



Bridging European employment opportunities

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United Euro Bridge manages a EU Leonardo-funded project to find placements for graduates across Europe. This eases the move from college to career and opens young people up to mobility in the Member States.

In a tough job market, new graduates need all the help they can get to make themselves stand out. They also need to have the flexibility to move to where work can be found, whether within their own country or across Europe and beyond. Those who have completed placements in Europe, and proved that they can work, live and thrive in other European cultures, have an instant advantage in today's career arena, believes Diana Cetara, Director of United Euro Bridge.

Diana regularly sends fledgling graduates to placements in everything from marine biology, flora research and conservation and agronomic research to law, psychology and social projects for children with HIV. Placements have been arranged in a number of different European countries, including Belgium, Greece, Italy and Portugal. The non-profit company specialises in fitting the right graduate to the placement that will make that crucial difference to their future career, in a project called 'Winning the Future'.

With a network of partner companies across Europe, the organisation is one of many regularly sending young people off for Leonardo-funded placements lasting six months – a big adventure for a new graduate. The application procedure is rigorous, and includes psychometric testing, to make sure every candidate is fully prepared for the challenge. "We wouldn't send someone who is scared of water on a marine biology placement, for instance," says Diana Cetara.

The right person for the right placement

Counsellor and therapist Angela Watson is accredited to conduct the psychometric tests for United Euro Bridge. "We go through a full process, including assessing literacy, numeracy and basic levels of communication skills, just to make sure the right person go to the right place. At the interview, we also make clear what is going to happen on the placement, to be sure they are ready, and they know the role and the expectations that go with it. The ethos is to carry on with the individual even after they've done the placement – we get fond of them and it's not goodbye. They often pop in to see us." Diana Cetara agrees. "I try to contact all the participants during the placements; I am like a mother, as I have boys the age of the students. It's always a good idea to see how they're getting on, how they are managing.

We've had the odd call from a mum and dad saying, 'our daughter is very depressed, her bedside light bulb has gone,' and then I have to say, 'well, tell her to go out and buy another bulb', but most are quite able to cope. Occasionally, there's been a cultural problem, like one girl who was very distressed when she saw a dog being maltreated in her placement country. We can't condone bad treatment of animals but you have to accept that there are different attitudes in different countries. But normally, things go fine, the candidates grow up enormously during the placements, thanks to the experience of living and managing away from home, among strangers and speaking a different language, and we have surprisingly few problems."

Making a real contribution

Milan Delor, a French-born physics graduate from Leeds University, who spent six years at school in China, has just returned from working on two different projects on the Greek island of Ikaria. The first studied the impact of military sonar equipment on whales, and the other was on implementing ecological infrastructures of waste management in marine transportation systems. His work on the second project culminated in an in-depth report with recommendations for future practice. "I'm now applying for a PhD in low-carbon technologies and the placements will definitely help with that. The experience taught me a lot and I think it is really important to do something applied, so you can see the effect. I'm looking forward to studying for my PhD in the UK but I'm not sure yet if I'll stay permanently – working in Europe was a great experience, I would definitely recommend it."

Diana Cetara points out those placements can sometimes turn into permanent jobs, proving that the graduates pull their weight and make effective use of the opportunity to put their university training into practice. It also demonstrates the extent to which the project can change an individual's life and career. "I always ask if there is any prospect of the position becoming permanent, and sometimes we are lucky," confirms Diana.

An added advantage for United Euro Bridge's placements is the opportunity to pick up or improve language skills, although the degree of immersion in the host language depends on the individual candidate. For example, Milan Delor, already bilingual in French and English, took the opportunity to learn his host language. "There was a one-hour Greek lesson a day, so I made some progress, which was an advantage." Language preparation starts before the placement begins, explains Diana. "We provide each candidate with an interactive DVD language course, and there is a certificate they can receive at the end of that as a 'carrot' so that they will complete the course, but we don't say that language skills are essential. Most of the value of the placements comes from putting what they have learnt at university into real practice at last."

Living, working and surviving away from home

The placements provide flights, insurance, accommodation, pocket money, a language course, mentoring, certification and work experience. It is often the first opportunity a new graduate has to put their freshly acquired, theoretical skills into practical use, thus giving them a genuine advantage once they start to embark on the job market. The added bonus of gaining experience in living, working and surviving away from home and communicating in another language is an enhancement of the project. It also reflects the ideals of the Copenhagen Process, with its emphasis on lifelong learning, in allowing young people to make use of vocational training opportunities. United Euro Bridge has been involved in previous placement schemes and, says project coordinator Chiara Mortarino, "we have learned a lot from project to project. We are always trying to customise the experience and keep the emphasis on the needs of the individual." Ali Khan, manager at United Euro Bridge, feels that the placements offer a genuine advantage to participating graduates. "The job opportunities go very fast. It is first come, first served. For 38 placements, we had 180 applicants this year." "I feel so sorry for young people today," says Diana Cetara. "It's very hard out there for them at the moment. I feel our placements really do offer them an advantage when it comes to getting their first job, whether in the UK or elsewhere."

The 'Winning the Future' project was coordinated by United Euro Bridge. The project was supported by the European Commission's Leonardo da Vinci programme for vocational training, under the framework of the Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-2013

[Ref: UK/08/LLP-LdV/PLM/163052]

More information:

The Leonardo da Vinci Programme:

http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc82_en.htm

The United Euro Bridge www.unitedeurobridge.org

Photos:



Caption: The team at United Euro Bridge provides support and guidance to young people participating in work placements in other European countries. The project is supported by the European Commission's

Leonardo da Vinci programme for vocational training, under the framework of the Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-2013 [Ref: UK/07/LLPLdV/PLM/163052]

Caption: Milan Delor took part in a work placement on the Greek island of Ikaria thanks to the 'Winning the Future' project run by the United Euro Bridge. The project was funded by the European Commission's Leonardo da Vinci programme for vocational training, under the framework of the Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-2013 [Ref: UK/07/LLPLdV/PLM/163052]

Additional quotations from organisers/participants

"Working abroad can be such an eye-opening experience for people who have never left their own back garden." **Diana Cetara, Director**

"We give all our participants feedback on how they have done and they take it all onboard. We often find they are nicer when they come back." **Chiara Mortarino, project co-ordinator**

"Some students have unrealistic expectations but once they are on a placement they tend to do really well." **Manager Ali Khan**

"You do get people thinking they're going to be running the company – you have to make it clear exactly what's going to happen on the placement." **Director Angela Watson**

"I would recommend the experience to anyone."

Participant (Greece) Milan Delor

The United Euro Bridge is a charity and voluntary organisation set up to promote and fund selected work placements in Europe and across the world in order to enable ambitious people to achieve their aspirations.



Thomas Kennedy

"I've really enjoyed the experience. The placement has provided interesting, work, whilst the people have been very welcoming. Showing me the area around the region and helping me to develop my Portuguese."

Participant (Portugal) Thomas Kennedy



Milan Delor