

Work Experience Europe
The German Work Experience and Cultural Exchange Trip 2012-13
Stage 1 - Germany

On Sunday 21st October, 16 Year 13 students accompanied by 3 members of staff embarked on the first part of the Belfast/Rastatt Work Experience and Cultural Exchange Project.

The project, funded through Comenius, aims to facilitate international work experience and collaborative social and cultural activities between students from St Malachy's College and Ludwig Wilhelm Gymnasium in Rastatt, Germany.

The Student Connection

In advance of travelling to Germany, preparation to ensure a successful trip was essential. This preparation was mainly focussed on the partnerships between the schools and with that in mind our group of students worked together to produce an introductory PowerPoint presentation 'Getting to Know You'. Key themes included our school, Belfast, sixth form in St Malachy's, our group and our expectations for this project.

To facilitate easier introductions our German partners had each sent a personal profile which included a photograph, name, address, email address, DOB and general 'About Me' details. Email contact between each student and his German partner therefore was made before face to face meetings took place.

Almost immediately on arrival strong friendship bonds were formed. We were welcomed on the platform of the train station in Rastatt by our teacher contact Ms Merz, Mr Weinig the Vice-Principal, other staff from the school and a number of the German students. A quick luggage drop at the hotel, a welcome beverage and a slice of a very hospitable 'Welcome' cake baked by one of the students Jacqueline, was all we needed time for and we were off to a horse racing event at Iffezheim Rennbahn and to enjoy every minute that this experience was going to offer!

Our first full day in Rastatt began with a visit to our partner school Ludwig Wilhelm Gymnasium and introductions to all involved in the project. Ms Merz and Vice-Principal Mr Weinig formally welcomed our group in English and Mr Lambon responded to this in German. To encourage conversation students were paired with their partners and in small groups participated in an ice-breaker activity. Once the conversation started it didn't stop all week! The morning session closed with the 'Getting to Know You' presentation by St. Malachy's students and then it was time for them to get to know more about LWG.

The insight into education in a German school that followed was an enlightening experience for our students who attended a range of lessons. No uniforms and a less formal ambience were the obvious differences in our educational establishments and freedom to leave school premises when not in class and to go home when classes

were finished for the day were reported as very appealing aspects. The considerable range of subjects that German students take in addition to their A'levels as well as their fluency in English was quite a surprise however.

Lunch provided another insight into the German way of life as Ms Merz had arranged for us all to dine in the 'Landratsamt'. This building is a 'district office' and provides a 'value for money' lunch for workers and others in the local area. That a government building was put to this use struck many of our students as unusual and made them pause to reconsider their preconceptions of German culture.

After lunch we visited Rastatt Castle in the centre of the town. Constructed in the style of Versailles at the beginning of the 18th century the castle is the oldest Baroque residence in the Upper Rhine Valley. The guided tour appealed not only to the would-be historians and architects among us but also the would-be actors as the opportunity to dress up and become part of the court of Margrave Ludwig Wilhelm presented itself! The good nature of both Irish and German students was evident as they participated readily, entered into the spirit of the occasion and provided both learning and entertainment for all present.

Monday provided an opportunity for more German hospitality as arrangements had been made for our students to go home with their partners for their evening meal and to experience life with a typical German family. For many this was a real highlight as it provided time to relax, to get to know each other better and small groups of friends formed as a result.

Throughout the week a schedule of evening activities provided a framework for social and cultural experiences. Bowling, a guided tour of the beautiful town of Baden-Baden, a speciality dinner in a theatre restaurant as well as free time in Rastatt and Karlsruhe allowed students to learn about the way Germans their age live their lives and helped to promote an appreciation of the German culture.

By all accounts the social and cultural aspects of this trip were not only tremendous learning opportunities and recognised as such, but they were particularly enjoyable experiences as well. As one student said "I think the highlight for me was meeting the German partners. I think most of us took very good friendships away with us and it makes seeing them in February an event to highly look forward to."

The Workplace Experience

Our experience of the workplace was focussed on the Mercedes-Benz Plant at Gaggenau on the outskirts of Rastatt. Founded in 1894 and therefore the oldest automotive plant in the world, it is today part of the Daimler Trucks division's operations. It manufactures manual and automated manual transmissions (for both cars and trucks), axles, torque converters and other parts for the Mercedes-Benz A- and B-Class.

On our first morning at the factory we were welcomed by the coordinator of our work experience programme Mrs Brasseur, three undergraduate engineers and a team of apprentices. An introduction to 'Daimler' in the form of an exciting marketing movie ensured students fully appreciated the global identity of this company. An outline of the products of the Gaggenau Plant followed and led to a discussion of job opportunities, recruitment and an introduction to the undergraduates and apprentices present.

Throughout the day our students, guided by the undergraduates interacted with apprentices involved in training for a range of different roles in the company - the company offers 6 Technical and 2 Commercial Trainee fields. Presentations prepared by the apprentices and subsequent conversations allowed students to understand better the training needed to work in areas such as electronic engineering, manufacturing and mechanical engineering, mechatronic and technical engineering, tools engineering, materials testing and cutting machine operations.

Our team really enjoyed the guided tour of the bespoke education centre for engineering apprenticeship training. This practical experience of the facilities ensured students saw training in action and developed a realistic view of this type of workplace.

The contributions from apprentices undergoing Commercial Training were also significant and helped to provide a fuller picture of how a company works. Students got the opportunity to learn about roles in Supply Management, International Logistics, Human Resource Management, Customer Service, Secretarial Service, Company Members Business, Personal Management and the Purchase Department .

The differences in the role of the professional engineer and the apprentice were of specific interest to our students and conversations with the undergraduate students helped to clarify these. Daimler recruits students from two degree programmes; Mechanical Engineering and Industrial Engineering and throughout their course, in keeping with the strong vocational links in the German education system, students undertake regular project work at the factory alternating 3 months at university with 3 months at the factory.

What was possibly most surprising about the training of the apprentices was the emphasis that Daimler places on personal development. We were clear about how we wanted to benefit from this experience but were not so clear about what the employees of this large company would gain from their involvement with us. Developing in their employees the key skills of communication, working with others, improving one's own performance, as well as developing a good sense of personal achievement and therefore confidence, are obviously high on this company's agenda. As a result our students got to benefit not just from the workplace experience but also from the additional experiences for employee development.

Our trip to the Mercedes-Benz Museum in Stuttgart was vastly more interesting than anticipated and instilled in all an appreciation of the development of the automobile industry not only in Germany but worldwide. Furthermore, the day spent doing leadership and team building activities in the Black Forest was not only great fun but added a whole new dimension to the development of good relationships in the workplace and what it really means to lead or to work in a team.

Our final day at the company began with breakfast (courtesy of the apprentices), followed by a guided tour of the full facility and production processes. Being on the shop-floor was once again very popular with our students and they listened attentively to the expert explanations provided by Powertrain Key Account Manager Mr. M. Schoeppl.

A final session of group work involving our students and the apprentices focussed on a reflection and evaluation of 'The Daimler Experience'. St. Malachy's students presented very positive feedback to the assembled groups and so brought to a conclusion our time at Mercedes-Benz, Gaggenau.

Overall Daimler has facilitated a tremendous experience for our students and for that we are all grateful. Our group have truly enjoyed their time in this environment and have learned and absorbed so much that each student acknowledges an increase in his confidence to be successful in the workplace locally, nationally and internationally.

Mrs McAlinden
Head of Careers