

Study of the Impact of Comenius Assistantships

Executive Summary

Friedhelm Maiworm, Heiko Kastner and Hartmut Wenzel

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**Gesellschaft für Empirische Studien bR, Maiworm & Over, Querallee 38, D-34119 Kassel
Zentrum für Schul- und Bildungsforschung an der Martin-Luther-Universität in
Halle-Wittenberg, Franckeplatz 1, Haus 31, D-06099 Halle / Saale**

1 Objectives and Design of the Study

The present study is one of the means available to the European Commission of evaluating the impact of Comenius on school education in Europe and identifying opportunities to increase the effectiveness of the programme. It is the aim of the Comenius Assistantships Action to give future teachers the opportunity of gaining a better understanding of the European dimension of teaching and learning, of enhancing their knowledge of foreign languages, other European countries and their education systems and of improving their teaching skills. Furthermore, the assistantships are intended to contribute to the improvement of the language skills of the pupils at the host schools and to increase both their motivation to learn languages and their interest in the assistant's home country and culture. Future teachers who are nationals of the countries participating in the Lifelong Learning Programme or who are living in one of these countries under the conditions fixed by each of them as well as schools in these countries are eligible to apply for a Comenius Assistantship.

The target group of the study consisted of successful applicants, i.e. Comenius Assistants and host schools, from all eligible countries whose application were approved in the period 2000-2009. About 7,000 Comenius Assistants and 4,000 schools were asked with the help of web based questionnaires to report on their experiences and to assess the outcomes and impacts of their participation. About 45 percent of the assistants and 47 percent of the schools responded to the surveys.

2 General fulfilment of the objectives of the action

The results of the study show clearly that Comenius Assistantships contribute to a significant extent to the personal and professional development of future teachers and trigger impacts not only on pupils attending classes or extra-curricular activities of the assistants but also on an institutional level of schools. An added value for assistants could also be observed with respect to their careers as teachers after completion of their studies. The teaching experiences abroad not only helped them find first employment but also contributed to the quality of everyday work tasks. Altogether, there is no doubt that this Comenius action meets its objectives.

3 Participants and mobility flows

Whereas prior to the implementation of the Lifelong Learning Programme in 2007 future language teachers were addressed by the Comenius Assistantships Action, it is now open to future teachers of any subject. Consequently, the proportion of non-pure language teachers increased from about 40 percent prior to the implementation of the LLP to 62 percent in 2009. Every fifth assistant from the 2009 cohort studied solely subjects other than languages prior to the assistantship.

The majority of host schools provide education at secondary level: 49 percent are general secondary schools and 15 percent technical or vocational secondary schools. Primary schools have a share of about 30 percent while only a few pre-primary and other types of schools take part in this Comenius action.

In accordance with the amount of the Comenius budget allocated to National Agencies, the larger European countries have a higher share of Comenius Assistants than the smaller countries. With an average of about 140 assistants per year, Germany is the largest sending country, followed by Italy with about 115 and Great Britain with 100 assistants. Major host countries are the larger EU member states in West and South Europe: Spain with an average of 155 incoming assistants per year, France with 126, Italy with 108 and Great Britain with 104 incoming assistants. A more detailed analysis of the flow of assistants shows a clear imbalance of movements between East Europe and West Europe: Considerably more assistants were sent than received by almost all individual East European countries. The few former EU-15/EFTA countries which receive a significantly lower number of assistants than they send are Germany and Belgium.

4 Procedures and modalities of the Action Scheme

Matching of assistants and host schools

Comenius Assistantships are a decentralised action under the responsibility of National Agencies. Both assistants and schools have to submit their application independently to the National Agency of their country. The matching of assistants and host schools is based on preferences stated by the applicants, e.g. country and location of host school, mother tongue of assistants, etc., and is carried out by the National Agencies. It became clear that the result of the matching process is of major importance for the overall success of the assistantships. The more the preferences of assistants and schools were met, the higher the level of perceived outcomes. For assistants it is of special importance that their preferences concerning the type and location of the school are taken into account while host schools put high emphasis on the subjects the assistant is able to teach. It is strongly suggested that National Agencies take this most important criterion for assistants, i.e. type and location of the school, and for the host school, i.e. subjects the assistant should teach, seriously into consideration as "must-be-fulfilled-criteria" when matching assistants and schools.

Duration of Comenius Assistantships

Future teachers can apply for a Comenius supported assistantship abroad lasting at least 3 months and at most 10 months. Former Comenius Assistants taking part in the survey spent on average 6.2 months at the host school: 26 percent up to 4 months, 34 percent 4-6 months, 26 percent 7-8 months and 15 percent 9-10 months. The flexibility in setting the duration of the assistantship is an advantage because it allows students to spend shorter periods abroad and thus reduces the risk of a substantial prolongation of the overall period of study. However, there are good reasons to argue that assistantships of less than six months should be rather the exception. Firstly, too short a duration endangers the success of the

assistantship in terms of outcomes and benefits for assistants and host schools. Secondly, a duration of less than one term makes it difficult for schools to integrate the assistants properly into the curriculum and time table for pupils. The shorter the assistantship, the more often schools cited problems. Consequently, assistantships lasting six months or more should be given priority.

Level of grants

Comenius Assistants receive a grant from their National Agency intended to cover the subsistence costs abroad and the travel costs for a return trip between the home and host country. Although the European Commission has developed a framework of grant rules specifying the maximum amount of support, it is within the responsibility of each National Agency to define their own ceilings. However, serious financial problems as reported by one in seven former assistants depend not only on differences in the level of support provided by individual National Agencies but also on high expenses of assistantships at schools located in capitals or large cities, extra costs for transportation in the case of assistants shared by two or more schools or ongoing costs at home which had to be paid during the stay abroad.

By and large, the cost coverage rate of the Comenius grant seems to be sufficient for most of the assistants. Nevertheless the Commission should examine the possibility of providing additional funding under clearly defined circumstances, e.g. to assistants shared by two or more schools. The possibility of National Agencies to set their own ceilings for grant levels has advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, assistants from different countries spending a teaching period abroad at the same school or in the same host country get a different amount of grant to cover their expenses which might be in contradiction to the principle of equal treatment. On the other hand, the definition of ceilings allows National Agencies to divide the total budget available for Comenius Assistantships into as many units as necessary to ensure an appropriate acceptance rate of applications. It is suggested that in the light of the results of this study the grant rules in general and the autonomy of National Agencies to set their own ceilings should be re-examined between the Commission and the National Agencies.

5 Advice and support provided to Comenius Assistants

Contribution of host schools to the preparation of assistants prior to the assistantship

The provision of information material by the host school prior to the start of the assistantship contributed significantly to the level of preparation of assistants in respect to their knowledge about the host school and its local environment and the content of lessons to be taught during the assistantship. Unfortunately, only one in two assistants received appropriate information or support. It is therefore strongly suggested that all future host schools should be obliged to contribute to the preparation of assistants by sending information packages containing detailed descriptions of the institution and its environment and especially of organisational matters and the role and tasks expected from the assistants.

Advice and support provided by host schools during the assistantship

Overall, host schools were very well aware of their responsibility for the Comenius Assistants and provided substantial advice and support during the time of the assistantship. Most of the suggestions published by the European Commission in the “Good practice guide for host schools and assistants” were put into practice. Mentors were appointed by the schools to welcome the assistant and assure his or her integration into the school and local community, he or she was picked up on arrival in the country, a guided tour of the school was undertaken to familiarise the assistant with the building and infrastructure of the school, an introduction of the assistant to teachers and staff members took place, etc. The high degree of satisfaction of Comenius Assistants with the support provided by the schools is a clear indication of the quality of such provisions. Based on statistical analysis, it turned out that the level of support is of major importance for the integration of the assistants in the school and in the local community. Thus it is strongly recommended that schools follow the rules described in the “Good practice guide” of the European Commission.

Contributions of the National Agencies

National Agencies are responsible for the contractual management of Comenius Assistantships and support assistants and schools by organising induction meetings prior and during the assistantships. Overall, the positive assessment of the work of National Agencies indicates no need for change. Nevertheless, there were also some complaints from schools and assistants that induction meetings were not offered, invitations were not received, or large distances to the venue and a lack of financial support hampered a participation in the meeting. In order to avoid similar difficulties in the future, National Agencies should reconsider their information policy and should ensure that neither assistants nor representatives of schools are unable to take part in an induction meeting due to a lack of financial means. National Agencies and the European Commission should also strengthen the information flow between potential applicants and current or former assistants by supporting the implementation of an Alumni Association and by giving more access to the final reports of Comenius Assistants.

6 Activities and performance of assistants at the host school

Weekly workload of assistants

In the "Good practice guide for host schools and assistants" the European Commission suggest a workload for assistants of 12-16 hours "school based" work per week. During the period of observation of the study, this ceiling has become more and more a reality. Prior to the implementation of the LLP, only every second assistant felt within the suggested range while one out of three worked more than 16 hours per week and one out of six less than 12 hours. In the most recent years, the proportion of assistants falling within the ceiling of 12-16 hours increased to slightly more than two thirds while the proportion of those stating a higher or lower weekly work load decreased respectively (23% and 9%). Thus, a growing majority of schools obviously followed the recommendation of the Commission and gave the assistants

on the one hand enough time for teaching practise and job-shadowing in the classroom and on the other hand for their own studies and cultural activities in the host country.

Subjects of teaching

While prior to the start of the Lifelong Learning Programme in 2007 only future (foreign) language teachers were eligible to apply for a Comenius Assistantship, the LLP has opened the action to future teachers of all subjects. The rapid increase of the proportion of assistants who have studied solely subjects other than languages to about 20 percent in 2009 confirms the attractiveness of this Comenius Action for the new target group. On the other hand, the majority of schools are still more interested in Comenius Assistants in their traditional role as language assistants than as contributors to content and language integrated learning in other subjects (CLIL). Consequently, almost all assistants were employed to teach a foreign language to pupils but only a minority to teach other subjects. In respect to the use of qualifications acquired abroad for the job as a teacher after the assistantship, some evidence was found that pure language teachers have the highest benefits from the period abroad. The implementation of a special study to be carried out in about three to five years to evaluate the benefits of Comenius Assistantships for non-language teachers and their host schools is suggested.

Foreign languages taught to pupils and language of instruction

Learning and teaching of foreign languages are still at the core of the objectives of Comenius Assistantships. In this respect the assistants support their host schools in two ways: Firstly, they expand the pool of (native) foreign language teachers and secondly, the presence of an assistant increases pupils' interest in the country of the assistant and its language. In accordance with the pattern of foreign-language teaching in European schools, the assistants are mainly employed to teach English (63%). Classes in other foreign languages were offered at a considerably lower extent: German lessons at 16 percent of the schools, French lessons at 14 percent, Italian lessons at 11 percent and Spanish lessons at 8 percent. Classes in languages from smaller countries were rather exceptions. However, at 30 percent of the schools the assistants offered foreign language lessons in a language which was not regularly taught at the school by other teachers.

From the perspective of the assistants, the teaching of foreign languages can be a mixed blessing. On the one hand, the schools expect them to give foreign language lessons to the pupils, i.e. classes in a language that is not the native language of the pupils. On the other hand, the assistants have been at least partially trained in the language of the host country and intend to work as a foreign language teacher in that language after returning to their home country. Seen against this background, it would be quite reasonable that the assistants have the opportunity of offering classes in the domestic language of the pupils or at least to taking part as assistant teacher in such classes. This has happened only in every second case. In particular Comenius Assistants from countries with major European languages such as English were generally employed by the host schools to provide classes and lectures in their mother tongue. Although it is understandable that schools are mainly interested in the

native/foreign language skills of the assistants, it has to be ensured that the assistants can get teaching practise in the domestic language of the host country if this language is one of the main subjects studied prior to the assistantship.

Performance of assistants

Overall, Comenius Assistants did a good job as assistant teachers abroad. They were praised by their host schools for their degree of interest and their work with the pupils. Most of the schools were especially satisfied with the social and communication skills of the assistants and their good knowledge of the culture and society of the host country and of practical matters of life in the host country. In contrast, their professional performance was judged with slightly less enthusiasm, e.g. the ability to explain complex issues, a good mastery of the main language of instruction at the school, the use of interesting teaching material brought from the home country or the use of innovative teaching methods. However, taking into account that nearly half of the assistants had not completed the course of studies at the time of the assistantship, expectations of their professional performance should be realistic. The following measures could possibly help improve the competency and performance of assistants:

- Initial training for assistants might help to enhance their knowledge and mastery of pedagogical approaches and use of training/teaching material.
- A tighter cooperation between host schools and the training organisations of the assistants, usually universities, would furnish the training centres with feedback on the performance of the assistant and improve the curricula (content as well as quality) of the training organisation itself.

Major difficulties encountered by assistants and host schools

The major problem faced by Comenius Assistants and by schools was mastering the language of the host country: 14 percent of the assistants stated significant communication difficulties in general and 18 percent had problems teaching in the main language of instruction at the school. Assistants in Eastern and Northern European countries were most often confronted with such language problems. Since the vast majority of assistants spending a period of time in these countries had practically no or only very limited proficiency in the domestic language beforehand, it is suggested putting more emphasis on language preparation and defining a minimum level of language proficiency as pre-condition for supporting the assistantship.

Personal conflicts between the assistant and the school were reported by slightly more than five percent of respondents. While assistants complained about a lack of acceptance by teachers and pupils, the schools criticised the personal attitudes and professional abilities of the assistant. Although the proportion of participants affected by these difficulties is not high, it has to be taken into account that personal conflicts normally lead to dissatisfaction and thus endanger the outcomes and impacts of the assistantship. It is therefore suggested that a contact person in the National Agency be named as a mediator to solve conflicts. If obvious

problems between assistants and schools cannot be solved this way, then the possibility of continuing the assistantship at another school in the host country (rematching) should be considered.

7 Outcomes of Comenius Assistantships and satisfaction of participants

Personal and professional development of assistants

Maturity and personal development: Overall, Comenius Assistantships proved to be instruments with a high potential to foster the personal and professional development of future teachers. Almost all Comenius Assistants confirmed the value of the teaching period abroad on their maturity: the younger the assistants, the higher the benefits.

Improvement of international/intercultural knowledge and awareness: The assistantships lead in nearly all cases to a substantial improvement of the knowledge and understanding of the school and education system in the host country and to an improvement of intercultural knowledge and understanding. Furthermore, the vast majority of the assistants gained considerable experiences in international cooperation.

Improvement of the proficiency in a foreign language: It is also a clear indicator for the functioning of this action that high proportions of assistants were able to improve their foreign language proficiency and developed an increased motivation to learn a new foreign language. However, assistantships in countries with more widely used languages such as English, Spanish, Italian, French or German contributed more often to such outcomes than assistantships in most countries in the East, South-East or North of Europe. As confirmed by statistical analysis, the extent of teaching in the language of the host country is of major importance for the improvement in the foreign language proficiency of the assistants. Further factors are a high motivation to learn a foreign language prior to the assistantship, a certain level of proficiency in the language of the host country prior to the assistantship, a sufficient length of the period abroad and frequent contacts with host country nationals outside the school.

Professional development as a teacher: For the vast majority of Comenius Assistants the teaching period abroad was not only a valuable exercise for the improvement of intercultural or foreign language proficiency but also improved their teaching skills. Two out of three assistants experienced new ways of teaching and learning, gained a better understanding of the relationship between theory and practice, became acquainted with new teaching methods/didactic concepts, improved their interdisciplinary knowledge/understanding, became more familiar with (future) teaching subjects or were able to acquire knowledge about conflict management in everyday school life. The longer the assistantship lasted, the more often respective outcomes could be observed. Finally, it is worth noting that the experiences at the host school in most cases strengthened the motivation of Comenius Assistants to become a teacher.

Outcomes for schools, teachers and pupils

Generally, Comenius Assistantships contribute to the strengthening of the European dimension at the host schools and to the skills of pupils as laid down in the objectives of the action:

a) Outcomes for schools/teachers: The majority of schools observed a variety of outcomes and impacts of the assistantship on the institutional level: A strengthening of the European Dimension in the daily school life, a contribution of assistants to foreign language training at the school accompanied by an increased interest of staff members in foreign language learning, the creation of pedagogical materials and the introduction of new teaching techniques and pedagogical approaches. Furthermore, one school in two praised the role of assistants in other Comenius actions or international activities and one in three stated an important contribution to the establishment of partnerships/cooperation with schools/organisations from other countries. The highest benefits could be observed at schools in which the assistants taught not only languages or only other subjects but both, i.e. languages and other subjects. Better use of the knowledge and skills of assistants by involving them in other areas than mere language teaching is therefore to be recommended.

b) Outcomes for pupils: Substantial contributions of assistants to the curriculum and the European Dimension in daily school life at the host school are pre-conditions for the generally expected impact of Comenius Assistantships on competency, skills and attitudes of pupils. The success of the assistantships is shown by the overwhelming number of schools which noted a significant increase in the motivation of pupils to learn a foreign language, an improvement in foreign language skills, a strengthening of the interest of pupils in other countries and cultures, a combating of stereotypes about other countries and cultures and an expansion of their pupils' knowledge about the European Union. It becomes clear that the main factors for maximising the benefits for pupils are a strong motivation and commitment of the school to make use of the assistant as a specific teaching resource, the personality and attitudes of the assistant, sufficient competency and skills of the assistant to perform as a teacher and sufficient proficiency of the assistant in the language of the host school.

Overall satisfaction of assistants and host schools

The vast majority of Comenius Assistants and their host schools were very satisfied or satisfied with the results of the assistantship (each about 90 percent), and less than five percent of both considered it an unsatisfactory experience. Based on statistical regression analysis it was clear that the following factors are of significant importance:

- Satisfaction with the result of the matching process organised by the National Agency, i.e. fulfilment of preferences and assignment to a host school;
- Satisfactory collaboration with the host school before the assistantship;
- A sufficient level of support from the host school during the assistantship;
- A good working climate at the host school and the readiness of colleagues to respond to and work with the assistant;
- Integration of the assistant at the school and in the local community;

- Improvement of foreign language proficiency during the assistantship;
- The contribution of the assistantship to the personal and professional development of the assistant.

The Comenius “Good practice guide” was found to be helpful and useful for both assistants and host schools, and contributed to the success of the action.

The North/West - South/East gap of provisions and outcomes

The extent of satisfaction with support and advice provided by schools as well as the level of outcomes and impacts varies considerably between assistants and schools from countries in different parts of Europe. The two extreme poles on the geographical map are the North/North-West of Europe on the one hand and South-East/East on the other. In comparison to assistants hosted by schools in the South-East/East of Europe, the assistants at schools in the North/North-West

- were on average more often satisfied about the collaboration with the host school prior to the assistantship;
- praised more often the advice concerning work tasks and provision of language training during the assistantship;
- were more satisfied with the quality of the induction meeting in the host country;
- stated less often significant difficulties with the readiness of teachers/staff members to work with the assistant in the classroom or a lack of interest of pupils to attend the lectures, extra-curricular activities;
- stated more often professional outcomes of the assistantship, e.g. the acquaintance with new teaching methods/didactic concepts, experiencing new ways of teaching and learning or the improvement of ICT competency (Information and Communication Technology);
- rated the overall satisfaction with the assistantship higher.

A comparison of the outcomes of assistantships from the perspective of schools shows, that

- schools located in countries in the South-East and South of Europe rated the benefits for their pupils, teachers and the school as a whole above average while schools in the North/North-West of Europe were below average;
- the overall satisfaction with the outcomes of the assistantships was rated highest by schools from South-East, East and South of Europe.

In order to increase the outcomes of Comenius Assistants spending a teaching period at a school in South-East/East of Europe but also to reduce the imbalance of flows between Western and Eastern European countries it seems to be necessary to make host schools more aware of the important role they have to play to make the Comenius Assistantship a successful and valuable experience. Each highly satisfied assistant returning from a host school in South-East or East Europe could be seen as a valuable promoter for that region.

8 Impact of Comenius Assistantships on employment and work of former assistants

About 80 percent of former Comenius Assistants holding an academic degree were employed at the time of the survey. The majority found a job in the educational sector: 61 percent at schools up to secondary level, 10 percent at higher education institutions and 4 percent in other institutions mainly concerned with education, e.g. special language schools or adult education. The remaining quarter is widely spread over other sectors of employment. Altogether, about two thirds of the former Comenius Assistants employed currently work as teachers: 88 percent of them in their home country prior to the assistantship, 7 percent in the Comenius host country and 5 percent in a third country.

In the opinion of former assistants, the Comenius supported teaching period abroad had a clear impact on the transition to work and employment. Taking part in an assistantship not only helped the assistants to obtain a job but it helped them to cope with the every day work tasks and improved the quality of their professional performance. The longer the assistantship lasted, the more often employment related benefits were reported by the participants. Advantages in terms of an increased level of income are dependent on the type of occupation. The highest benefits in this respect were reported by former assistants working outside the educational sector, i.e. who decided not to become a teacher. Former assistants from countries in East and South-East of Europe benefitted particularly in this way from Comenius Assistantships. Within the sub-group of teachers, the pure language teachers were most often able to use skills and competency acquired abroad while those who studied solely subjects other than languages could least often apply their foreign language proficiency, the subject-related knowledge acquired during the Comenius Assistantship, pedagogical skills or knowledge of the host country in the classroom or in the daily work tasks.