

FAIJU – AN ASSESSMENT CENTER TO DEVELOP SKILLS FOR VOLUNTEERS WORKING IN INTERNATIONAL YOUTH EXCHANGE

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ABSTRACT:

The three non-profit student exchange organizations AFS, Experiment and YFU have been carrying out a special assessment center for the development of skills necessary for volunteers working in international student exchange. In this paper we will present the goals and intentions behind this tool and also discuss the use of human resources development tools in youth exchange.

The training of volunteers plays a significant role in all organizations enabling volunteers to be able to conduct the preparation of participants on a high level. The special assessment center presents a new way of assuring quality. Participants are enabled to focus on their individual strengths and weaknesses by receiving expert advice during this weekend long training.

1.) FAIJU – WHY AND WHERE IT ALL BEGANⁱ

Like many other institutions, companies and organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGO) have been under scrutiny over the quality of their programs and the qualifications of their voluntary employees. For NGOs, assuring quality has become a driving force in rethinking long-held beliefs and restructuring ways of selecting, training and developing volunteers. Implementing new structures, new ways of training and a closer focus on standards and qualifications among their voluntary workers have become major issues.

In addition, NGOs have been confronted with severe competition over the limited time their volunteers are able and willing to spend for honorary engagements with NGOs. The arising of new social movements like the environmental and anti-globalization movements have enlarged the possibilities and potentials to get involved. Especially younger people are willing to spend their time on issues they feel connected with and organizations that provide them with the feeling of doing meaningful work for society. Voluntary engagement and involvement with social NGOs have been increasingly looked at in CVs as well and have been asked for by human resources departments.

At the intersection of these two tendencies, the Germany ministry of youth (Bundesministerium für Familie, Soziales, Frauen und Jugend (BMFSFJ)) provided the funding for the creation and the implementation of a special skills development assessment center. The so called FAIJU (Förder-Assesment-Center Internationale Jugendarbeit – Skills Development Assessment Center for the International Youth Exchange) is the result of a process started in December of 2002 by experts from all areas of international youth exchange in Germany. AFS-Interkulturelle Begegnungen e.V., Deutsche Sportjugend, Arbeitsgemeinschaft der evangelischen Jugend und transfer e.V. established with support by the Institute für Kooperationsmanagement from the University of Regensburg, Germany and in cooperation with IJAB e.V. within a 1,5 year-long process a useful, scientifically sound and engaging assessment center.

2.) FAIJU IN PRACTICE

While FAIJU quickly gained wide recognition and attention within the international youth exchange scene in Germany, the whole assessment center was received most prominently by a special part within the international youth exchange scene in Germany – the long-term exchange programs for students. AFS Interkulturelle Begegnungen was already present within the development group. The new qualification tool and its wide ranging usefulness for the development of competences among the volunteers was then transmitted through AJA (the umbrella organization for long-term non-profit international youth exchange organizations) to the other non-profit long-

term youth exchange organizations in Germany. Especially YFU e.V. and Experiment e.V. expressed their willingness to use FAIJU for their training purposes. While in the first two years until December of 2006 FAIJU was conducted regularly with participants from the whole international youth exchange scene, the three organizations AFS Interkulturelle Begegnungen e.V., YFU e.V. and Experiment e.V. have been the only organizations conducting a FAIJU since 2007 on a regular twice a year basis.

To date about 100 participants have had the opportunity of taking part in a FAIJU. The pool of observers, who have all been given a special observer training, consist of about 40 people.

Every assessment center done either for selection of employees or for the development of those as a human resource development tool asks for enormous personal and financial resources. For the FAIJU process a ratio of one participant to one observer/organizer/role-player is maintained. As each FAIJU done by Experiment, AFS and YFU brings together four volunteers from each organization, the coordinating organization most of the time is responsible for finding at least four role-players, eight observers and one coordinating person. As the observers and role-players fulfill their task also on a voluntary basis, their room and board as well as their traveling cost are covered in full. Hence, each FAIJU spot not only includes the cost of room and board for the participants but the equal sharing of all the cost for the coordinating team and their cost. As one can imagine, FAIJU itself is a costly event and also requires a lot of organization in preparing the training.

There is, however, a common understanding among the three organizations, that the outcome for every individual person participating in the FAIJU and the individual advancement and the general assurance of quality is absolutely worth the input given by the organization. The following presentation of the FAIJU concept may help enlighten the strength of FAIJU and why this assessment center has played a crucial role in assuring quality for the preparation of volunteers active in the different fields of international youth exchanges

3.) FAIJU'S CONCEPTⁱⁱ

The development of the assessment center went through a long correction and practice test. In contrast to the use of assessment center for human resources purposes, there had not been a model or an established framework for the use of a development assessment center in the field of international youth exchange. The actual development process towards establishing the FAIJU will not be part of this article. The outcome of the creation process has, however, shaped the development of quality standards significantly. Since the implementation, only a few tasks have changed and the overall process is still similar to the FAIJUs done in April of 2004 – twelve participants run through six different simulations and are observed and assessed by observers.

The central element for the successful use of this assessment center is the methodic quadrate: exact definitions of the requirement profile, suitable and realistic exercises, a standardized observations and assessment procedure and high quality and helpful feedback. Each of the four corners of the methodic quadrate will now be given adequate room for explanation.

Requirement profile

A clear definition of competences and skills for high quality voluntary work within the international youth exchange scene is of course a major issue. The development group used questionnaires and evaluations to find and define the competences within the requirement profile. FAIJU's requirement profile contains seven key competences. All of the competences are defined and provide the basis for the observation and feedback procedure. To clarify the definitions a set of examples of what the respective key competences entail have been provided and are shown for each exercise. For every exercise and every competence observed during this exercise examples of an ideal, exaggerated and insufficient performance have been listed and are available for each observer.

The seven competences have become a framework for necessary qualifications for volunteers within the field of international youth exchange. The competences are:

Empathy, creativity and flexibility, self-confidence, team orientation, conflict resolution, structured thinking and self-reflection and perspective-taking.

As an example of how the competences are structured and defined, the last one listed will be examined in greater detail.

Self-reflection and perspective taking is defined as: "The person reflects on his/her own behavior and the behavior of others. He/She knows about her own preferences and is aware of his/her cultural imprint. The person is interested in other people's orientations and motives and values them." An example for an ideal performance and an ideal example of self-reflection and perspective taking would be the promotion of the idea of putting oneself into the other person's shoes. Insufficient behavior might for example be the lack of questioning intentions and the background of the person's behavior. (During the exercises the other person is the role player.) Exaggerated behavior could for example be that the person attributes uncommon behavior always to differences in cultural backgrounds and never to the person's characteristics.

It is important to stress, that of course the insufficient, ideal and exaggerated behavior is different in every simulation and for every competence. Therefore there are behavioral anchors for each simulation and each competence within each simulation. According to these anchors the

observers have the possibility to evaluate the performance and give an adequate assessment of the performance.

Exercises

An important element for the acceptance and the validity of the assessment center by the participants are the exercises. In FAIJU they simulate real and central situations for the participants to show their competences. Each exercise provides the attendee with information on the situation they are about to simulate, the goals for the exercise and the observation criteria assessed within. In the assessment center two different kinds of exercises are conducted: a) one-person exercises where the participants conduct the situation alone or in interaction with a trained role-player; b) group-exercises where the participants are among themselves. During the assessment center the participants go through the following exercises:

Strategic simulation:

The participant is asked to plan and conduct an international youth exchange; he/she is asked to take various pieces of information and different wishes into consideration. A classical transfer of prioritizing information.

Presentation:

The participant is asked to give a presentation about possible problems that occur during an exchange. The presentation is held at a training session for volunteers.

Interview with a participant:

The participant is the leader of a camp. He/she has a conversation with a participant (role-player) of the camp who has problems with other participants.

Counseling interview:

As the local coordinator, the participant is conducting a talk with the host mother and her exchange student after problems occurred. Group discussion:

In the coordinating team of an exchange a number of misunderstandings and conflicts evolved. They should be solved in a common discussion by two participants and one trained role-player.

Group situation:

During an intercultural exchange, problems between the two national groups occurred. Three participants as leaders of one national group are asked to come up with possible solutions to solve the conflicts.

All the exercises have been developed and are constantly evaluated. The simulation of realistic and useful situations that might occur for the volunteers is the priority.

Observation and assessment procedure

In each exercise the participant is observed by two trained observers ensuring a rather objective assessment of the participant's performance. Necessary is also the rotation of the observers. In a normal FAIJU one person should be observed by different observers with different combinations.

For the observers the procedure is separated into two phases. During the exercise the precise writing of minutes of everything observed is necessary. An important part during the training of the observers is the focus on what is written down. In order to assure an objective assessment it is necessary to just write down what the observer has seen during the simulation. The assessment of what has been seen is the second step that the observers take on after the exercise. An assessment based on the minutes and in combination with the observation criteria and the examples stated therein is the task for the observers after the simulation. Before reporting their assessment back to the participants, both observers discuss their respective findings and fill out a form with a quantitative rating (based on a rating-scale) and a qualitative rating with a strong focus on the assessment and tips for improvement.

As the process of assessing the performance requires an enormous amount of tact and also a clear idea of what the requirements for each simulation are, training of observers and appropriate instruments and resources are vital.

Feedback

In contrast to an assessment center for selection purposes, FAIJU is not used to evaluate the participants and to eliminate some of the participants for further voluntary work. This training is used to monitor quality and to enable the volunteers to receive useful and continuative feedback for their work within the organization and also their lives outside their voluntary work. Hence, sophisticated and fair feedback is a key ingredient to the validation of FAIJU.

Observers are trained to present their assessment based on examples during the simulation. A discussion of results and the assessment should be presented in a fair, respectful and reasonable manner. This assessment should give the participant help and orientation towards his/her performance with regard to the requirement profile for this task and present motivation to work and improve his/her performance for the future. Feedback is given along the lines of feedback rules and each participant gets at least a one-to-one feedback. In some exercises both observers give feedback to the one participant.

Every feedback is structured into three phases. In the first phase the participant has the opportunity to present his/her general impression of the simulation and his/her feelings during and

maybe after the task. It is important that he/she doesn't start justifying what went wrong or what he/she felt was extraordinary. In the second phase the observers give their assessment according to the dimension observed within this exercise. Observers are asked to restrict themselves to a few prominent points for which they can also give strong examples based on the minutes taken during the simulation. Here it is also possible to encourage the participant to immerse himself/herself into a training series to improve specific aspects. The third phase is reserved for questions towards the observers. Again, there is not room for justification of certain actions or critique on the observers' assessment. Although it might be hard for the participant to accept some of the aspects mentioned and the assessment given, observers present their findings based on their view of the simulation.

These four corners of the methodic quadrangle interact with each other during a FAIJU training and all its simulations. As each exercise is structured along the same lines, it is important to understand the proceedings of each exercise beyond the content, the type of the exercise and the competences involved. Following, therefore, is a brief description of how the exercise is conducted.

Each exercise has a *starting phase*. In this phase the participants has the chance to read the instruction for the exercise and prepare himself/herself for the task ahead. The observers have the chance to look over the competences and the behavioral anchors for each of the competences. As the observers rotate from exercise to exercise, they have to prepare themselves thoroughly for the observation of the simulation ahead.

In the second phase the *simulation* is being carried out. Either the role-player(s) enter the room or other indicators mark the start. While the participant shows his/her behavior, the role-players try to simulate the situation as realistic as possible. The two or more observers take the minutes of the simulation. Minutes are taken on an observation sheet and as close to what has been shown as possible.

After the end of the simulation, the observers transfer their observations into the actual *assessment* on the qualitative and quantitative scale in the third phase. The participants are asked to note down their observations, ideas and feelings in their own learning journal. The learning journal plays an important role for the overall assessment of the FAIJU.

Last phase of each exercise is the *feedback* given by the observers and the possibility for the participant to ask question of clarification.

As the feedback given on an qualitative and quantitative scale is just done for the exercise and not outside the simulations, the feedback received is sometimes diverse and does not

necessarily entail the same recommendations and aspects for each exercise. The original FAIJU was planned to be conducted over a five day period. As will be shown in the next section, resources and financial restraints limit the FAIJU as it is practiced by the three organizations through a weekend-long training. However, this does not give the observers the time to discuss and write a thorough and sophisticated report about each participant's performance with regard to each competence. In contrast, it is up to the participants to put together a full picture out of the different feedbacks, the quantitative and qualitative assessment on the rating scale and their own inputs from the learning journal. There is a reserved amount of time for the participants to discuss their findings on a one-to-one interview with one self-chosen participant. This is an unfortunate concession towards time and money but the feedback by the participants shows that this reflection phase at the end of the training helps to find connecting lines, overall tendencies and areas for improvement.

4.) EXPERIENCES WITH FAIJU

As stated above, the three organizations Experiment, AFS Interkulturelle Begegnungen and YFU have been conducting FAIJUs together for the past three years. Although the development group had earlier included more organizations with focus on different and diverse aspects of international youth work and exchange, these three organizations have been the only ones conducting FAIJU for the past almost three years. In making sure that at each FAIJU the number of people from the respective organizations are the same, it was easily accepted that the coordination of each FAIJU would also rotate. This has enabled the organizations to reduce the amount of work for each FAIJU. Only the selection process for each assessment center is to be done by each organization. Other aspects, such as the search for observers and role players are the duties of the coordinating organization. This has reduced the amount of work for each FAIJU tremendously.

However, there still remains the financial obligation for each person. The development group of FAIJU has insisted on the meeting of high standards for each participant. Volunteers can only participate if they meet three criteria: a) they have been active in international youth work and youth exchange for at least three years, b) they are involved with bi-, tri- and multilateral youth exchange and c) they have been trained with their respective organizations and are themselves multipliers for the field of international youth exchange. In addition, the three organizations have set their own goals and principles for the selection process on top of the requirements. At Experiment, for example, the selection process works through an application to the board which then selects the participants. Our common experience is that people who fulfill the criteria take the most out of this assessment center. Volunteers form the backbone of most of the work done within the respective organizations: being in charge of the selection process, managing the pre-departure

and re-orientation seminars and training younger and new volunteers. All these tasks require a lot of responsibility for young volunteers in the early twenties to whom the organization hands over this responsibility. These volunteers get high quality feedback at FAIJU and are able to improve their competences and skills. As their performance as group leaders and organizers of selection processes have a limit in terms of feedback and improvement within the organizations, their observation outside their known frameworks enables a further evaluation and an improvement possibility. Therefore, FAIJU steps in at a point, where one organization may not have the possibilities of providing the volunteers with adequate feedback. FAIJU gives everyone the opportunity to be evaluated and to receive sophisticated and useful feedback.

This assessment center has, however, not been used by the organizations as a method to monitor the performance in terms of their future work for the organization. It is not FAIJU's goal to find out if volunteers are not suitable for specific voluntary engagement within the organization. This process is the sole responsibility of the organizations and their respective quality monitoring. It would be counterproductive to the training, as one major factor for its success is an open, friendly and productive atmosphere. Evaluations of the FAIJU show that the participants evaluate the whole atmosphere, the feedback and the possibility to discuss quality aspects outside the normal framework as the main great benefits of a FAIJU.

For the three organizations FAIJU also provides a great opportunity to inform about the common goals in AJA (the umbrella organization for non-profit youth-exchange organizations).

The use of FAIJU as a method to assure quality and provide experienced volunteers with a high-profile training and assessment has proved to work very well. Monitoring quality through FAIJU provides the organization with a clear and accepted tool. In communicating with parents, partners and other actors who sometimes question the quality of seminars, selection processes and other aspects of voluntary work with young volunteers, FAIJU provides a good argument to demonstrate how quality is assured and that the organizations are willing to use modern human resources methods, invest financial resources, and develop adequate training tools to assure the best quality. As participants have the opportunity to develop their own personal skills and competences for their work within the organization but also for their activities outside their voluntary work, their connection to the organization and their willingness to be engaged within the organization that is investing into their future, is also strengthened.

FAIJU therefore, provides a modern, high-profile and high-quality training tool for the organizations to meet the three challenges ahead laid out at the beginning of the article for working with young volunteers: it strengthens the bond between volunteer and organization, assures the

possibility to improve voluntary work for the individual volunteer and provides the organizations with a qualitative training tool.

Biography

Tom Kurz has been working as an organizational developer with focus on training of volunteers for *Experiment Germany* for over two years and as a volunteer for over ten years. He studied North American Cultural Studies at the University of Bonn and the University of Washington in Seattle.

ⁱ The author is indebted to the developers of FAIJU. More information about the development process, the scientific study around it and general background ideas can be found here: Egger, J. , Ehret A., Giebel, K. & Stumpf, S. (2004) FAIJU: Ein Förder Assessment Center für Mitarbeiter/-innen aus der internationalen Jugendarbeit. In: Internationaler Jugendaustausch- und Besucherdienst der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (IJAB) e.V. (Editor). *Forum Internationale Jugendarbeit 2004*. Bonn: IJAB e.V.

ⁱⁱ This section draws on the material developed and provided for the users of FAIJU.