



# Long-term effects of the participation in international youth exchange programmes on the participants' personality development

## Summary

### 1. Background

The research project was carried out from December 2002 to July 2005 at the University of Regensburg under the scientific leadership of Prof. Dr. Alexander Thomas as well as the qualified psychologists Ms Heike Abt and Ms Celine Chang in cooperation with the German Federation of Associations for Cultural Youth Education (Bundesvereinigung Kulturelle Jugendbildung), the International Youth Community Services (Internationale Jugendgemeinschaftsdienste), the German Federal Youth Council (Deutscher Bundesjugendring) and the Bavarian Youth Council (Bayerischer Jugendring). The project was funded by the German Youth Stamp Foundation (Stiftung Jugendmarke).

### 2. Aims of the project

The main objective of the project was to find out whether the participation in international youth exchange programmes of the format "short-term programme in groups" has effects that even last after years, that are still significant or have led to further developments which have left marks in one's later biography.

As this subject has not been comprehensively and systematically researched so far, the object of research was to be explored from different points of view and with the application of various methods.

Thereby, former participants who took part in different programme formats were to be involved into the study and also, to a smaller extent, participants from abroad.

### 3. Research questions

#### a) What kind of long-term effects do international youth exchange programmes have on former participants after at least six years?

Although this question already implies that long-term effects can occur, it was absolutely unclear at the beginning of the research whether the respondents could remember an experience of one to several weeks which happened more than six years ago. Yet, on the basis of studies about individual programmes with three months' duration (Hetzenecker, 1999), a fairly detailed reproduction of experiences can be expected.

#### b) What fields of experience and action are addressed during the programme?

Here, it was of interest if there are certain forms of experience in youth exchange programmes that many participants estimate as having been significant, regardless in what

programme format they participated. It was to be investigated whether during these programmes typical and specific experiences are made.

**c) What processes lead to long-term effects?**

It was to be examined in which way the long-term effects are achieved. For that purpose, the interviewees were inquired about their emotional, cognitive and behavioural reactions to situations during the exchange which they remember up to now as they have been contrary to their expectations in a special way (experience of discrepancy) or have been especially emotional. It was to be examined if these situations have led to particular long-term effects. Thus, the process from the experience to the long-term effect was to be made transparent.

**d) What influence on the exchange experience do processes that are relevant to developmental psychology have?**

At the time of the meeting, the young people are in a specific phase of development which is influenced by particular subjects (developmental tasks). like development of identity, vocational orientation and intimacy It was to be examined in how far these subjects became relevant during the programme.

**e) How is the exchange experience integrated biographically?**

As the time of the survey was scheduled at least 6 years after the participation and as therefore, for the most part, important events of life took place since the experience like moving out from home, beginning of a vocational training or studies, possibly marriage, birth of children, it was to be checked, what significance does the exchange have in the respondents' biography, how it has been integrated into the biographical history and how it is assessed from today's point of view.

**f) Are there differences with regard to various types of programmes?**

As there have been chosen four typical formats from the field "short-term programmes in groups" and therefore, different types of programmes were included into the study, a comparison between the programmes was to complete the results of the study.

#### **4. Researched programme formats**

The choice of the different types of programmes was based on an analysis of the various exchange programmes conducted in this field. Researchers and practitioners agreed that with this choice, a broad field of exchange activities in the sector of short-term group programmes has been covered. The following types of programmes have been integrated into the study:

**a) Exchange of secondary level students with home stays**

This exchange programme with mutual visits is organised by schools. The students are accommodated with host families in order to provide an insight into family life in addition to the improvement of foreign language skills. The students stay in their respective host country for about 1 to 4 weeks. The programme in the respective countries take place in the same or in the following year. At the time of the exchange, the young people are aged between 14 and 18 years. The international group consists of 30 to 50 adolescents.

**b) Mutual exchange of youth groups at the respective home town of the partner**

During this programme which is conducted partly in the home town of one group and partly in the home town of the other group, young people from different countries work together on certain topics. In addition to the aspect of meeting, the treatment of subjects definitely makes up the focal point of the programme contents. The exchange lasts between 5 and 15 days. The programme in the respective countries can take place in the same year or also in the following year. The participants are accommodated with host families and they are, at the

time of the exchange, between 16 and 20 years old. The group consists of 15 to 35 young people.

**c) Project-oriented cultural exchange of young people with common accommodation**

A common cultural project that may be limited to the time of the meeting or may be planned for several years' duration is the focus of this youth exchange programme. The participants from different countries meet at a so-called "third place". The programme lasts between 5 and 15 days. The group consists of 20 to 80 participants. The persons to be included into the interviews should have been aged between 16 and 20 at the time of their participation in the exchange programme.

**d) Multinational work camps**

Young people from different countries work together without remuneration for 2 to 4 weeks for a non-profit (e.g. social or environmental) project at a third place. During the programme, self-organisation by the group plays an important role. Participants work for about 5 hours a day, organise their leisure time on their own, live together in simple accommodations and for the most part, they care for their meals on their own. In the majority of cases, these programmes are open to all young people. Between 10 and 20 participants take part in a work camp. Work camp participants should be approximately aged between 18 and 21.

## 5. Steps of the project

**a) Analysis of literature:** First of all, a comprehensive analysis of literature was conducted and a theoretical frame model was developed.

**b) Analysis of documents:** Information about programmes, newspaper articles, statistics, reports by participants and leaders (if available) have been evaluated to obtain an overview of the respective programme formats with regard to aims, implementation and participants.

**c) Interviews with specialists:** Semi-structured interviews with N=17 persons who hold many years of experience in the field of planning, organisation and leading of international youth programmes. Aim of the interviews was to obtain information on the development of the programmes as well as characteristics of the programmes and their participants. Based on the results of the first three steps, the survey instruments for step 4 were developed.

**d) Interviews with former participants:** There have been N=93 semi-structured interviews with former participants from Germany and N=40 interviews with former participants from abroad. The interviews lasted between 1 - 2.5 hours. They were recorded, completely transliterated and analysed by means of a qualitative content analysis.

**e) Survey by questionnaire:** Based on the results of the interviews, a questionnaire was developed which was completed by N=532 former participants from Germany (response rate: 66 %).

During the entire period of this project, five accompanying workshops with the cooperation partners took place at regular intervals. During these workshops, the survey instruments were checked and discussed with regard to their suitability to the target group, and the results which were available at that time were validated communicatively.

## 6. Results

The first and surprising conclusion obtained from the interviews became clear quickly and obviously: The interviewees remembered their exchange experience well, described a multiplicity of detailed situations during the exchange, could provide information on their

emotions, thoughts and actions at that time. In many cases, they could relate them to effects which last until today. Moreover, the research team met with the former participants' high acceptance of the questions. Partially, the interviewees were even highly delighted that they "could finally tell someone once again thereof" and that "such nice memories have been brought back" by the interview. The results of the interviews and the research by questionnaire can be summarised as follows:

**a) Socio-demographic characteristics of the questionnaire sample:** 66 % of the 532 former German participants queried are female, 60 % have had no previous experience with exchange programmes, 51% had been encouraged to take part, 86.3 % attended a grammar school at that time. The average age of the participants was 17 years, and more than 90 % had participated at least 10 years ago.

**b) The leading motives** for participation differed greatly between the programme formats. Depending on the focus of the programmes, they relate to the following fields:

- interest in a music or theatre project
- interest in a non-profit activity
- improvement of foreign language skills

Common motives are:

- to get to know people from other cultures (56 %)
  - generally to get to know new people (36 %)
  - to make international experiences (33 %)
  - to get to know something new (32 %)
  - interest in a certain country (31 %)
  - to get to know a culture/a country not as a typical tourist (30 %)
- (N=532, multiple entries possible)

**c) Access** to international youth exchange programmes proved to be very programme-specific and varied in the degree of initiative on the participants' side. As expected, the majority of participants in student exchanges (48.3 %) were addressed by their teachers, and 48.5 % of the participants in cultural projects were called on to participate by music teachers or theatre group leaders. 35.8 % of the participants in work camps indicate that they actively looked for an appropriate programme on their own. For the other programmes, only 5.4 - 9 % indicated this. In comparison the other programme formats, participants in youth group exchanges indicate most frequently that they were encouraged by their family or by friends to participate.

**d)** In the interviews, the former participants report a multitude of **detailed situations** during the exchange. The 93 interviewees from Germany described 440 triggers (situations that were surprising/unexpected and/or associated with emotions), and the 40 interviewees from abroad described 210. A multitude of triggers were related to long-term effects.

**e) The triggers** can be subsumed to 6 central topics for the German sample and to 4 central topics for the foreign sample.

The topics of the **German sample** are:

- specific contents of the programmes (music, theatre, living with a host family, non-profit project, faith)
- differences experienced during the exchange (economic differences, standards of living, differences in resources, cultural differences, gender-specific differences)
- situations with significant others (other participants, exchange students, teachers/youth leaders/project leaders)
- positively felt hospitality
- group (specific experiences due to the group situation like conflicts, the feeling of togetherness, activities in the group)

- German history (confrontation with the Third Reich, the bilateral relationships to the host country, the national self- and stranger-perception)

The topics of the **foreign sample** were:

- German history (Third Reich, reunification, current xenophobia, bilateral relationships with the country of origin)
- cultural differences (food, orientation by rules, habits, structure of the family)
- handling of alcohol (liberal handling of alcohol, quantity of alcohol consumption, first experiences with alcohol)
- significant others (other participants, exchange students, teachers/youth leaders/project leaders)

Thus, it becomes apparent that these youth exchange programmes open up specific fields of experience and action which are strongly affected by the contents of the programmes, the host country and the bilateral relationship, by German history and single, important persons.

The occupation with one's own national identity (noticeable here through the perception of differences) and subjects like the consumption of alcohol which becomes relevant at this age, are typical topics during this developmental phase. Developmental tasks during adolescence are reflected in many contents of the triggers. This subject was especially significant for the foreign sample as the foreign participants experienced a different consumer behaviour in Germany regarding to alcohol and as they partly had their first experience with alcohol (drinking age is already 16)

During the interviews, it also became clear that not all long-term effects are associated with specific triggers, but the exchange as an overall experience is often remembered as having been a "big trigger".

f) The German and foreign interviewees of all programme formats report a multitude of effects which last until today and which they causally connect with the exchange or with specific triggers during the exchange. The categories of **long-term effects** can be subsumed as follows:

**Self-related characteristics and competences:**

effects in the field of self-awareness, independence, self-confidence, self-assurance, self-efficacy.

**Openness, flexibility, composure:**

A change in this field leads to reacting more openly towards new situations and people, and more composedly and flexibly in unfamiliar situations.

**Self-awareness/self-perception:**

self-reflection and dealing with one's own self-perception. Participants learn to better assess themselves.

**Social competence:**

relates to group situations and includes first of all the ability to work in a team and to cope with conflicts.

**Intercultural learning:**

Intercultural learning includes the following fields: being able to adopt the perspective of another person, being aware of the fact that there are differences between cultures, and to have a deepened knowledge about one's own and the other culture.

**Cultural identity:**

promotion of the development of a cultural identity through realisation of one's own cultural imprint, reflecting being German with its advantages and disadvantages

**Relationships to the host country/host region:**

promotion of a positive emotional relationship to the host country/host region and its inhabitants as well as an increasing interest in the host country/host region and in other cultures

**Foreign language:**

promotion of foreign language skills as well as the interest in and the readiness to speak and to learn a foreign language and to deepen the knowledge of it

**Follow-up activities:**

further frequenting of intercultural contexts (programmes, contacts) as well as voluntary commitment

**Training and profession:**

The experience during the exchange programme has had effects on the professional development.

**Contacts:**

Even many years after the exchange, there is frequently contact (personally, by telephone, in writing) to persons who also took part in the respective exchange programme.

Concerning the long-term effects, it is noticeable that they are clearly less programme-specific than the triggers. In the questionnaire, the categories generated from the interviews were queried by means of various items per category. The formulation of the items was highly geared to the interviewees' statements.

**Long-term effects**

In the questionnaire, each of the 10 scales for the long-term effects was composed of a different number of items, each with the possibility to answer from 1 (I do not agree) to 5 (I fully agree). Medium agreement is achieved when the value of the sum is bigger than: *number of items x 3*. This figure expresses that on the scale, the person always ticked more than "I agree at medium level". For a scale with 7 items, the medium agreement would therefore be at 21. The results which have been subsumed in the following table show how many percent of the 532 respondents are more likely to agree to the statements (*value of the sum > number of items x 3*), that there is a positive connection between the exchange experience and the development of these competences and activities.

<b>Construct</b>	<b>are more likely to agree (in %)</b>	<b>are more likely to disagree (in %)</b>
<b>Self-related characteristics and competences</b>	62.9	37.1
<b>Openness, flexibility, composure</b>	51	49
<b>Self-awareness/self-perception</b>	39.7	60.3
<b>Social competence</b>	51.8	48.2
<b>Intercultural learning</b>	62.3	37.7
<b>Cultural identity</b>	28.1	71.9
<b>Relationships to the host country</b>	59.7	40.3
<b>Follow-up activities</b>	27.9	72.1
<b>Influence on vocational development</b>	16.1	83.9
<b>Foreign language</b>	52	48

In addition to these constructs, it has been recorded in how far the contacts established during the exchange have lasted until today.

Item	Yes (in %)	No (in %)
I am still friend with persons I have got to know during the exchange.	28	64
I still have contact to people I got to know during the exchange.	41	59
A partnership with one of the persons from the exchange developed which lasted longer than the exchange.	15	85

52 % of those who kept in touch until today (N=316) contact each other one or two times a year, 29 % have contact 3 - 5 times a year, and 19 % more than 5 times a year. With 67 %, the contact is surprisingly often face-to-face (N=215), in 81 %, it is in writing, and in 49 %, it is by telephone (multiple answers possible). In 59 % of the cases, there is a contact to non-German participants.

**g)** Regarding the **overall significance** of the exchange experience, 71 % of the 532 respondents find it important. 51 % consider it more important than other experiences abroad, 56 % regard it as more important than meetings with foreigners in Germany and for 57% it is more important than other group experiences. 39 % state that the significance has remained temporally stable and for 19 %, the significance has even increased in the course of time. From today's point of view, 85 % mark the exchange programme *very good* or *good*. During the interviews, 32.2 % of the 93 German respondents classified the international exchange under **the top 5 events they have experienced hitherto** in the fields leisure time, education and profession. Having to take their choice of 86 events, the exchange takes one of the first 5 places.

**h)** Four different processes to **integrate the experience biographically** can be observed:

**Nice to have:**

The exchange experience did not leave any noteworthy traces in the biography. The exchange was a nice holiday, a wonderful time, a valuable experience, but did have little formative impact and no major effects.

**Mosaic:**

The exchange experience contributes to a certain development together with other events. It fits in as a "tessera" into one's entire biography. The exchange is regarded as a tessera to one's career, a reason amongst many others, a particle which also belongs to it, a contribution to the future path of life, simply a part of the whole.

**Domino:**

The exchange experience is a trigger for a string of follow-up events and activities. The exchange is looked at as an initial ignition, an impetus transmitter, a trigger, the beginning of a string, the beginning of all, the hour of birth, the foundation stone.

**Turning point:**

The exchange experience initiates a turning point in one's biography. The exchange represents a turnaround, a breaking out of habitual structures or an initial point for a changed life.

i) In the context of the interviews, persons were asked whether they have been aware of the **coherences** between the exchange and the effects they describe already *before* the interview, or whether these coherences were primarily established by them during the interview. Checking this was important, as it could have been possible that the causal coherences were only built during the interview when activating the memories of the exchange and when questioning on the long-term effects. Merely regarding a few situations, the respondents expressed that they had just become aware of certain aspects when they were reflecting the events during the interview.

j) The **differences** between the four researched programme formats can be summarised as follows:

- no differences in the constructs 'self-related characteristics', 'openness', 'self-awareness', 'social competence'
- slight advantage of the student exchange programmes und youth group exchanges concerning the furthering of intercultural competence
- no difference concerning cultural identity
- no difference in follow-up activities
- slight advantage of cultural youth exchanges concerning the influence on career development
- advantage of student exchange programmes concerning the promotion of foreign language skills
- no difference in unwanted long-term effects

The results from the interviews provided a detailed insight into how participants had perceived, reflected the exchange experience and how it takes continuing effects. From the overall evaluation of all individual cases arising from the interviews, important conclusions could be drawn regarding typical developments, trigger categories and long-term effects as well as the overall significance of the experience. With the questionnaire study the findings from the interviews could be quantified on the basis of a large sample.

#### k) Development of correlational models

In addition to the descriptive analysis, the relationships between the fields of long-term effects and variables related to the participants as well as programmes should be investigated.. For this purpose, the fields of long-term effects were combined to three different categories (factors) by means of a factor analysis (with Varimax rotation). For each of the factors a regression model (using stepwise methods).was developed on the estimated factor values

Name of factor	Fields of long-term effects
Self-related, generalised characteristics and competences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-related characteristics and competences</li> <li>• Openness, flexibility, composure</li> <li>• Self-awareness</li> <li>• Social competence</li> </ul>
Intercultural competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intercultural learning</li> <li>• Relationship to the host culture/to other cultures</li> <li>• Cultural identity</li> </ul>
Domain-specific, practice-oriented activities and competences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow-up activities</li> <li>• Foreign languages</li> <li>• Vocational development</li> </ul>

The following variables are connected with the self-related, generalised characteristics and competences (model 1) ( $R^2=.29$ ):

<b>Variables of model 1</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
Motive for participation: generally, to get to know new people	Participants, who took part in the exchange also for this reason, have benefited more in this field.
Self-description: unconfident	Participants, who characterised themselves as unconfident before the exchange, have benefited more in this field.
Age of other participants	The participation of older participants had a beneficial influence.
Reflection on the experience	Reflecting the exchange experience was conducive to the long-term effects in this field.
Overall significance	The higher the significance of the exchange experience, the larger were the effects in this field.
Importance: Contact with like-minded people	The more important participants considered the contact with like-minded people (i.e. peers who have the same topics and aims), the larger was the effect in this field.

The field 'intercultural competence' (model 2) is connected with the following variables ( $R^2=.35$ ):

<b>Variables of model 2</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
Motive: to get to know people from other cultures	Participants, who took part in the exchange also for this reason, have benefited more in this field.
Experience of divergency	Novel and unaccustomed experiences were conducive to the long-term effects in this field.
Importance: contact with like-minded people	The more important participants considered the contact with like-minded people (i.e. peers who have the same topics and aims), the larger was the effect in this field.
Importance: contact with inhabitants of the host country/of the host region	If the contact with the inhabitants of the host country respectively the host region was important for the participants, there were more long-term effects in this field.
Stay abroad within the scope of the exchange	If a stay abroad did take place during the exchange, this was conducive to the long-term effects in this field.
Gender	Men benefited more in this field than women.
Programme format: cultural youth exchange	Participants in cultural youth exchanges benefited less in this field than participants in student exchange programmes (baseline).

In the field of domain-specific, practice-oriented competences (model 3), a relationship with the following variables was found ( $R^2=.18$ ):

<b>Variables of model 3</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
Overall significance	The higher the significance of the exchange experience, the larger were the effects in this field.
Motive: to improve foreign language skills	Participants, who took part in the exchange also for this reason, benefited more in this field.
Self-assessment: adventuresome	Participants, who characterized themselves as adventuresome before the exchange, achieved more effects in this field.
Importance: non-organised leisure time activities	The more important participants rated non-organised leisure time activities, the more long-term effects could be found in this field.
Stay abroad within the scope of the exchange	If a stay abroad did take place during the exchange, this was conducive to the long-term effects in this field.
Programme formats: work camp and cultural youth exchange	Participants in work camps and cultural youth exchanges achieved more long-term effects in this field than participants in student exchange programmes (baseline).

As a whole, the three models provide first insights into the relationships between participant and programme characteristics and long-term effects which should be examined more intensively in the framework of further studies.

The finding that the gender plays a minor part than expected is remarkable. The fact that programme format has no influence in model 1 shows that all formats have supported personality development with regard to the promotion of self-related characteristics and competences. The domains of long-term effects which are subsumed in model 1 especially reflect developmental tasks during adolescence. In the other two models, the programme format has an influence: the programme formats show different effect-related profiles, i.e. they promote long-term effects in different fields (for example artistic development versus foreign language competence). The results also confirm our assumptions that the motives for participation, experience of discrepancy and processes of reflection play an important role with regard to the effects. These models permit to directly derive recommendations for actions in the field of practical implementation of international youth meetings, particularly with regard to programme planning and selection of participants.

Further information on this project is available at:  
[www.jugendaustausch-langzeitwirkungen.de](http://www.jugendaustausch-langzeitwirkungen.de)

The results will be published by the Thomas Morus Academy in a book which has the temporary working title "Internationale Jugendbegegnungen als Lern- und Entwicklungschance" (International Youth Exchanges as a Chance for Learning and Development") and which will be released in the series "Studien zum Forscher-Praktiker-Dialog zur internationalen Jugendbegegnung" (Studies about the Researcher-Practitioner-Dialogue on International Youth Meetings). The book will be published until midyear 2006 and will be available at the bookselling trade or via the Thomas Morus Academy.

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In case of questions, we shall be pleased to be at your disposal. You can get in touch with:

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