



Youth stories: my European experience

Introduction

The young people featured in these articles were given an opportunity to travel to another country, experience other cultures and meet new people. For many, these youth mobility experiences help to shape the adult they become, fostering new skills and inspiring them to recognise their talents as a contribution to the wider community.

This publication aims to showcase the stories of the young people and youth organisations who have taken part in a wide range of projects, from democratic processes and advising political decision makers, to youth exchanges and volunteering projects. The articles are written by the young people themselves, or the organisations that supported them.

Youth work plays such an important role in guiding these young people to the opportunities available and helping them to get the best out of their experience. Eurodesk offers a network for youth organisations to collaborate and share experience, and find the information to help more young people take part in these opportunities. This booklet serves as a celebration of what is already being achieved and we hope that this work will continue for many more young people in the future.

Political Participation

Structured Dialogue: Giving Young People a Voice on Issues Affecting Them

Structured Dialogue aims to include young people in political decision-making across Europe. It's a process that brings together young people and European policy-makers to discuss topics where young people should have a say. In the UK, representatives are elected to reflect the voice of young people as UK Young Ambassadors (UKYAs). These UKYAs travel to meetings held in different European countries, sharing the thoughts and ideas of UK's youth. At these meetings, they work with representatives from other countries to agree on recommendations for EU Youth Ministers to hear.

Gary Paterson, Scottish Youth Ambassador for Europe, reflects on his experience attending a European Youth Conference for Structured Dialogue:

In September 2015, European leaders and youth representatives met in Luxembourg for the third and last European Youth Conference of the fourth cycle of Structured Dialogue. I joined youth representatives from across Europe, culminating the 18 months of research, representation, discussion, compromise, and conferences I had undertaken as a UKYA. This conference concluded final recommendations to be submitted to European decision-makers on the issues of youth rights and political participation.

The final recommendations seek to ensure that participation in our democracy is encouraged and supported from a young age, with school and youth councils promoted as a form of active citizenship. To involve young people in decision-making processes at all levels, just like this experience which gives us the power to shape decisions affecting young people, seeking genuine participation from young people countered with genuine commitment from decision-makers.

At the Conference, we heard from the Prime Minister of Luxembourg, youth ministers, European Commissioners, and just as importantly, from young people armed with not only the thoughts and ideas of the young people back home, but the

hopes for answers in a Europe which has much potential to drive change for individuals and society at large, but which is often caught up in crises, as was noted by the Prime Minister himself when discussing the recent challenges facing Europe, such as the Refugee Crisis.

I have had the opportunity to make some wonderful friends, brush shoulders with European leaders and Prime Ministers, and to shape European policy, and I have done it all by taking forward the views and hopes of people in our communities; disenfranchised young people unable to access their rights and their opportunities, that is what UKYA representation has to be about, and that is why I am delighted I have had this opportunity to take those stories to the very heart of European decision-making. It has been an experience I have cherished and will never forget.

For more information on the UK Young Ambassadors – www.UKYA.org.uk



Connections Project – Northern Ireland Assembly

Participant Ross McVittie, 18, Member of Youth Parliament Belfast East writes about the project and his experience.

The Northern Ireland Assembly has been awarded Erasmus+ funding to develop a youth engagement project. The programme provides 36 young people the opportunity to actively participate in democratic life by working closely with the Northern Ireland Assembly on an inquiry issue chosen by them.



I was selected to take part in the programme and so far, the group have taken part in a variety of activities. They participated in ice breakers, quizzes, workshops, research activities, information sessions, round table discussions, and group work. We saw Question Time in the NI Assembly Chamber and a NI Assembly Committee in action (and put our questions to the Members). We also met the Education Officers, Committee Clerks, a range of MLAs, the Speaker, and the Director General of the Assembly.

(Picture shows Speaker of the NI Assembly Mitchel McLaughlin MLA in the centre with

Erasmus+ Connections participants and NI Assembly Education Service leaders. I'm on the LHS in the grey suit and blue tie!)

As part of the programme we got to choose the issue to focus on for the duration of the project and after some discussion we all agreed that it would be Mental Health issues that impact young people in NI.

We developed a survey about mental health services following discussions with local mental health organisations, talking to young people in focus groups and to date hundreds of young people from across NI aged between 11 and 25 have completed the survey. The results will be discussed with a number of NI Assembly Committees later in the year.

I received training on research methods and how to conduct focus groups as part of a co-ordinated programme of engagement. I also worked with a group of young people to develop, film and complete the editing of 3 mental health awareness films (Film 1 - A Picture of Mental Health in our Community, Film 2 - Education and Mental Health and Film 3 – Mental Health Services).



On 13th October I had the privilege of introducing the Speaker of the Assembly, Mitchel McLaughlin MLA, at the screening of the films in the NI Assembly Senate Chamber to various MLAs and local mental health charities and agencies to mark World Mental Health Day. Mitchel McLaughlin MLA said in his speech that he “hopes that this project will strengthen democracy by giving young people an opportunity to influence decision-making on an issue that concerns them and concerns all of us.”

The next step was for the Erasmus+ Connections participants to formally present the findings of the mental health survey along with a screening of the 3 films to both the Committee for Education and the Committee for Health.

“I’ve found the experience challenging and rewarding especially since we have been able to highlight the very important issue of mental health issues amongst young people to local NI Assembly decision makers. I hope that our work will result in specific improvements in mental health awareness education and service provision for NI young people. ■■



Picture from erasmus+ connections 13th October

Further information can be found at:

<http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/youth-engagement>

<http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/news/assembly-screens-films-made-mark-world-mental-health-day>



NI Assembly Speaker Mitchel McLaughlin MLA introducing the event.

Youth Exchange

'Street Culture'



On the bus

Borough of Poole Open Access Service's 9 Day European Youth Exchange

July 2015 - Cherbourg, France

Partner Countries: Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary

The opportunity to take part in the Youth Exchange was promoted during Borough of Poole Open Access Service's Summer Programme. The location of the exchange was important to us as Cherbourg is our twinned town. The young people who took part came from existing centres and projects that the service co-ordinates. A series of five preparatory meetings took place where participants were able to prepare and talk about their 'Hopes and Fears' for the Exchange:

Here are some of their hopes.

- Enjoy sharing Street Culture
- Make new friends
- Have a memorable experience
- Learn a bit of other languages
- Decent weather (!)

Participants were involved in various activities to support the 'getting to know you' process. The accommodation was based in a brand new 'Seniors' Residential home and so as well as being inter-cultural was inter-generational.

Other activities included:

- Preparation of sharing their own culture to invited guests and the other countries (including preparing a full roast dinner!)
- Workshops on Street Art, Street Dance, DJing and Videoing
- Conflict resolution over a specific issue
- Using public transport
- Food shopping

The participants did daily evaluations looking at what they got out of the Exchange. Comments from the participants included:

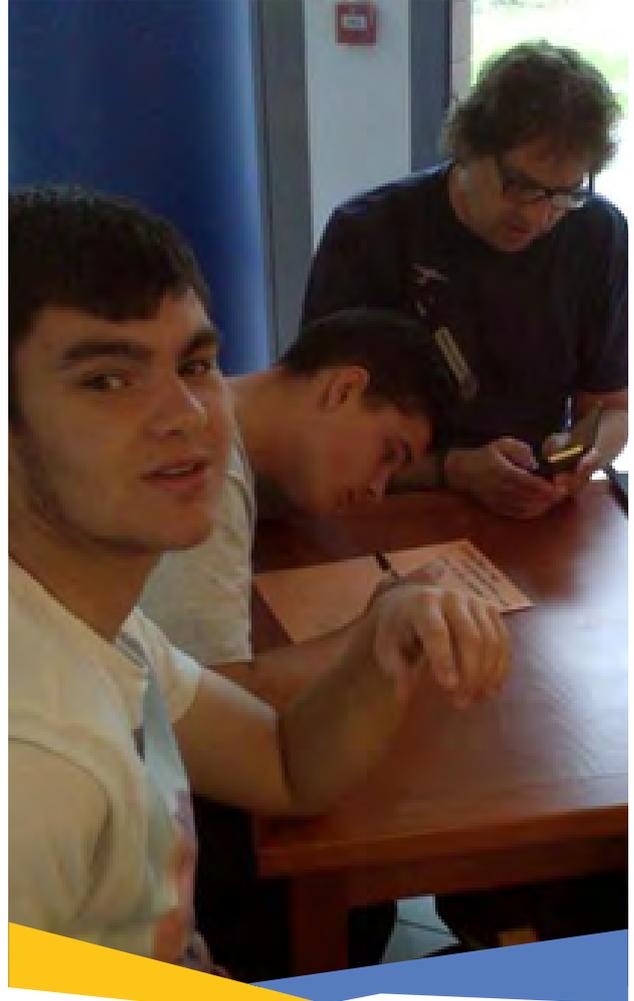
- "I learnt how to buy my food using different money with out help"
- "Learning how to DJ with the French people"
- "I touched a shark in the Aquarium"
- "People are nice"
- "Learnt some French words and phrases"
- "The kindness of people stunned me"

- "I've challenged myself to express myself in other ways than talking"
- "Sorting out an argument without a leader helping."

Young people should get involved in this or similar projects

- The experience will provide significant challenges for all participants and for some it will be their first ever visit abroad.
- You get to share and meet people from four other countries and develop an understanding of cultural similarities and differences.
- You get to take part in a range of activities and can develop a wider range of skills and self-expression.

As a direct outcome from this experience young people are now meeting on a weekly basis to plan to host the group from Cherbourg in the summer of 2016. They are hoping to make this exchange self-financing, therefore enhancing their entrepreneurial skills. This involves making presentations to funding organisations and developing a business plan.



Poole Group



Graffiti Wall

'Lead the Future' Kirklees Youth Council European Exchange

Five members of Kirklees Youth Council took part in a ten day European Youth Exchange in Strasbourg, France. There were six countries involved in the exchange: France, Spain, Romania, Hungary, Latvia and the UK.

The aim of the exchange was to:

- Develop European Citizens
- Learn about other European cultures
- Create links with young people from other countries
- Find out all about the European Union

Prior to the exchange the Youth Councillors:

- Researched elements of the European Union
- Prepared a presentation about life as a young person in Kirklees for use during the exchange
- Raised funds to support the exchange
- Planned how to share their experience with other young people while they were in France and on their return

The Experience

During the exchange the Youth Councillors worked hard as representatives of young people living in the UK. They experienced a wide variety of opportunities including:

- A visit to the European Parliament building
- Gathering information from young people from all of the other countries
- A visit to Struthof concentration camp
- Exploring local democracy for Pays De Hanau
- Evaluating local transport
- Developing their communication skills



Learning

The experience has given this group the foundations upon which to build their knowledge of what it means to be a European Citizen. It has also provided insight into 'life as a young person in other European countries'.

They have learned how the decision making process in the European Parliament impacts on life in the UK.

The visit to Struthof Concentration Camp has had a lasting impact. The group wish to share the need to 'understand the past and how important it is to our future'.

The young people have completed their ADSAN accreditation portfolios for the Youth Voice Award – the award for local representatives.

If you have any questions please contact:

✉ Youth.council@kirklees.gov.uk

NICOLA - New International Company of Live Arts

NICOLA WORLDWIDE aims to inspire a sense of active citizenship, solidarity and tolerance amongst people. We facilitate Youth in Action, Lifelong Learning Programmes and (European Voluntary Service) EVS (Hosting and Sending). NICOLA has built hundreds of contacts with like minded associations around the world, travelled numerous times to Poland, Lithuania, Turkey, Bulgaria, Luxembourg, Holland, France and Italy for projects or training regarding environmental, cultural, and social issues.

In London NICOLA hosts, and refers to other organisations, young person internships through Voluntary Service (EVS), Leonardo and Erasmus+. Our aim is to give young people the opportunity to train or do work experience in the UK or any another country while widening their chance to get into employment.

» <http://www.nicolaarts.org/index.php/en/>

Here are some first-hand experiences of young people who have been involved in NICOLA Youth Exchanges.



What an experience! It is better than I thought it could be.

My story with Youth Exchange started in September 2014 with a trip to a small town in Portugal, Figueira da Foz.

All excited, I have met other participants at the airport and because I have not met them before, the journey to the unknown already started there. Once arrived in Portugal, we were all picked up by the receiving organisation and met everyone else taking part in the exchange. From then on we have spent all our time together either working on a group exercise, presenting our organisations and countries, meeting local authorities or simply enjoying our free time. Following this journey, I could not stop joining other projects and representing my sending organisation NICOLA from London, UK.

Each exchange is very different from another, however they are all very similar in a way. Joining a youth exchange not only gives you a great opportunity to travel but also to meet very interesting people, learn about other cultures, countries and languages as well as find out information about various topics, which are the main reason for youth exchanges.

In my opinion everyone should be able to join at least one youth exchange in their life, as it changes one's view about various issues. Ever since my first journey I have gained great contacts, made amazing friends from all over the world, and learned a lot about myself. »»

Patty Trish



I had the opportunity to travel to Sicily with a group of young people from NICOLA (New International Company of Live Arts) London. We stayed in a hotel for 8 days, it was opposite the beach. We were served breakfast, lunch and dinner. We also got a tour around some of the places in the town, we visited a few museums, churches, and shopping sites. We also met some of the politicians. It was a great experience, especially because we got to interact with other young people from different countries and discuss about what our government is doing for the young people. Interacting with the other young people was good, and that's because I got the chance to learn about their culture and also what's taking place in their country currently. »»

Tega Akpod

European Voluntary Service

UNA Exchange

UNA Exchange is a not for profit organisation based in Wales, working to promote international understanding since 1973. The organisation aims to support community development through volunteering and cultural exchange. UNA Exchange manages a range of programmes which support international volunteering in Wales and abroad from two weeks to 12 months. Their activities bring together young people from different countries to volunteer their time and energies in a unique way, bringing benefits to individuals and communities alike.

Website: <http://www.unaexchange.org>

Below are some first-hand experiences of young people who have taken part in EVS through UNA exchange.

Angela: Nothing is impossible



Since being a student in secondary school until graduating from University I thought: "So, what am I gonna do now?" I was looking for different ways to go abroad and I found the European Voluntary Service (EVS). Finally in September 2014 I started my EVS project, promoting cycling, in Cardiff.

I was working in three different organisations: One day I was in schools explaining to children how to get safely from home to school by bike, another day I tried to find the best bike for a person with disabilities or helped fixing bikes in the workshop. I had to learn so many new skills - I didn't know anything about bicycles or how to use the tools before, and because my English was really bad at the beginning, I could hardly understand anything. I couldn't express myself properly or have a proper conversation with others. During that time I felt like

I am not able to do my project. But things changed for the better and I learned a lot and gained more skills. At the end of the project one of the organisation I volunteered for offered me a job and I decided to stay in Cardiff working and studying English.

I enjoyed living with six other people from different countries, you feel like you are on a summer camp all the time! With the group we were travelling a lot and tried to do something different every weekend: I went to Russia, Slovenia and North Wales.

Looking back now I would say that I learned to be independent that year. You are far from your friends, you live in another country and you have to learn how to survive by yourself. I am not scared of anything now and I learned that life is moving all the time, you only have to move with it even though you are facing



difficulties in your life, you have to keep going. I think I stopped to try to control everything and started to “go with the flow”, and be more relaxed. Because I learned so much during my EVS I started thinking about running my own business when I go back to Spain. Back in Spain, when I was in my hometown with my friends, all the time in the same place, I couldn't see how many different opportunities you

actually have. Abroad you meet lots of different people from different countries, different ages, living their life completely different. And you can see they enjoy their life more than what we call “normal life” and it makes you realise how many things you actually can do in your life. After EVS I feel like nothing is impossible. ■■

Daniel: Leaving the comfort zone



I think people who are afraid of travelling are just used to their comfort zone - I was as well, and was fed up. This year I participated in a ten day Youth Exchange in Spain and it was unbelievable. We had a lot of activities and spent a lot of time speaking with each other, learning about each other's countries (Wales, Belgium, Montenegro and Spain).

Our project was called “Building our European home” and we all talked about what home means to us in our different countries. From that we started building ideas about what the European home is. We talked about a sense of community. Home means lots of different things, it can mean the house we live in, or it can mean a tent or eco-friendly pig farm! It's really what you make of it.

We made two visits to alternative living places, which were real eye-openers. Just to see how people can live is magnificent, some people manage with so little money and all seemed so happy.

I have never spent time around people from different countries. We quickly found out that although we are different in a few ways we're all very much the same. Our cultures are different, our ideas are different, traditions are different (eg. where I live you don't go

out for coffee at 11pm!) but then as we carried on, we saw that everybody was really the same.

I think you learn that there is so much life beyond where you are. I mean you may see someone from a different country on the street and you might say “hello”, you might see someone in a bar and you might speak to them for ten minutes about their country but to go there and learn and see how they live as well, it really gives you an idea of the world.

It was bizarre that so many people from so many different places became so close over the space of ten days. When I came back, I felt a bit weird. I never got along with people so quickly and so well. I was glad to be home and it was nice to see my friends again but it wasn't as much fun, there was nothing new pushing me forward like in Spain, it just really motivated me out there.

I am definitely more confident and I find it easier now to socialise with people, especially if they struggle with English. I started to learn to speak more clearly and I am very patient. It opened my eyes to see that there is more than just the little town where I live. I try to travel a lot more so I continue to build and grow in this way. ■■

Darren: Keeping busy and having work to do helps to avoid trouble



When I decided to go for my first project abroad in 2010, I just wanted to be out of Wales. I am from Wales and I love Wales, but I was fed up to see the same things over and over again. I started to do projects with UNA Exchange when I was homeless and I was in the homeless centre. UNA asked me if I wanted to go to Austria, so I said yes. I just wanted to go somewhere else and see the different culture, I had never been to Austria and I thought it would be a different culture. I wanted to see how Austrian people live, because everywhere you go, it is always different to Wales.

I went to this project for three weeks and I enjoyed it so much that I stayed for one year. I ended up being paid by people who worked in the office. I just enjoyed it. I lived in a house in Austria, there was a bit of construction work to do, and there were horses and pigs there and children came from Vienna to see how a farm works. During the project I learned how to be more responsible and I started to grow up and be more confident. I started to speak more, say my opinions, before I

wouldn't say anything like that.

After Austria I went to Moldova for two months in 2012 to work with disabled children and then to France for one year to work in an international youth meeting centre in the Alps. When I came back, I kept helping people around me. For example if I see an old lady with bags, some people would just pass, but I would stop and help. Before I wouldn't have done it, but because I have been abroad and helped people, I came back with the same attitude.

I think before I went abroad I was always getting into trouble. I changed the scenery, and I changed my life. I would have probably been in trouble if didn't meet UNA. I have changed now: I took part in a lot of projects and I grew up. It was important for me to stay busy and not be so bored, I simply needed to do something. ■■

Gary: To spend some time near the ocean is always nice



I was very interested in Portugal, to learn the language and be totally immersed in the culture and after 3 years of searching for a European Voluntary Service (EVS) I found a project in Faro, focusing on media. On my EVS I was making films in Faro for a Portuguese organisation called ECOS. We started a project called "Impressions of Faro" and we made three films in total on various subjects with local young people. We used to do "vox pops" walking around and talking to young Portuguese people which was really interesting. We were very fortunate because one of the volunteers that was with us was fluent in Portuguese, so she could go around and speak with the people in their language and we could record and then translate afterwards and create subtitles for non-Portuguese speakers. One particular video was really popular because it showcased the beauty of the city, which is a time-lapsed video of 24 hours of Faro. It was something that took us a long time but it was really well worth doing it.

During my year in Faro, being so close to the ocean I decided to take part in a scuba diving course. There is a big scuba diving culture in Portugal and it is a haven for marine biology, the University of Algarve has a lot of marine biologists there. I met some friends who studied in this field and we used to go scuba diving together. It was very interesting for me and I learned to do underwater and nature photography. In that sense, scuba diving became important for me because I could use this skill alongside the media production skills that I have.

It was always sunny in the Algarve and we used to go to the beach till mid-November. We used to go to on a small pontoon on the Ria Formosa to watch the sunset. During the shooting star season we sat there together and it used to be an incredible setting to be in. We would watch the shooting stars and the moon above. I think it's just worth it to spend some time near the ocean in the sun, which is always nice. ■■

Jess: I just wanted to change more than anything



I think I chose the volunteering project in France because I always wanted to go abroad and I also like the feeling of giving something back to the community. I expected to be quite terrified and nervous as it was my first time travelling abroad and on my own and I was just like, "Oh my god, I think I am lost... Oh my god, what's gonna happen to me? Will I get kidnapped!"

But once I did it, I realised it was actually quite simple. Now I have done it once I feel I can do it again.

I just wanted to change more than anything. I was doing the same thing seven days a week so it was refreshing to do something else for three weeks in France. The work that I chose was agriculture and renovation. I was making concrete, drilling holes and I was using equipment I have never used before so it was a new experience. It was brilliant, not just because the good time I had but also because of the good feeling I got from it. I actually didn't want to come home!

After work we went to festivals, went shopping, went to the river, had picnics... I didn't have TV or anything else there and I didn't miss it at all, because we just made our own entertainment, we had our own fun.

This project gave me a lot of confidence and independence because I budgeted my own money and had to do our shopping. I learned a lot of teamwork skills and improved my communication skills: I had to because a couple of girls didn't speak the best English and most of them told me that I spoke too fast...so I had to slow my speech down - I had to say basic words, so they could understand. I opened up to one or two other volunteers, which is something I don't do in general. I was surprised that I got along with everyone, I literally loved everyone there. I have been volunteering in Merthyr for about 4 years, but to go abroad and do something completely different in a completely different way was a brilliant experience, it was new and fascinating. That's why I think that if you have the opportunity, take it. Don't think twice. It may seem scary at first but once you get through it, you will be addicted to it. ■■

Laura: Pick your own lettuce for dinner



I have done some volunteering before and I thought it might be quite nice to lead the project in my home country. The project I chose was farming work on Caerhys Organic Community Agriculture (COCA) farm in west Wales. I haven't been to that many places in Wales either, so this was a chance to explore another area of my country.

We were on an organic farm and we were planting, harvesting and weeding for the local community. I remember how happy we were on the first day, when we started to harvest the onions; pick them up and hang them to dry, working together! Working outside for the whole day was quite relaxing, because a lot of the time daily life is spent inside working or studying. For me it was incredible just how much land that Gerald the farmer has and the amount of crops they planted! The farmer and his son mainly do all of it on their own and they only have a few volunteers who come to help when they can, but Gerald really relies on volunteers to help. At the farm they make vegetable boxes from the weekly harvest, which people can buy from COCA. We also cooked our own meals from the organic vegetables; we had delicious salad every day or milk, which was locally produced. It was such a nice thing to be able to pick your own lettuce and have that for your dinner! I think that living in city, we don't really realise that so many people are passionate about their community and produce

their food! It is something I didn't have awareness of but obviously living in the city it is not around you on a daily basis and this experience makes you think more about where that food comes from, and what you can do to change it. It has made me want to grow my own food in the future.

The main responsibility for me as a leader was to make sure that everybody was able to carry out and enjoy the work they did and that everyone was getting along well together. I enjoyed living together; after a few days you kind of feel like a family because you do everything together all day. Obviously you can have time to go out and do your own things, but you do get close really quickly. I always like to meet people from all over, so I really enjoy the company of other international volunteers. You can just go abroad for a holiday and stay in a hotel and not really see anything of the culture, but if you go somewhere and volunteer there, you are doing something good and you learn about the culture and actually live in the culture. I think it is a much nicer way. 

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