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Higher Education Employees' Workplace Learning Within Three Schemes of International Mobility

Abstract

Studies on the educational dimension of international mobility discuss the implications of academic, international mobility in general, or focus mainly on students' mobility. There is, however, an insufficient number of studies that focus on the mobility of higher education staff, particularly in relation to learning. Each year, studies on the impact of mobility are published by the European Commission, but this does not provide an overview of how adult learning occurs within mobility and how mobility affects the lifelong learning of higher education employees. The purpose of this paper is to describe and explain HE employees' learning characteristics in the course of three types of mobility: traditional, blended and digital. The study was conducted with the participation of 103 staff members of European Universities from 17 countries. We claim that the three mobility schemes studied here are different ways of experiencing the world and learning. Therefore, they should be implemented in parallel, and not perceived as alternatives.

Key words: workplace learning, Higher Education, mobility, staff, international learning

Introduction

Learning in the workplace allows employees, societies and countries to meet the challenges of the present day, such as rapid technological development, the globalization process and progressive socio-economic and cultural changes. It enables employees to improve their qualifications after completing their education. This can be achieved by participating in courses and training, as well as completely independently, e.g. by watching instructional films and reading books. Employees learning in various types of institutions has become a standard workplace practice requirement. Organizational solutions that support workplace learning consist in the mobility of employees, and its three types: physical mobility (traditional), mobility in the virtual world – digital mobility, and blended mobility, which consists in combining physical and digital mobility.

This article deals with the problem of conducting higher education employees' workplace learning through three schemes of mobility. Study justification is the process of replacing the traditional (bureaucratic) model of the university with a management model which is robust, competitive and governed by the laws of academic capitalism (Antonesei 2007). It is important to improve the quality of work done by academic staff by increasing student orientation, supporting researchers and increasing the efficiency with which grants are obtained. The implementation of these demands requires new knowledge, skills, competences and styles of administration from administrative staff and education from teachers.

The main research question was: *What are the characteristics of higher education employees' workplace learning within three international mobility schemes?* To solve this research problem, when planning the study, we aimed to conduct the research in 20 countries on a group of approx. 500 people. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has limited our research capabilities. Finally, we managed to receive the surveys from 103 academic employees located in 17 countries between April and May 2020. Thus – because of the small research sample – we are aware that our research cannot be used as a basis for formulating broad generalizations. However, the study was preceded by theoretical analyzes, was carried out and consulted in the international community as a part of an international research project. Therefore we think that our finding can be used in designing other research projects and are worth publishing in the form of a scientific article. The questionnaires were also used with the aim to give us a diagnostic overview over issues that relate to workplace learning within higher education.

Workplace based learning – new technology, new perspectives

The origins of scientific thinking about workplace learning should be sought in the concept of organizational learning developed by two Americans, Chris Argyris (1993, 1978, 1974), and Donald Schön (1987, 1983). However, this concept is more a management than a learning concept, as learning in it relates to organizations not to workers. This concept does not take into account that there is a gap between what workers say, think, plan and what they actually do in the organization. Its attention is focused more on the creation of learning-friendly situations by institutions than on learning itself.

Learning in the workplace is most often classified as non-formal education that takes place without any imposed education programme (Hodkinson, Colley, Janice Malcolm, 2003, p. 313–318). As David Livingstone (1999, p. 51) points out, informal learning can be defined as “any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs outside the curricula of educational institutions, or the courses or workshops offered by educational or social agencies”. This kind of learning may not have specific learning objectives. Informal learning may occur on the initiative of the individual, but also happens as a by-product of organized activities, which may or may not have learning objectives. Also, studies on workplace-based learning within Higher Education emphasize outcomes of learning like crossing boundaries, empowerment or teaching activities that embrace flexible conditions for learning (Ryan and Tilbury, 2013; Barnett, 2014).

The current growth of interest in workplace learning is expressed both in the intensification of scientific research in this area (Rintala, Nokelainen, Pylväs, 2018; Coetzer, Kock, Wallo, 2017; Froehlich; Beusaert, Segers, 2017; Haemer, Borges-Andrade, Cassiano, 2017; Janssens, Smet, Onghena, Kyndt, 2017; Illeris, 2004; Illeris & Associates, 2004; Koltai, 2002; Järvinen, Poikela, 2001; Engeström, 2001; Ellesröm, 2001) and in the institutional support of this process by international organizations. Workplace learning has been recognized by the European Commission as important for the future of the European Union's societies and is a priority in the Horizon 2020 programme. The purpose of supporting and promoting workplace learning is to increase levels of innovation within European Union's economies, to accelerate economic development and to reduce unemployment. Institutional support and the intensification of workplace learning are expected to fill in the gaps between science and economy and to remove barriers to cooperation between science and economy to stimulate innovation.

The technological revolution has now transformed the workplace environment, especially the educational dimension of work. More and more companies are shifting towards fully digitalising their work processes, which was signifi-

cantly accelerated by the pandemic COVID-19. It means that the traditional methods for workplace learning, training and professional development are slowly becoming obsolete. Therefore, companies invest in digital technologies in order to educate their employees. According to H. G. Bauer (Bauer et al., 2012) and C. P. Cerasoli (Cerasoli et al., 2018) digital tools (formerly known as “ICT”) broaden the autonomy of employees in learning and managing their development. As a result, employees’ learning is becoming more independent and self-directed (Heinz, 2010). This type of learning is based on various sources (Edwards, 2010; Ha, 2008, 2015) and is supported by challenging and exciting tasks and collaboration between professional groups and the expectations of work effectiveness constrain learning and creativity (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2017). According to Smyrnova-Trybulska et al. (2018, p. 30) “digital technologies provide innovative openings to partnerships and exchanges and pose a number of challenges”. Ajrouh & Slamti (2020, p. 3) are of the opinion using digital technologies “employees would reach their ultimate goal of developing personally and professionally and become operational in the dynamic educational environment”. Therefore, learning is perceived as necessary for the organisation (Scheeres et al., 2010) and is driven by the organisations’ and employees’ expectations (Fuller & Unwin, 2010; Riddell et al., 2009).

It seems that learning in the workplace is as vital as never before, but – as H. G. Bauer and his associates – noticed, we do not know in detail how this learning is going and its characteristics (Bauer et al., 2012). Therefore, it is worth conducting research in this area.

Purpose

The aim of the study was to examine, identify and explain the main characteristics of HE staff learning through three schemes of mobility:

- a) *traditional mobility*, where mobility participants go abroad to carry out mobility activity in a partner country different from the country of the sending organization and the country where they live (Pherali, 2012; Kim, 2016; Messelink et al., 2015)
- b) *blended mobility*, where mobility participants go abroad to carry out their mobility activity (as mentioned above), and supplementary to the physical mobility at the same time, they use digital technologies (digital tools, mobile devices, online courses) for their learning (Ritchie, 2018; Gruber, 2018; Owston, 2018; Naylor & Gibbs, 2018; Consuegra & Engels, 2016;

- c) *digital mobility*, where mobility participants do not go abroad to carry out their mobility activity abroad, however, they learn within their mobility throughout online courses in the cyberspace understanding as “a non-material reality which includes the totality of information moving among different communicators through the new types of media (...) opens new geographies, new territories to conquer and explore at the same time (Cucoş, Ceobanu, 2009, p. 2). The courses were led by teachers coming from foreign universities (Carlsen, Holmberg, Neghina & Owusu-Boampong, 2016; Philipsen, Tondeur & Zhu, 2016; Schuwer et al., 2015; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Graham, Allen & Ure, 2003).

Methodology

The study used a questionnaire with open-ended and close-ended questions and was conducted between April and May 2020.

The leading questions when building the questionnaire were:

- *What are the main characteristics of HE staff learning through traditional mobility?*
- *What are the main characteristics of HE staff learning through blended mobility?*
- *What are the main characteristics of HE staff learning through digital mobility?*
- *What are the similarities and differences in learning within three mobility schemes?*

The survey was developed in the English language and all answers were given in English. A purposive sampling of employees was performed. Respondents were selected based on their experience with mobility (selection criteria: participation in at least one mobility scheme in the last 18 months). The study sample constituted 103 employees involved within mobility from 17 countries both inside the European Union (EU) and outside of the European Union (non-EU) (68% females, 30% males, other than female or male gender was declared by 2%; 16% were 20-30 years of age, 32% were 31–40 years old, 37% were 41–50 years old and 15% more than 50 years of age). The participants came from different departments of education faculties at state universities. The study is diagnostic in character and focused on the description of the values and features of dependent and independent variables. The results obtained were the basis for formulating judgments about the occurrence or absence of relationships between variables. The research method was a diagnostic survey. Based on the theory of three dimensions of learning developed by Knud Illeris (2002), our study can be illustrated by the following model.

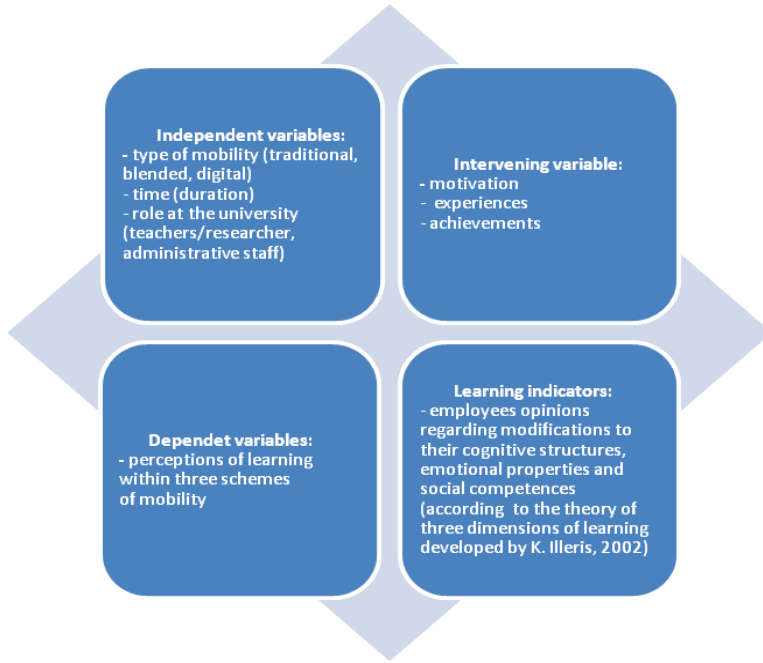


Figure 1. Models of Cloud Computing Services.

S o u r c e: own work

Data Analysis

Since we rely on and infer facts about social sciences about education only on the basis of learners' results and their opinions, the assumption was made that employees' opinions could be treated as indicators of learning. These indicators were measured in the survey questionnaire, for which employees determined their degree of compliance and acceptance on the Likert scale, and answered open questions, which were then categorized. During the analysis of answers to the open questions, each quote was inductively coded. No text recognition or automated frequency software was used; all analyses were performed manually to ensure coding familiarity. With the help of content analysis, the data were refined, and underlying patterns and qualitative differences likely to be present in the data were revealed and coded. Once the codes were saturated, similar open-text answers were grouped together through content-driven analysis, and then built into themes.

Findings

HE staff members prefer short-term forms of mobility. In each scheme of mobility, the respondents indicated up to 2 weeks as the most favorable, specifically 37% in cases of blended mobility, 43% in cases of digital mobility and 58% in cases of physical mobility. Less favorable, and in the second place, were answers concerning cases of blended and physical learning from 2 weeks up to 2 months. Significantly fewer respondents indicated longer than 12 months. The HE workers would be the least willing to leave for longer than 12.

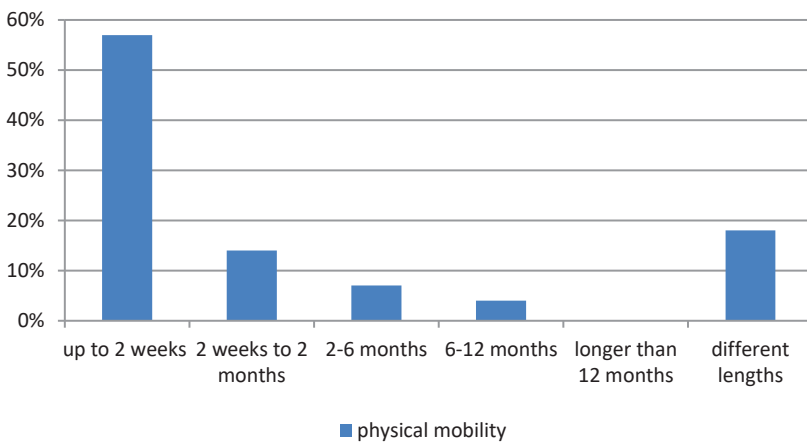


Figure 2. Preferred length of stay – physical mobility.

Source: own work

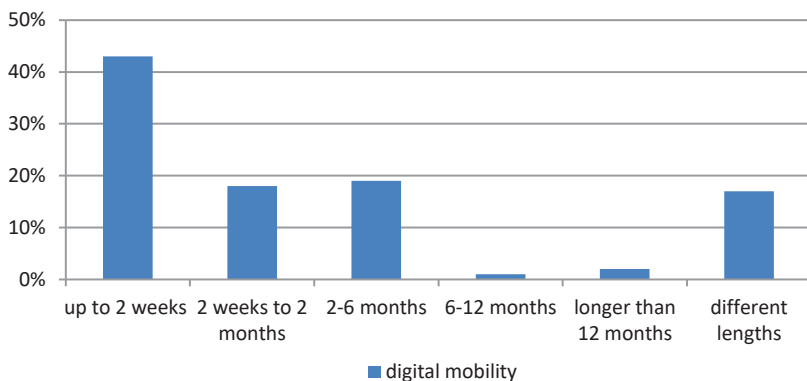


Figure 3. Preferred length of stay – digital mobility.

Source: own work

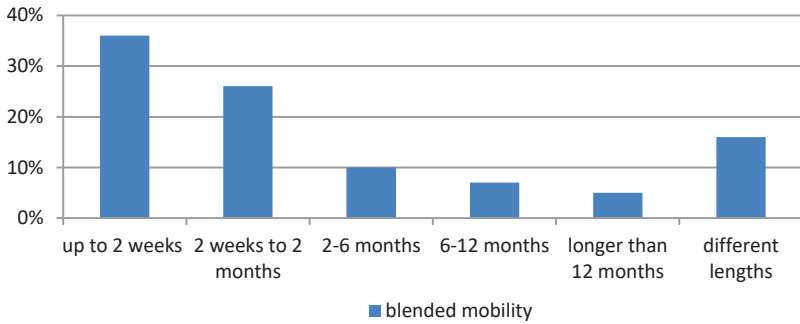


Figure 4. Preferred length of stay – blended mobility.
 Source: own work

Learning in the workplace gives one the opportunity to learn and develop competences. The study, therefore, asked about the educational benefits of the three types of mobility. In the case of physical mobility, the dominant indication was international experiences (31%). Online networking was in the second place (23%). It turned out that professional knowledge and professional skills are also important. The other benefits were of little importance. The responses in cases of digital mobility were slightly different. One answer that was dominant was gaining digital skills (31%) and professional knowledge (29%). The average values were professional skills (9%), networking opportunities (7%), and others (8%). The remaining responses received less than 5% of responses. Responses about

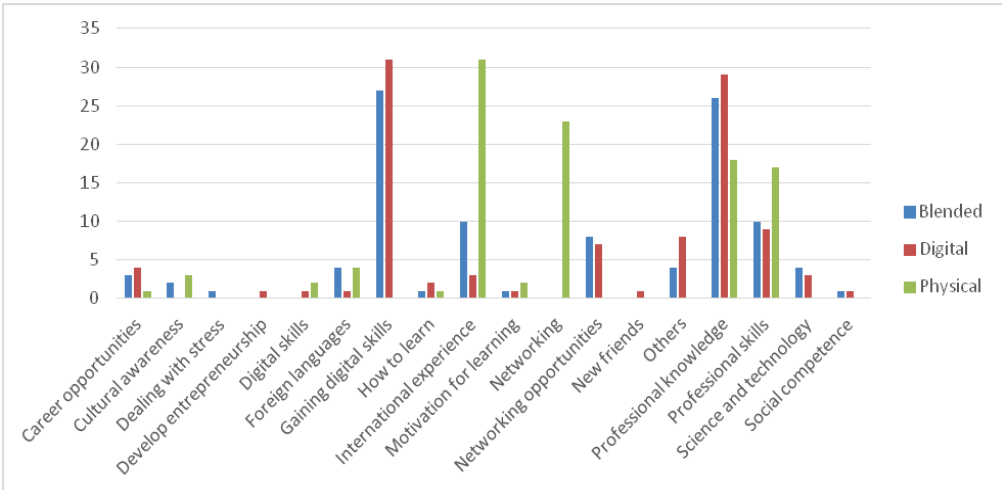


Figure 5. Comparison of benefits from three schemes of mobility.
 Source: own work

blended mobility were very similar to digital mobility, however, there were slight differences. Greater importance was attached to international experiences (10%), and foreign languages skills (4%).

In an open-ended question, we asked staff to explain their choices. The most popular responses were as follows: “you need to share your knowledge”, “knowledge about the background of the subjects or courses to be an attendee”, “it is necessary to have knowledge about the topic that will be discussed during the mobility”, “knowledge about the topic that the mobility is focused on is needed prior to the mobility”, “knowledge for exchanging best-practices, seeing what services the universities provide you with”. By way of explanation, university staff made the following comments regarding professional skills: “you need to have social skills (and know) how to communicate with others”, “language skills are needed”, “skills to adapt to a new country”.

When comparing the benefits of the three types of mobility, one can see that the benefit of mobility is visible regularity, and that benefits from blended and digital mobility are similar, but form physical mobility significantly differently.

Most respondents (96%) would like to take part in physical mobility again. In the second place was blended mobility (68%) while digital came third (47%). The largest number of respondents expressed their reluctance to participate in digital mobility (22%). There were definitely fewer respondents interested in taking part in blended mobility (8%) and physical (7%).

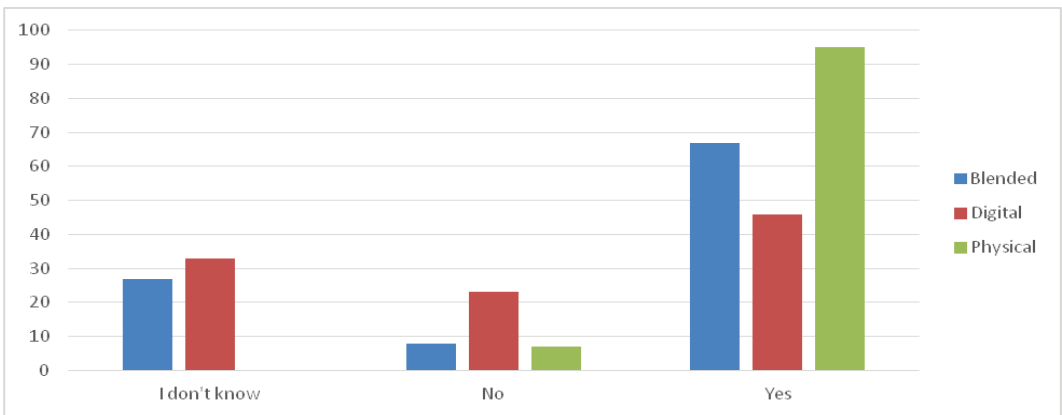


Figure 6. Willingness to participate again in three schemes of mobility.

Source: own work

Assuming that the willingness to participate again is a measure of the attractiveness of the mobility, it can be concluded that for the respondents, physical mobility was definitely the most attractive. Most Higher Education employees

would like to take part in it again, and only a few percent would not. At the same time, the fewest number of workers would like to take part in mobility again and most would definitely not. It can be assumed that the willingness to participate again is a measure of the attractiveness of the mobility.

Discussion and conclusions

Organizations aiming to make operations faster and more flexible have begun to transfer power to individuals (Rigby & Ryan 2018) and responsibility for learning has moved to individuals and teams themselves (Ellinger 2004). This has become possible by creating self-directed teams that can respond to the individual needs of staff (Holbeche 2015). Our study shows that workplace learning within mobility where individuals and groups who take responsibility for their learning both in planning and assessing a mobility programme, aims to develop professional knowledge rather than skills. The approach to learning taken by higher education staff was to view it more as an opportunity than a duty. What is interesting is that professional knowledge within mobility was perceived as added value that is rather shared within mobility than gained. Employee's skills have less bearing on their professional development than their interpersonal relationships and interactions with others.

Higher education administrative staff and academic teachers are one of the professional groups whose workplace conditions have changed in recent years and are continuing to change. Mainly due to globalization the university has become an entrepreneurial institution governed by the laws of academic capitalism (Clark, 1998). This change necessitates altering the competences required and can be achieved through learning. One of the organizational solutions conducive to learning is mobility. The opinions of university staff on studied schemes of mobility varied. Opinions were more similar regarding digital and blended mobility, and differed significantly from opinions on physical mobility. Hence, the three mobility schemes studied here are different ways of experiencing the world and learning. Therefore, they should be implemented in parallel, and not on the basis of alternatives.

Wallin, Pylväs & Nokelainen (2020) illustrate the double nature of digitalization, as it may both support and hinder professional development and learning by changing work tasks, work practices and knowledge development and management. Our findings confirm this educational and development potential. The international mobility of academic staff in which digital tools become more and more important,

improves the effectiveness of research, builds the potential and competitiveness of scientific institutions, and contributes to the progress and development of science in the country and at the European Union level. However, academics must not be forced to be internationally mobile and learn in a multinational environment as this may be counterproductive. Whereas, it is worth considering creating a system of incentives and promotion at universities, as well as creating an organizational culture at universities in which mobility and internationality are central values. Superiors should also appreciate the international activity of employees. There is also a need to move away from single or uncoordinated efforts to a coordinated strategy to promote mobility and internationalization.

Our study shows that workplace-based learning occurs because of the interpersonal contact between people rather than the environment in which that social interaction occurs. The culture within which learning takes place is a critical issue in higher education, understood as a supportive work environment where staff make decisions concerning the content and scope of their learning within mobility. University employees are typically adult learners who learn independently, and pursue job-oriented learning within mobility. Thus, the learning culture is a critical issue in higher education, understood as a supportive work environment where staff decide about the content and scope of their learning within mobility.

In recent years, learning motives have been perceived as crucial for an individual employee's learning path. These might cover various activities designed to develop your career such as learning for professional development and learning for social functioning (Markus, 2006), "learning by adding something new in the job" (van der Pol, 2011). This study shows that workplace learning within the mobility of higher education staff is also based on professional development, however, physical mobility that is combined with going abroad focuses on international experience and networking opportunities. Consequently, the learning focus is moved towards the development of digital skills.

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Uczenie się pracowników szkolnictwa wyższego w formule trzech rodzajów międzynarodowej mobilności

Streszczenie

Dotychczasowe badania nad edukacyjnym wymiarem mobilności międzynarodowej środowiska akademickiego dotyczą głównie rezultatów mobilności akademickiej oraz koncentrują się na mobilności studentów. Istnieje jednak niewystarczająca liczba badań, które koncentrują się na mobilności pracowników szkolnictwa wyższego (nauczycieli akademickich/badaczy i kadry administracyjnej), zwłaszcza w odniesieniu do ich uczenia się. Każdego roku Komisja Europejska publikuje badania dotyczące wpływu mobilności, ale nie zawierają one przeglądu tego, w jaki sposób uczenie się dorosłych odbywa się w ramach mobilności i jak mobilność wpływa na uczenie się przez całe życie. Celem tego artykułu jest opisanie i wyjaśnienie cech uczenia się pracowników szkół wyższych w odniesieniu do trzech rodzajów mobilności: tradycyjnej, mieszanej i cyfrowej (digitalnej). Badanie zostało przeprowadzone z udziałem 103 pracowników europejskich uniwersytetów z 17 krajów. Twierdzimy, że trzy badane tutaj schematy mobilności to różne sposoby doświadczania świata i uczenia się. Dlatego powinny być wdrażane równolegle, a nie postrzegane jako alternatywy.

Słowa kluczowe: uczenie się w miejscu pracy, szkolnictwo wyższe, mobilność, kadra, uczenie się międzynarodowe

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Обучение сотрудников высших учебных заведений по формуле трех типов международной мобильности

Аннотация

В исследованиях образовательного аспекта международной мобильности обсуждаются последствия академической, международной мобильности в целом или основное внима-

ние уделяется мобильности студентов. Однако недостаточно исследований, посвященных мобильности сотрудников высших учебных заведений, особенно в отношении обучения. Ежегодно Европейская комиссия публикует исследования о влиянии мобильности, но они не дают обзора того, как происходит обучение взрослых в рамках мобильности и как мобильность влияет на непрерывное обучение сотрудников высших учебных заведений. Цель данной статьи – описать и объяснить характеристики обучения сотрудников высшего образования в ходе трех типов мобильности: традиционной, смешанной и цифровой. В исследовании приняли участие 103 сотрудника европейских университетов из 17 стран. Мы утверждаем, что три изучаемые здесь схемы мобильности представляют собой разные способы познания мира и обучения. Поэтому их следует реализовывать параллельно, а не воспринимать как альтернативу.

К л ю ч е в ы е с л о в а: обучение на рабочем месте, высшее образование, мобильность, персонал, международное обучение

Marcin Rojek, Joanna Leek

Aprendizaje de los empleados de educación superior en la fórmula de tres tipos de movilidad internacional

R e s u m e n

Los estudios sobre la dimensión educativa de la movilidad internacional discuten las implicaciones de la movilidad académica, internacional en general, o se centran principalmente en la movilidad de los estudiantes. Sin embargo, hay un número insuficiente de estudios que se centren en la movilidad del personal de educación superior, particularmente en relación con el aprendizaje. Cada año, la Comisión Europea publica estudios sobre el impacto de la movilidad, pero esto no proporciona una descripción general de cómo ocurre el aprendizaje de adultos dentro de la movilidad y cómo la movilidad afecta el aprendizaje permanente de los empleados de educación superior. El propósito de este artículo es describir y explicar las características de aprendizaje de los empleados de ES en el transcurso de tres tipos de movilidad: tradicional, mixta y digital. El estudio se realizó con la participación de 103 empleados de universidades europeas de 17 países. Afirmamos que los tres esquemas de movilidad estudiados aquí son diferentes formas de experimentar el mundo y aprender. Por lo tanto, deben implementarse en paralelo y no percibirse como alternativas.

P a l a b r a s c l a v e: aprendizaje en el lugar de trabajo, educación superior, movilidad, personal, aprendizaje internacional