

THE UAB'S EUROACCIÓ PROJECT TO FOSTER PROFESSIONAL INTEGRATION AND MOBILITY OF RECENT GRADUATES

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In addition to building knowledge and technology, universities must provide people with the opportunity to train as professionals.

If young graduates are to make a successful transition to employment, the barriers between the worlds of education and business must be broken. The Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona is aware that its responsibility to its students does not end on graduation, and therefore offers services aimed at facilitating the transition to employment. It also goes beyond the local or national level to open up the European market to its graduates.

The European Union's Leonardo da Vinci Programme was created, among other objectives, to facilitate cross-border professional mobility. It gives financial support to projects that allow university students to obtain work placements in companies and institutions of European countries whilst improving their language and interdisciplinary skills, which are highly valued in the labour market. The UAB's Euroacció project presented in this note is an example of this.

Key words: University, professional integration of graduates, professional mobility, Leonardo da Vinci programme, Euroacció project

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1. Universities and professional integration

Universities have a primary responsibility for training the human resources required by present-day society, which are continually changing due to the technification, evolution and accumulation of knowledge. To obtain the best results, the worlds of education and business must be coordinated. Higher education must be diversified to provide flexible continuing education and lifelong learning. This approach was described by the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona in its 2002 report:¹

‘The changes in the demand for professional competencies will be shown both in the increasing need for technical competencies and in the need for certain key competencies, for more transversal competencies that are not specific to a particular job [...].’

According to surveys of young graduates of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and the results they obtain when they have integrated in the labour market, the theoretical training they receive is good but the practical training is merely adequate.²

Due to the great variety of occupations and employment trajectories that have arisen from the globalisation, diversification and specialisation of the labour market, professional integration is a complex process.

The worlds of education and business must be coordinated. Higher education must be diversified to provide flexible continuing education and lifelong learning.

Specific action must be taken to keep universities in line with social and economic change and cutting-edge research in order to ensure that students receive a sound theoretical and practical education adapted to the professional reality of Europe and the rest of the world. Most universities have made significant progress by creating networks with universities in other countries, but they lack international contacts with companies in order to ensure the proper dissemination of new knowledge in technology and economics, and in society in general.

¹ Cambra de Comerç, 2002.

² VIVAS, 2008.

The most effective form of integration in the labour market for young graduates is through *informal* relationships, or personal contacts. However, the initiatives of university employment services, which include training in competencies, job marts and work placement opportunities, are becoming increasingly important.³

The main mission of the Treball Campus Office of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona is to facilitate the integration of graduates in the labour market.

2. The experience of the UAB: the Treball Campus Office

Aware of its responsibility for the professional future of its students, in 1989 the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona created the Treball Campus Office,⁴ whose main mission is to facilitate the professional integration of graduates. This also marked the creation of a favourable framework for collaboration and communication between the University and businesses, which has a positive influence on the social performance of both. The Treball Campus Office has obtained ISO 9001-2000 certification.

The other public and private universities in Catalonia offer their students similar services with similar aims. Most public and private universities in Spain also do so. On the initiative of the Spanish University

Student Affairs Network (RUNAE),⁵ all the universities hold contacts and working meetings to deal with subjects of common interest and establish co-ordinated lines of action and good practices.

The current fields of action of the Treball Campus Office are the following:

A) Orientation and training

Students and recent graduates are informed about the employment world. Training is offered in transversal competencies that are common to all fields of study and provide students with a general preparation to enter the labour market. In particular, they offer tools for improving their capacities, their jobseeking skills, and their ability to present a good image of themselves. Students are also given information on the composition, functioning and management of companies and training in entrepreneurship and setting up companies.

B) Job mart

Students are offered the opportunity to register for the UAB's job mart. The University thus acts as an intermediary between supply and demand, provides companies with information on the CVs of registered students and carries out specific actions for groups with special needs.

C) Business presentations and forums on the university campus

These presentations are very useful as they offer mutual benefits for the University, students and businesses. They allow businesses to enter into direct contact with possible candidates for jobs, to disseminate their corporate image, and to

³ The results of the professional integration studies of 2008 (for students who graduated in 2004) can be consulted on the website of the Quality Assurance Agency for the University System in Catalonia: <http://www.aqu.cat/uploads/insercio_laboral/enquesta2008/index.htm>.

⁴ Treball Campus: <<http://treball-campus.uab.es>>.

⁵ RUNAE: <<http://runae.crue.org>>.

contact the university structures from which they can obtain technology, applied research and continuing training.

D) Management of voluntary work placement in companies

According to the Treball Campus Office, 37% of the students who have done work placements have been recruited by the host company.

E) Management of cross-border professional mobility projects

The aim of this action is to offer young graduates access to international markets and to improve their technical and transversal training.

3. The Euroacció project

In January 2006 the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, through the Treball Campus Office, drew up a project called Euroacció in the framework of the Leonardo da Vinci programme.⁶ This project was approved by the Spanish Leonardo da Vinci agency.⁷

The main objective of the Euroacció project is to allow young graduates of the UAB to obtain work placements in countries of the European Union in order to gain experience, enhance their CVs and

improve their prospects of obtaining a good job. It also has a positive effect on their personal, linguistic and sociocultural development.

The specific objectives of the Euroacció project are:

In 2007 and 2008, the Euroacció project managed 150 grants.

- Integration in different technological and labour situations
- Acquisition, application and improvement of individual competencies
- Creation of cooperation networks with European companies
- Fostering stable professional mobility
- Increasing cross-border relations between universities and companies
- A continuing approach to lifelong training

The first Euroacció project awarded 42 grants to support work placement by recent graduates in countries of the European Community. Two new editions of the project offering 150 grants were presented and approved in 2007 and 2008. Half of these grants will be applied for stays in 2008 and the other half in 2009.

⁶ Leonardo da Vinci is a programme, approved by the Council of Ministers of the European Economic Community on 6 December 1994 (94/819/EC) (<<http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc82-eu.html>>), which contributes to a "Europe of Knowledge" by consolidating the European area of cooperation in education and vocational training. It supports actions carried out by member states and in member states and complements them, with full respect for the competences of the states with regard to the content and organisation of vocational training, and with regard to cultural and linguistic diversity. The main objectives of the Leonardo da Vinci programme are:

- To strengthen the skills and competencies of the population, especially young people, by reinforcing professional integration.
- To improve continuing training and lifelong learning.
- To promote innovation in order to improve competitiveness, paying special attention to cooperation between educational institutions (including universities) and businesses.

⁷ The Spanish Leonardo da Vinci Agency (<<http://es.leopass.org>>) is an organisation depending on the Ministry of Education and Science that manages the European Leonardo da Vinci programme. It receives applications for interested organisations of the whole of Spain and an expert committee decides whether they meet the objectives of the programme. The projects may be at a national, regional, provincial or local level, or centre-specific. A centre-specific project can only have participants from the centre. Project evaluation and approval are currently the responsibility of the Autonomous Body for European Education Programmes (OAPEE <<http://oapee.es>>), within the Permanent Learning programme (PAP).

3.1. Implementation of the programme

The UAB offers a wide range of official courses, ranging from the humanities to engineering and including social sciences, health sciences and experimental science. All recent graduates are eligible to apply for these grants, regardless of the course they have taken. This approach provides recent graduates with an equal opportunity to carry out work placement that they are unlikely to find in the labour market.

Treball Campus has a network of intermediaries partners located in different European union countries who seek companies where the participants can obtain placements according to their education and expectations. They also deal with the logistics of the stay.

In order to apply for a grant within the Euroacció programme, students must have finished their degree in the two academic years previous to the call. The grants are awarded according to academic record, knowledge of the language of the host country and interest and motivation, which are evaluated in a personal interview.

Though the University normally finds the host companies, the students can also do so. For students who have not chosen their own destination, the Treball Campus Office has a network of intermediary partners located in other EU countries. These partners have the experience and administrative structure for managing mobility programmes. They seek companies where the participants can obtain placements according to

their education and expectations. They also deal with the logistics of the stay (welcome, accommodation, advice on leisure activities, etc.). If the participants have selected the host company themselves, the partners assess its suitability and the quality of the placement.

Before the departure of the students, a written collaboration agreement must be entered into by the sending organisation (UAB), the host organisation (the company where the work placement will be carried out) and the student. The stays are of 14 weeks: 1 week for initial adaptation and contacts, and the following 13 within the company. Each participant is supervised by a tutor in the company and receives continuing monitoring and support from the Treball Campus Office.

If the work placement is carried out in the areas of work provided by the network of intermediary partners of the UAB, there are two departure periods: Late March and mid-September. If the participants find the company themselves, they choose their own departure date. Before departure, the students receive language immersion and sociocultural preparation for their stay in the host country.

3.2. Characteristics of the grants

For the first and second Euroacció projects, the average amount awarded per participant was €2,248. For the third call, it was raised to €2,600. The grants do not cover the full cost of the management by the intermediary partners, so the project is co-financed by the University.

- The grant must be distributed as follows:
- Seeking the host organisation (if necessary)
- Personalised language training
- Return travel costs

- Travel and health insurance
- Accommodation and living expenses
- Management and tutoring expenses
- Management

3.3. Assessment and certification of the work placements: the Leopass questionnaire

During the stay, the Treball Campus Office monitors and supervises the students on work placement through e-mail messages and telephone conversations, and takes action to solve any problems that may arise. The Spanish Leonardo da Vinci Agency also carries out a thorough final evaluation through a detailed questionnaire that students answer by logging in.

This questionnaire is called Leopass⁸ and it is common to everyone on the Leonardo da Vinci programme, whatever institution they belong to. As a promoter of the project, the UAB has access to the results. The Leopass questionnaire evaluates the following aspects:

- Preparation of the participants before departure.
- Content of the work placement. Organisation of the work placement, tasks carried out, and attitude of the tutors.
- Recognition: certificates received.
- Outcomes: technical, competencies, impact on work and personal life.
- Practical preparation: management of the journeys, logistics, insurance, signing of the tripartite contract.
- Satisfaction with the support provided by the sending organisation (the University).

- Overall satisfaction with the financial support provided by the programme
- Advice for other beneficiaries.
- Suggestions for improvement of the programme.

The Leopass questionnaire, which is common to everyone involved in the Leonardo da Vinci programme, makes a thorough evaluation of the participants.

When the participants return from the visit, the Treball Campus Office also evaluates their employment situation and offers them help towards their definitive integration. It holds informal but structured interviews with the returning participants, in which they are asked about how they experienced the stay, placing special emphasis on obtaining suggestions for improvement.

When they have completed their work placement, the participants receive a certificate issued by the European Agency (the Europass mobility document)⁹ and a certificate issued by the UAB in Catalan and English. The certificate states the name of the participant and when and where they did the work placement, and is signed by the vice-rector for External Relations. The Europass mobility document is a personal document awarded to the beneficiaries of a grant. It states the period of work placement and the professional experience and competencies acquired. It also describes the

⁸ <<http://es.leopass.org>>.

⁹ Europass is a set of five documents that foster training and work in Europe. The main aim is to facilitate mobility for students and workers in the member states of the EU, the countries of the European Free Trade Association/European Economic Area and the candidate countries who wish to seek work or apply for admission to an educational or training programme. <<http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/europass/home/hornav/Downloads.csp>>.

content of the work done, the objectives, the duration, the methods and the tutors who guided and supervised the participants. It must be signed by the three parties: the participant, the tutor in the company and the tutor at the University.

3.4. Development of the project

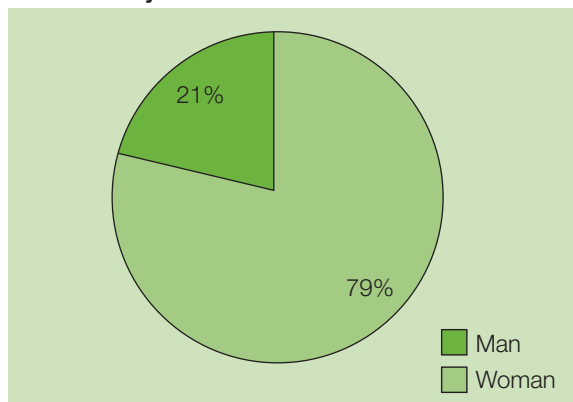
The first Euroacció project ended in March 2008 with the presentation of the progress report and the economic report. The second one is currently underway and the stays had ended in December 2008. Full data are therefore available on 42 of the grants and partial data on the current ones.

3.5. Participants and countries

Information on the beneficiaries and their work placement is available for a total of 117 grants corresponding to the first (42) and second (75) projects:

- A) 79% (92) of the participants are women (Figure 1).
- B) The distribution by degree subjects can be seen in table 1:

Figure 1
Distribution by sex



Font: Elaboració pròpia.

- c) With regard to the location of the host organisations (Figure 2), only 14 of the 117 participants chose their own host organisation. For the rest, the host organisations were chosen in places where the University has intermediary partners, with the priority of meeting objectives of quality and satisfaction of the participants. For example, in the first project the United Kingdom

Table 1
Distribution by qualifications of the UAB participants in the first and second projects of the Euroacció programme

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| 1 participant | Labour Studies; English Studies; Philosophy; History; Music and Music History; Chemistry (degree); Literary Theory and Comparative Literature |
| 2 participants | Business Studies: Law; Economics; Social Education; Statistics; Physics; Physiotherapy; Geography; Art History; Humanities |
| 3 participants | Business Management and administration; Biology; Computer Engineering |
| 5 participants | Biotechnology; Sociology; Veterinary Medicine |
| 6 participants | Political Science; Advertising and Public Relations |
| 7 participants | Psychology |
| 8 participants | Environmental Science |
| 10 participants | Translation and Interpreting |
| 12 participants | Audiovisual Communication |
| 17 participants | Journalism |

Font: Elaboració pròpia.

Figura 3
Location of the stays



Font: Elaboració pròpia.

destination was Birmingham. Because the persons who went there in the first call (March 2007) were very satisfied with the work placements but not with the city, a new intermediary partner was sought for another English-speaking destination. Belfast was chosen, and the results were satisfactory.

3.6. Impact of the work placement on competencies

As stated above, at the end of the work placement the Treball Campus Office carried out personal interviews with the participants. From the information gathered from the first 42 stays, the following outcomes were detected:

- Only one person was dissatisfied with the work placement, though this person was highly satisfied with the stay as a whole.

The participants state that they obtained new knowledge, improved their technical competencies, increased their professional flexibility and developed transversal competencies.

- The participants acquired new knowledge, improved their technical skills (in their field of study) and increased their professional flexibility.
- The participants developed transversal competencies, such as knowledge of the language used, teamwork, adaptation to new environments, tolerance, self-confidence and initiative.
- The participants were satisfied with the opportunities to interact with other young

people, to get to know other social and cultural customs and to strengthen their personal autonomy.

3.7. Impact of the work placement on professional integration

A study carried out in 2005 shows that 21.5% of students graduating from Catalan universities in 2001 took over three months to find their first job.¹⁰

At the UAB, the Treball Campus Office offers all job seekers the job mart service, addresses of companies and training in applying for jobs.

In order to determine the employment situation of the participants in the Euroacció project, and to determine lines of action that the Treball Campus Office can continue after the end of the project, a questionnaire was distributed to the participants in March 2008, two months after their return. The following information was obtained from the 31 responses received:

- 100% of the participants found the stay to be interesting or very interesting overall.
- 85% considered that it would be positive for their career at present or in the future.
- 76% were working two months after finishing the stay and 85% considered that the tasks they had performed were suited to the university degrees they had taken.
- 17% were still studying and 50% of these said that they were seeking employment but gave priority to their education.
- 7% were seeking employment.
- 11% had been offered the possibility of continuing in the company in which they had worked.

- 4% had continued working in the company at the end of their work placement.

Whereas in the Leopass questionnaire only one person stated that the work placement was not directly related to their professional career, in the Treball Campus questionnaire 15% (six persons) stated that it would be of no value for their professional career. The reasons for this lack of correspondence were deduced from the personal interviews carried out on the return of the students: some participants had found that the tasks carried out were of a lower level than corresponded to their competencies in terms of importance, organisation or responsibility.

4. Conclusions

Work placement compatible with the education of students is a very valuable way for them to acquire technical and generic competencies that allow them to seek employment in the confidence that they have the necessary knowledge, know-how, attitudes and behaviour.

Universities are aware that their obligations to the students do not finish on graduation and that their aim must be to programme and carry out actions aimed at training the professionals required by society. These experiences are one of the best ways to obtain a job. Students who do work practice are transformed into employed professionals. If the workplace is done in a foreign country, the values acquired are multiplied.

Finally, university employment services are a suitable place for managing programmes of this

¹⁰ These figures were obtained from periodical studies carried out by the Research Observatory of the UAB, which are not done every year or with 100% of the courses. The samples studied consider the professional development of persons who finished their education some years ago.

type, because of their links with the business world. In view of the good reception of these programmes among the beneficiaries, instruments designed to favour cross-border mobility should be used increasingly by universities. The European Higher Education Area¹¹ could become the European professional mobility area.

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¹¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/higher/higher_en.html>.

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