



# The Experience Report

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*Enhancing Inter-cultural Learning in European Enterprises*



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## The 'EILEEN' Experience Report and Acting Recommendations

### 1. Introduction

This Experience Report provides an overview of the practical stage of the EILEEN Project. Its purpose is to describe and analyse a key phase of the EILEEN project which involved the active participation of all partners in the selection, training and preparation of young people seeking an internship abroad and matching them with business based mentors in a receiving country. Following comprehensive training via the **EILEEN online platform** and some face to face input, participants were encouraged to further develop their intercultural competences in a real-time business environment. This was to be facilitated via a number of **learning projects** carried out by participants during internships abroad. At the end of the training period, the aim was to evidence and authenticate the newly acquired intercultural competences of all participants (Interns and Mentors) using the innovative **Level5 system** for validating informal and non formal learning.

The Experience Report is based on the national reports compiled and submitted by each member of the partnership and compares differing approaches with regard to the implementation of the EILEEN approach. It also draws conclusions and recommendations for the benefit of key stakeholders, derived from multiple sources, including feedback from our target groups.

#### 1.1. Target Groups

The primary target groups in the EILEEN project were:

- young people seeking an internship abroad
- Entrepreneurs or business people willing to receive interns and work with them in the role of mentor.



The core project partnership, comprising 9 members in all, provided a diverse and broad access to our targets groups. Each partner used their extensive networks to engage with young people and entrepreneurs promoting the EILEEN brand and approach. This resulted in a number of fruitful collaborations at both national and international levels. In Bulgaria, for example, CATRO worked in partnership with an international student organisation that agreed to incorporate the EILEEN e-learning programme and validation procedure as an integral part of their internship development plans. Similarly, BUPNET in Germany formed a successful partnership with an Adult Education Organisation (VHS – Kassal) who support refugees. The aim of the collaboration was to help refugees integrate into German society and provide them with insights into the world of work. The VHS report (included in the Appendices) confirms that the EILEEN materials and processes made a significant contribution to their project and that the experiences of refugees were considerably enriched as a result of the intervention.

Other project partners who worked closely or directly with student mobility initiatives were in an excellent position to add value to complementary initiatives under Erasmus+ Mobility Programmes. In France for instance the INSUP project team worked in partnership with PRIMERA, adding an intercultural dimension to the initiative through the EILEEN online platform, dedicated preparation modules and professional development workshops for local companies. Our Italian partners worked in collaboration with the Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs programme (EYE) which provides funding for interns seeking placements abroad. They were also able to draw on the expertise of the Materahub network, a consortium of enterprises that operates internationally to create new business ventures. Other partners focused on their particular areas of expertise and experience whether with young people, enterprises or both, seeking to engage productively with target groups and creating synergies with complementary initiatives wherever possible.

## 1.2. Multiplier Events

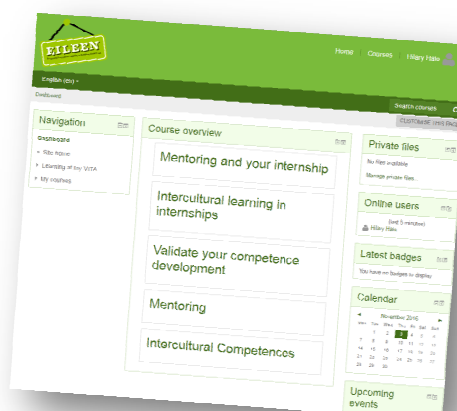
In order to attract and actively engage target groups, Partners held a number of Multiplier events to introduce the project and explain the EILEEN approach. These were highly successful in attracting large numbers of young people as well as entrepreneurs/business representatives willing to receive and mentor interns. At some events, in Greece and France for example, the audience comprised both target groups so it was possible to introduce the learning programme in its entirety, including the concept of a welcoming culture (recognised by the WEE label) and the importance of the mentor/mentee relationship in achieving successful internships. Other partners (Italy, UK) chose to engage with target groups separately, tailoring their presentations and activities to suit the target audience. In all cases partners adopted a lively approach using slides, multi-media and interactive participation to bring the EILEEN project to life.

Evaluation of Multiplier events across the partnership demonstrates a high level of satisfaction amongst participants. Given the number of successful learning projects we can conclude that these events played an important role in both the initial engagement and subsequent preparation/implementation of the EILEEN piloting phase.

## 1.3. The EILEEN Platform

The development of the online toolbox was an important precursor to the preparation and implementation of the learning projects. The materials were selected and adapted to meet the needs of the target groups as identified in the collective needs analysis. Moodle was the platform of choice as it allows the integration of a wide range of resources, a variety of questions and interactive exercises and can include any number of multimedia resources.

The training modules were designed for both prospective interns and companies involved in the project as potential



receivers and mentors. Divided into manageable units of learning, they include materials and exercises on a wide range of intercultural and mentoring topics enriched with videos, consolidation exercises and short, end of unit, assessments.

Most partners introduced the online platform to prospective participants at their individual multiplier events. This was considered to be the most effective and practical way to introduce delegates to Intercultural learning with a view to validating their competences through the Level5 system. Once registered onto the system, participants were able to study in their own time before, during and following their involvement in the work placement process.

#### 1.4. Participant Feedback on the online learning modules

Overall, the feedback from learners accessing and using the platform was positive although there was some constructive criticism, particularly from participating companies who were unfamiliar with Moodle platforms and in some cases, unused to online learning. The comments below illustrate typical reactions from each group:

##### a. Young People

- Participants from Germany felt that the training programme helped them to feel more prepared for an internship abroad, especially when faced with intercultural differences and potential conflicts arising from different cultural perceptions, beliefs and values.
- Young people in Greece were equally enthusiastic about the online course. Although many participants were aware of the need for intercultural awareness, they had never had the opportunity to approach the topic in a structured way. The course stimulated learning and self-reflection adding considerable value to their work placement experience.
- This positive view was echoed amongst students in Italy who felt that the online course presented a real opportunity to improve intercultural skills and to acquire an in-depth knowledge of and advice on how to succeed in different working environments.
- In Bulgaria young people accessing the platform felt that it was user-friendly and provided valuable content that helped in developing and enhancing their intercultural knowledge and competences.
- Prospective interns from Belgium trialled some of the course content before it was uploaded onto the platform. Feedback at this preparatory phase proved positive with students stating that it helped to develop an intercultural mind set and prepare for their imminent internships in South America and Indonesia.



With respect to this target group we can conclude that there was a genuine interest in the concepts presented in the learning modules. Students and other young people were able to access the platform with ease and experienced few, if any, navigation issues. They also felt that the content and the way it was presented helped to broaden their horizons and encouraged them to search for placements/jobs abroad with more knowledge and greater confidence in their intercultural skills.

## b. Entrepreneurs/Company Participants

When considering the comments of learners from the business community it is necessary to take into consideration that as a group, they were less familiar with online learning and very few had accessed a Moodle platform before. This lack of experience together with time constraints in many cases, influenced feedback. Nonetheless there were a number of positive comments and outcomes.

- In Germany, the target group felt that the content was comprehensive, covering all aspects of how to develop a 'welcoming culture' in their working environments. They also stated that the modules made them reflect on concepts that were relatively new to them. Those that had not used an online platform before enjoyed the experience especially the multimedia elements which they felt brought learning to life.
- In the UK feedback from business people was gathered via telephone interviews and online questionnaires. Reactions varied across the group but in general were more positive from learners who had persisted with the units and completed some of the activities designed to consolidate learning. Evaluation indicated a genuine interest in the concepts and a desire to develop both intercultural and mentoring skills. However, participants felt that whilst offering a convenient and flexible learning solution, the Moodle platform itself was not especially intuitive and, despite face to face instruction, proved difficult to navigate.
- Other partners echoed this concern in their national reports but expressed overall satisfaction with the content and learning objectives.

With regard to this target group, we can conclude that in contrast to younger learners, there are certain reservations concerning the learning platform and in some cases the mode of delivery. However, all participants agreed that the content and learning goals were both helpful and relevant to their working lives.

## 1.5. Feedback on the Validation of Intercultural Competences



In addition to Modules on Intercultural skills and Mentoring, the online learning programme includes a number of units focused on recognising and authenticating competences acquired through the **Level5 system** for the validation of informal and non formal learning. A number of participants from both target groups underwent this assessment process and gained a certificate. Others completed all or a part of the relevant units of learning without completing the assessment.

The feedback from partners suggests that those participants who were interested in or undertook an internship generally showed more interest in assessing and validating their learning outcomes through certification. They clearly saw the benefits of the validation system in terms of authenticating their intercultural competences and including them as part of their portfolio of achievements. Learners from enterprises, whilst recognising the benefits of the validation and reflection process seemed less interested in taking part.


In terms of the delivery mechanism for this module, feedback suggests that where the validation system was studied online without tutor support, it tended to be poorly understood. On the other hand, positive results were achieved where the system was



explained with the support of a trainer. This was very much the experience in France where the trainer conducted semi-directed interviews based on the validation questionnaires and the Level5 reference system. As a result a number of learners used the EILEEN approach to evaluate the results of their mobility. Having participated in the Erasmus+ programme they had already been assessed according to EUROPASS mobility criteria but the Level5 validation process afforded the opportunity to tease out other aspects of their experience in order to validate 'softer' intercultural skills gained during their mobility.

## 2. The Learning Projects

The Learning projects are at the core of the practical phase of the EILEEN project. Following a number of Multiplier events which included introduction to the online learning materials and training on the platform, a number of participants formulated learning projects. These projects formed an essential part of the internships abroad and provided a vehicle through which intercultural competences could be developed and validated.



The practical phase of the EILEEN project spanned several months, primarily conducted during year 2 of the project. In total 24 learning projects were undertaken with at least 50% of the participants receiving a Level5 Certificate, validating the competences gained during their work placements.

The online toolkit greatly enhanced the learning process, providing access to resources that could be tapped into both before and during the period of internship. Partners all contributed to the recruitment and training of potential participants through promotional campaigns and multiplier events designed to engage both company mentors and young people seeking to develop their intercultural competences. As is evidenced in the National Reports, the partners who proved the most effective in gaining successful learning project outcomes were those whose organisations already had, or were closely linked with mobility projects under the umbrella of Erasmus+ or other locally established mobility programmes.

Partners who were not directly involved in learning projects were nonetheless active in the training and ongoing support of learners enrolled on the e-learning platform. Included in the appendix of this report are a number of contributions from individuals who completed learning projects reflecting on their experiences and highlighting their achievements.

Below is a summary of the projects that were particularly successful in terms of the application of intercultural learning using the EILEEN approach:

- In **Germany** the practical phase of the EILEEN project comprised 3 interlinked initiatives in terms of participants, in addition to a group of learners who accessed the online learning platform but were not directly involved in the piloting stage.

In all 9 individuals completed learning projects. Their reports evidence the fact that they valued the Eileen approach and that involvement in the project had both improved and increased their knowledge of interculturalism and its practical application in the world of work. German partners also reported that interns planned their learning project meticulously, identifying in advance the competences that they wished to improve which, in the event, led to a richer and more fulfilling experience. The learning process was

completed with an assessment of these competences and a validation certificate.

One of the highlights and outstanding successes of the national piloting in Germany came as a result of collaboration with VHS Kassal an adult education centre that supports refugees. This joint initiative, fully aligned to the intercultural philosophy underpinning the EILEEN approach, was aimed at bringing together German companies and refugees helping the latter to integrate into German society and provide them with insights into local working environments. The VHS team who oversaw the work placements and implemented the Level5 validation process felt that they had discovered an innovative method for evaluating and evidences informal skills hitherto missing from their assessment portfolio.

- **Belgium partners**, Time4Society, facilitated a number of successful Learning projects. In all 5 young people participated, all of whom benefited from the EILEEN toolkit both prior and during their work placements. Their individual project reports indicate a high level of satisfaction with the training and support received from the EILEEN project team and the host organisations during their internships. Further details, plus participant feedback, are included in their individual reports as Appendices.
- **Italian partners**, MateraHub targeted young people who were participating in the Erasmus Young Entrepreneurs Mobility Programme. The Eileen project, with its focus on intercultural learning and preparation, added considerable value to the EYE programme as a flexible and accessible support package. Through their promotional campaigns Materahub succeeded in reaching a large number of young people and the team were able to actively support 3 participants on placements in companies abroad. The general consensus from these participants was that the experience was extremely rewarding enhanced by the EILEEN intervention. The Eileen/EYE collaboration provided a real opportunity to improve intercultural competences in a different working environment whilst simultaneously honing their entrepreneurial skills through work focused learning projects.
- **Spanish partners (CECE)** reached out to Erasmus+ and similar student exchange programmes in order to promote the EILEEN approach and e-learning platform. In total over 1000 students were introduced to the Modules, stimulating interest in intercultural learning and work placements abroad. As a result CECE received and supported an Intern for a period of 4 weeks. The student successfully completed her learning project and, on completing all learning modules, was able to validate the competences gained through the Level5 system.
- **In France** the national piloting and practical phase of EILEEN was conducted by INSUP in parallel to the Erasmus+ KA1 programme - PRIMERA+. The mobility programme involved trainees on work placements in EU countries for periods of time ranging from 4 to 13 weeks. Three of the Interns carried out learning projects as part of the EILEEN project. In addition the EILEEN project team were able to add value to the post mobility evaluation of work placements using the Level5 system. To date 3 Interns have received certificates validating competences gained through their experiences in companies abroad.
- **In Bulgaria** the national piloting of the EILEEN approach was conducted by CATRO in partnership with the Bulgarian office of the International student organisation AIESEC. As



a result of this collaboration AIESEC members who took part in the Intercultural workshop were in a position to apply their enhanced mentoring skills to Interns working on the 'Green Summer' project (see appendices). At the same time at least 3 of the interns benefited directly via the e-learning platform gaining Level5 competences in Intercultural communication and Team working.

## 2.1 Key Outcomes of Practical Phase

In terms of key outcomes and results, each partner has identified a number of achievements and successes which are described in their national reports. A selection of these positive results are highlighted below:

- Successful and productive strategic and operational partnerships (Germany, Bulgaria, France, Italy, Belgium)
- Extensive engagement of target groups as a result of focused multiplier events (All partners)
- The number of successful internships exceeding expectations (Germany, Belgium)
- Greater intercultural understanding amongst target groups (All partners)
- A number of Learning projects resulted in validation of Intercultural competences
- A number of participants receiving Level5 certification (France, Germany, Greece, Italy))
- Positive feedback from learners who participated in the online learning programme prior to and during internships (All Partners)
- Improvement of entrepreneurial skills amongst interns within an intercultural working environment (Germany, Italy, Bulgaria, France, Spain)
- More positive and informed mentor/intern relationships (All Partners)
- More EU companies adopting a Welcoming Culture as a result of \training modules (All Partners)



## 3. Obstacles and Challenges

As with many innovative projects, Eileen faced a number of challenges during its piloting phase. Itemised below are a number of recurring issues gleaned from partnership feedback, ongoing evaluation and national reports.

- Company engagement and active participation. Most partners experienced difficulty in gaining a firm commitment from companies willing to receive interns. Although they expressed an interest in the EILEEN approach and recognised the value and importance of adopting a welcoming approach, this did not always translate into action.
- Amongst business people a lack of familiarity with online learning and a reluctance to pursue units of learning to the assessment stage
- Owing to time constraints, poor completion rates on units of learning amongst entrepreneurs impacting on amount of evaluation data that could be gathered
- Amongst young people considering work placements abroad partners the following concerns were often raised:

- Lack of funding and worries over the additional costs of living and working abroad
  - Language barriers - poor mastery and/or little knowledge of the language of the receiving country
  - Little or no previous business experience
  - Lack of internship opportunity in preferred destinations
  - Difficulties in linking potential learning projects to suitable companies
  - Limited intercultural knowledge and experience
- With participants who completed learning projects including a number of refugees there were a number of challenges common to all. These include:
- Understanding new concepts, theories and communication styles
  - Repetitive tasks often not related to personal learning projects
  - Recognising subtle cultural differences causing confusion and misunderstandings
  - Lack of cultural sensitivity
  - Language barriers resulting in a feeling of unease and tension
  - Mental tiredness as a result of adapting to a new working environment and communicating in a second language.
  - Being unsure of procedures, constantly needing to ask questions and in consequence feeling a burden to colleagues.

It is interesting to note that most of these challenges were reported at a fairly early stage in the learning projects. As the work placements progressed in almost all cases the issues highlighted were to a large extent overcome and a positive outcome achieved, best expressed in the words of an EILEEN intern:

*“My internship was a great experience and the learning project not only supported my own learning process but also provided many opportunities for dialogue and exchange with my colleagues. I think they learned something from that too.....”*

### 3.1 Lessons Learned

At the conclusion of the practical phase of the project several valuable lessons can be drawn from the results. Evidence suggests that the online platform works better for young people than it does for enterprises. This is primarily due to younger participants’ familiarity with this style of learning and mode of delivery. For enterprises, online learning is more of a challenge and perhaps in hindsight it would have been more productive to use a less academically oriented platform. Similarly, the validation process proved more useful for interns than for business mentors. This reflects the findings of the Needs Analysis which suggested that the concept of validation in informal learning had yet to impact on the corporate world. The pilots also demonstrated a poor understanding of the validation process especially if this was attempted without the assistance of a tutor.

In terms of developing business focused learning projects for internships, lack of funding has in many cases, been a real barrier to participation. It is crucial therefore to identify and tap into mobility programmes such as Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs (EYE) early in the project so that participants have the opportunity to align their projects to the requirements of the funding programme as well as the receiving organisation.

In partner countries where, due to the economic climate, internships proved difficult to

achieve (in Greece for example) we have an excellent example of how the EILEEN approach was used in an innovative way, bringing together a group of international exchange students and local businesses. Learning took place via a number of interactive workshops that included role plays, group discussions, videos and guest speakers. The aim was to ensure that all participants improved their soft skills and competences through a simulated multicultural working environment. This approach provided a good example for the partnership of how to stimulate interest in mentoring (for businesses) and intercultural competences (for students) and that despite economic constraints and other barriers to participation, successful learning outcomes can be achieved.

*“The support from the Greek co-ordinators was great and constant.....As a result of the learning project which I attended, I am now able to collaborate with foreign people in my working environment”*

#### 4. Conclusions

Having reviewed the results and outcomes of the practical phase of the project there was general agreement amongst partners that the EILEEN online learning resources and the individual learning projects met the primary aims and objectives of the intellectual output and contributed significantly to the overall success of the project.

- Based on their individual experiences and participants’ feedback, all partners reported an increased awareness of the importance of intercultural competences from both employers and young people.
- With regard to the online learning resources, there was a realisation amongst young people that theory, whilst an excellent starting point and indeed essential to a sound understanding of the concepts, it is only a starting point. This needs to be combined with the practical experience of working in a different cultural environment.
- The EILEEN approach has provided interns with the opportunity to measure the progress made during their learning projects and validate the experience through the Level5 system. This is a key outcome for the project as for many interns it was an opportunity not only to validate their informal learning but also introduced the benefits of self-reflection in the evaluation of their experiences.

*‘Most learning progress is achieved through reflecting on observations and experiences with others and asking questions – communication is key to dealing with cultural diversity’*



- For employers involved in the project we can conclude that they were interested in the concept of interculturalism, indeed some had a well embedded ‘welcoming culture’ in their organisations. However, they were more reluctant to undertake the online learning programme in its entirety. Many participants preferred a dip in, dip out’ approach, no doubt reflecting the limited time they had available for a systematic approach to this type of learning. Also, as mentioned above, in some cases this reluctance was due to lack of familiarity with the style of learning and platform navigation issues.
- The Level5 competence assessment tool was of more interest to young people than to

employers who generally, demonstrated no real interest in validating informal learning although they could see its value as part of a portfolio of achievements.

- The EILEEN approach with its emphasis on pre-mobility preparation has been used to enhance and add value to other ERASMUS+ exchange programmes such 'Young Entrepreneurs' and the PRIMERA initiative. The approach has also been adopted by other partner organisations across Europe operating mobility programmes, ensuring sustainability of the learning resources.
- Finally it is significant that the EILEEN piloting has been used to great advantage with refugees in Germany and Greece. As can be seen from the BUPNET report, a fruitful partnership was formed with an adult education organisation supporting groups of refugees, where the intercultural issues were particularly challenging. The positive outcomes expressed in the individual learning reports are testimony to both the value and success of the EILEEN approach. Similarly in Greece, OCEAN continues to work with voluntary organisations that support refugees. In this context, the platform was and continues to be an invaluable training tool in reaching greater cultural understanding and communication between refugees and the Greek people.

## 5. Recommendations

At the final transnational meeting partners were asked to draw up a number of recommendations for applying the EILEEN approach based on their experience of piloting both the learning resources and facilitating the learning projects. These are outlined below:

- It is important for learners to receive an introduction to the EILEEN approach and become familiar with the toolkit before commencing the online learning programme. **This is best done achieved via a tutor led face to face pre-course training session.**
- Feedback suggests that the validation tool in its present form is too complicated and that whilst the concept is generally understood, its application cannot be achieved successfully through the online platform. **More prior face to face training is therefore essential.**
- **Continue to work closely with organisations that run mobility programmes introducing the EILEEN approach as an added value option for participants.**
- **Develop an online 'intern/employer' matching system where potential participants could display their details and requirements.**
- **Identify funding schemes for prospective internships abroad and publicise these early in the process.**
- **Broaden the appeal and reach of the EILEEN by targeting companies with a multicultural workforce.** This applies particularly to the mentoring module which was the least accessed of the learning resources.
- **Align learning projects more closely to the requirements of receiving companies.**
- **Make better use of participant case studies** (including video presentations) to illustrate the benefits of the EILEEN approach in intercultural working.
- **Use the EILEEN approach and resources as a tool to aid the integration of refugees in receiving countries.**

## 6. In summary



The outcomes and results of the EILEEN pilots demonstrate that overall the project has been successful in achieving the key activities relating to intellectual output 5. In all there were 24 learning projects where participants benefited from access to the EILEEN learning resources and as a result, gained a deeper knowledge and understanding of interculturalism and its value in the workplace.

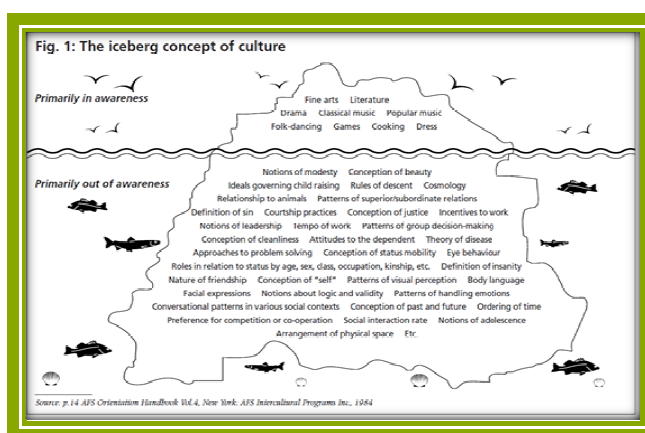
Although the number of participants who validated their competences through the Level5 system was fewer than anticipated we are now in a better position to understand the reasons for this and take the necessary steps towards increasing participation.

Similarly, evidence across the partnership suggests that commitment to cross border internships amongst employers could be greater so we need to focus more on employer engagement promoting tangible benefits for the companies.

Despite the difficulties encountered in engaging large number of employers, the EILEEN pilot has undoubtedly improved the experience of internship for trainees, raised awareness of intercultural issues with a large number young people and local business communities and crucially, improved the intercultural understanding and competence levels across a broad spectrum of project participants. EILEEN thus leaves a valuable legacy for the future of intercultural learning across Europe and beyond.

### Project Partners

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# Appendix:

## The National Reports

As these contain personal data and names, they are not available here. For further information please address the partner institution that you would want to get further information from.

Contact details are available on our website: <http://eileen-eu.org/partners>



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