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HOME » News » Borrowing and sharing identities

## Borrowing and sharing identities

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### Borrowing and sharing identities

Students from various universities across Europe travelled to Achill last week to learn more about Irish and each others cultures

Anton McNulty

WHAT does it mean to be Irish? That was just one of the many questions asked of Achill people last week by European students who visited the island as part of the trans-university 'Borrowed Identities' project. Last week, up to 30 students, of several different nationalities studying in universities in Germany, Lithuania, Hungary, Denmark and Britain, travelled to Achill to learn and discover new cultures and experiences. For the past decade students from all over Europe have been coming to Achill every year to work with the local community on the project.

The aim and ideas of the 'Borrowed Identities' project is to create an intercultural learning environment based on virtual and real mobility, and focused on combining computer-mediated academic work, face-to-face meetings and intercultural communication. The courses studied by the students in their home university vary from International Relations and Business Administration to Economics, but during the project they all worked together in workshops, with different students given different roles and responsibilities for the week.

For some the project was optional and an experience working with different nationalities, while for others it was compulsory. Kerstin Neugebauer, a Polish national studying Business Administration in the University of Applied Science in Koblen near Bonn in Germany, acted as the PR Manager for the project and explained what the students hoped to achieve from their stay in Achill.

"The aim is create an intercultural learning experience between students from different universities. We are mostly studying something relating to business but that is not the point. The point is to create something creative and multicultural and, by coming to Achill Island, it means nobody is at home. We leave everything behind us and concentrate on our work," she explained.

On the day of their arrival, at a reception party, the students presented their cultures to the Achill people by offering them traditional food from their home country and inviting them to participate in the project. For many of the students it was the first time they ever heard of Achill, but on their arrival they were looking forward to learning about life in the west of Ireland. Reka Farkos, an International Relations student from Corvinus University in Budapest in Hungary, said they had a lot to learn about how people live in Achill and hoped that Achill people would learn more about Europeans.

"This adds a lot to our personality because we will have an experience of meeting the local people that most Europeans don't when they come to Achill. If you come as a tourist it is not that kind of experience. What we hope to bring home is a feeling of openness and tolerance to others. Another good thing about the project is that hopefully people in Achill will get to know something else about Europe, and when they join us they will learn more about our traditions and cultures," she said.

Her colleague, David Szabo, said they hoped to learn about each other's cultures from the project.

"Our workshops will try to focus on Irish and local people's identities and their lives," he said. "We would like to learn more about the region, about Achill and how you live and how you define yourself. We hope to learn more about each other's cultures and habits and for ourselves to be able to work together in groups. We might be all 'westernised' but we are different and we hope to learn from each other's expressions and habits."

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