of being mixed with other people who has other studies or that has been taught in a different way, because our skills are completely different, and when working in groups, it is easy to divide the tasks and also to learn new tools to do projects.’* Another student said: *‘I have learned new tools and software to edit sketches that I didn't know before.’* It is important to comment that the students also found many similarities in their skills and knowledge. The one-week structure of Carousel means that learning is brought back into the participating students' cohort the week they return home. This keeps the experiences fresh and relevant, and the knowledge acquired can be disseminated almost immediately. This differs from longer-term exchanges, in which, in the example of the Scottish institute, long-term mobility occurs at the end of third year, so returning students enter their final year after a three-month summer break when the experience is no longer fresh.

6 CONCLUSION

When reflecting on the experiences between Carousel and long-term exchange programmes, one of the main benefits has proven to be the impact on participating staff experiences and development. The Carousel structure encourages staff to participate in the workshop collaborating with the host teaching staff. This is a great benefit compared to long-term exchanges, where staff may not have the opportunity or be required to visit students. Very rarely, if at all, is there an opportunity to engage in a complete student project abroad. In Carousel, every participant contributes to the project in different ways, which in turn generates conversation and discussion between staff. These interactions have developed research projects between different host participants which have been disseminated in international pedagogic conferences and journals. Furthermore, Carousel's small number of collaborators and the frequent visits between members means there are greater opportunities to build stronger relationships and ongoing communities of practice and project development. In addition to

building longer-lasting relationships, the workshops generate momentum to reflect on and develop experiences for future visits. It has been the practice for the workshop hosts to source local industry or relevant collaborators from the community for the workshop week. The fact that each member will host and visit each year creates an incentive to plan new workshops, and, as a result, a wide network of industry makers and studio collaborators is constructed. The workshops use external local venues/locations in addition to the host studio environment. This enables visiting participants to experience local culture rather than simply spending a week in a familiar studio environment similar to their own institute. This experience, both working with foreigners and experiencing their culture, enhances international competences, although Carousel cannot influence the same quantity of international competences as a long-term Erasmus exchange. Hence, Carousel is not an equal alternative for longer student exchanges but an additional option, which provides more opportunities for larger numbers of students and staff to participate. The structure of Carousel reduces financial costs and duration away from home when compared with longer exchange programs. From an administration perspective, it has proven to be more manageable when integrated into curricular timetabling. These benefits address major barriers that prevent participants from wanting to participate in international exchanges. The agile, short, and frequent structure of the workshops also means staff can adapt, develop, and quickly respond to both positive and negative experiences, and feedback allows administrators to constantly develop the programme in line with changes in culture, commerce, technology, and pedagogic methodologies. In the interview with the Scottish institute's global mobility manager, a number of challenges to long-term mobility engagement were identified. However, he also expressed that some benefactors to the university who contribute funding for the purpose of international mobility are not convinced that short-term mobility agreements provide sufficient cultural benefits and impact to the students. In light of these issues, the Carousel structure was praised for diversifying the mobility model in such a way that international educational mobility has become accessible to more people and for demonstrating an effective approach for increasing the institutes' mobility participation numbers.

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