



## **Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges**

Grant agreement number: 229616-CP-1-2006-1-BE-MINERVA-M

Document title: VM-BASE Home and away: Coaching Exchange Students from a Distance

Date of issue: 15 September 2008

Version: v2

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Number of pages: 8

Abstract: Paper presented at EADTU conference

Confidentiality status: Public



Education and Culture

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VM-BASE is co-funded by the European Commission, Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, Socrates – Minerva: ODL and ICT in EDUCATION. However, the sole responsibility of the information contained in these pages lies with the authors and the Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information eLearning portal European Commission: <http://www.elearningeuropa.info/>

## **VM-BASE**

### **Home and Away: Coaching Exchange Students from a Distance**

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#### **Abstract**

The VM-BASE project (Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges) wants to raise the quality of student exchanges by offering virtual support, both before and after the physical mobility. Virtual support is used to prepare and follow-up the mobile student, as a complement to the existing exchange programmes. The project thereby supports teachers in coaching exchange students at a distance (e-coaching). Possibilities on how students can virtually prepare their physical Erasmus are manifold. One can think of orientation guidelines (providing exchange students with very practical information on everyday life in the host institution to up-to-date information on courses they can follow at the host university), pre-selection tests (offering exchange students tools and tests to assess themselves in how far they are prepared for the studies at the host institute) or preparatory courses (on language, culture, digital literacy,...).

After the physical exchange, students are often forgotten, even though, in most cases, support and guidance are also needed in this final stage. Return activities aim at evaluating the mobility experience, offering examination facilities at the end or after the exchange, but also at reinforcing the social and content-oriented networks that have arisen during the period abroad (possibly through virtual alumni associations).

The VM-BASE project has set up several pilots in these areas, each pilot testing out different kind of e-coaching methods. Students, teachers, international relation officers as well as higher education institutions in general can benefit from the VM-BASE results collected in a manual with concrete guidelines and recommendations for blended mobility activities and a manual on good practices in e-coaching.

Key words: virtual, internationalization, student mobility

#### **Introduction: Virtual Mobility as an alternative for physical mobility**

Over the past years, higher education institutions and educational policy makers have acknowledged the importance of internationalisation for the higher education institution, its staff and its students in their policy statements. Proof of this evolution is the increasing importance paid to and the success of student mobility and inter-university programmes.

One of the best known European exchange programmes, the Erasmus programme, has celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2007. The programme contains a wide range of measures designed to support the European activities of higher education institutions and to promote the mobility and exchange of their teaching staff and students. Since the programme was adopted in 1987, it has given well over 1,5 million European university students the chance of studying and living in a foreign country. Currently 2199 European higher education institutions in 31 countries are participating in the Erasmus programme. Despite the evident success of Erasmus, but also of other mobility actions, research findings have shown there remain a number of opportunities for improvement.

One of the biggest challenges, as identified in the REVE (Real Virtual Erasmus) project and the Being Mobile project, is that many students simply cannot enjoy the benefits of the programme, mainly because of financial reasons as the grant often remains far too low especially for students from less favourable financial backgrounds.

Virtual mobility can offer a valuable alternative for those who miss out on a physical exchange, as it makes possible that students take part in courses at other universities without having to leave their home university. In the framework of the Being Mobile project, Virtual Mobility is being defined as: ““Virtual Mobility is a form of learning which consists of virtual components through a fully ICT supported learning environment that includes cross-border collaboration with people from different backgrounds and cultures working and studying together, having, as its main purpose, the enhancement of intercultural understanding and the exchange of knowledge”

It is important to point out that Virtual Mobility is more than just a copy of the traditional Erasmus programme and it can take many forms. The Being Mobile project identified the following main types of virtual mobility activities:

- *A virtual course or seminar:* Learners in a higher education institute engage in virtual mobility for a single course (as part of a whole study programme) or a seminar (series) and the rest of their learning activities take place face-to-face in a traditional way.
- *A whole virtual study programme:* Hereby an entire virtual study programme is offered at one higher education institute, giving students from different countries the chance to take this programme without having to go abroad for a whole academic year.
- *A virtual student placement:* Student placements are organised between a higher education institute and a company (sometimes in a different country). In the virtual equivalent students are using ICT to support their internship, giving them a real-life experience in a corporate setting without the necessity to move from the campus to the company or to relocate to another country for a certain period of time, and providing them with a practical preparation for new ways of working through (international) collaborative team work.
- *Virtual support activities to physical exchange:* Virtual mobility enables both better preparation and follow-up of students who participate in physical exchange programs. Preparatory activities could include student selection at a distance through video- or web conferencing (for checking social and language skills) and on-line language and cultural integration courses. Follow-up activities will help students to keep in touch with their peers, scattered around the world, to finish their common research work and/or paper work. They could also take on the form of a so-called 'Virtual Alumni' organisation, to foster life-long friendships and networks.

This last Virtual Mobility category, 'virtual support activities to physical exchange' is also being identified as 'blended mobility'. Blended mobility incorporates and combines aspects of physical and virtual mobility in order to maximize the advantages of both approaches to student and teacher mobility across Europe.

Exchange students could prepare themselves for their stay at a host university through, among others, virtual seminars between the home and host university. Preparatory language or cultural courses for the students would be given in a traditional way at the home university or via ICT from the host university before their stay. During their stay at the host university they could stay connected with students, colleagues, or teachers at the home university. And on their return, they could extend their stay 'virtually' by keeping in contact with the host university by virtual means. This way, the virtual mobility schemes can further support and innovate the existing physical Erasmus exchange.

The VM-BASE ('Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges') project has looked further into this concept bringing together all stakeholders involved in the exchange process and has investigated, through the set up of several pilots, how student and teachers could

apply blended mobility to enrich the physical exchange and make the experience more effective and fruitful for all.

### **Student and teachers' need for support.**

A needs analysis conducted within the framework of VM-BASE, revealed the presence of a need for support both for students who undertake the exchange as for teachers who assist and guide incoming and outgoing students.

This need for support could be identified in all phases of the exchange (preparatory phase, before exchange, during exchange and after exchange) and included measures taken in the following fields:

- Availability of information for exchange students
- Selection of students
- Flexible assessment methods
- Language preparation
- Cultural preparation
- E-coaching
- Evaluation and feedback on the exchange

Results of the study show that the incoming students are paid a lot more attention to than the outgoing students. Both the size and the structure of the organization as well as the number of exchange students, among other things, affect how students can be supported. Smaller institutions with fewer students are generally better able to support their students as well as to try new activities than bigger institutions with more exchange students. Institutional websites are the integral tool for disseminating key institutional information and for promoting institutional identities to the general public. Non-Erasmus students are generally more academically-oriented than the Erasmus students. Meeting new people, practicing a foreign language and living in a foreign country are, in turn, more important for the Erasmus students. The level of cultural and linguistic support as well as the availability of e-coaching also varies notably among the partner institutions. The lack of post-exchange support and virtual tools are also a common problem.

Students are often forgotten after the physical exchange, even though, in most cases, support and guidance are also needed in this final stage. Recognition of studies, support with the home-coming and so-called reverse culture shock as well as collecting feedback on the exchange are procedures that clearly require improvement. The provision of timely and adequate information is often considered somewhat insufficient, especially among the students. Both teachers and students have also shown interest in the pre-exchange communication and activities with one another. Continuous support and guidance from the home institution are highly appreciated by the students, but often missing at present. Culture shock or reverse culture shock, for that matter, are issues that are seldom discussed. Finally, the fact that students go abroad also to study generally requires a lot more attention. Many of the needs that both students and teachers have are more or less study-related. Recognition of studies, grading and availability of courses for exchange students are probably the top 3 concerns that students and teachers face. Also, students' access to internal services before and after the exchange is considered extremely important.

### **Support before the exchange**

Possibilities on how students can virtually prepare their physical Erasmus are manifold. While the advantage seems obvious (teachers will benefit from better prepared students, and students themselves are more productive during their Erasmus stay) real course modules,

tools and systems to facilitate the preparation of exchange students do hardly exist nowadays.

The VM-BASE project aimed to address the above mentioned need in creating orientation guidelines, codes of good practices in designing pre-selection tests and a blueprint for digital preparative courses.

### *Orientation guidelines*

Students often do not get enough information before they go on a physical Erasmus exchange. This ranges from very practical information (how to get around on campus, info on everyday life in the host institution, ...) to up-to-date information on courses they can follow at the host university.

Each university is used to address foreign students in its own way through websites or other information channels. It was not the objective of the VM-BASE project to intervene with this communication strategy. Nevertheless, some topics such as how to select a host institution for physical Erasmus exchange programme, how to acclimatise with the institution and its location before arrival, how to establish links with new international friends while keeping links with friends at home, etc. Have been addressed in the VM-BASE pilots and cases on orientation guidelines and have resulted in a set of guidelines for institutions to the benefit of their international students to be published in the projects' manual on blended mobility.

### *Pre-selection tools*

Tools and tests to assess themselves in how far they are prepared for the studies at the host institute of their choice are another possibility to enhance the advance orientation phase of exchange students. From the teachers point of view it is also important to be able to select the best students beforehand – via electronic means – and have well-prepared students that reach a certain study level for following a particular course and have the necessary language and other skills. VM-BASE therefore develops codes of good practice in designing pre-selection tests for students.

### *Preparatory courses*

Finally, the VM-BASE project investigated the concept of preliminary courses for students preparing for a physical Erasmus exchange in three subject areas: language courses (basic skills in the language of the host country), culture courses (about the history and culture of the host country, the organisation and academic traditions of the host institution) and digital literacy courses (if particular ICT systems, e.g. a digital learning environment, are in use in the host institution, that require prior training). Although such courses do already exist in most universities, they often do not yet exist in a virtual form or are not easily accessible for Erasmus students.

### *Examples*

The Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven introduced a "Virtual Buddy System" for exchange students. Already before their stay, incoming students get a virtual buddy (a local student) that will be their 'real' buddy once they arrive at the institution. As a means of communication e-mail, Skype and MSN are used. The 'buddy' guides the international student through daily life in the host country and institution and can answer practical questions, be a support for language learning and explain cultural particularities. What this buddy system certainly does not aim at, is to let the students take over the role of the international co-ordinators. Providing essential information, especially on the academic/ educational level, clearly is the task of the international co-ordinators of both the home and the host institution. The buddies play a more practical role (as well before as during the exchange) and can make the integration of the exchange student in the host institution easier. The pilot project has received mainly positive

feedback from the stakeholders involved. The institution will therefore most certainly continue the initiative after the VM-BASE project has ended. One of the major challenges of the pilot was to motivate the exchange students and to KHLeuven students to enrol and to convince them about the benefits of the system. The success of the system also highly depends on the motivation of the buddies; the human element cannot be excluded.

Another project partner, the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven is designing a course and preparation tests for a Master in Physiotherapy. In order to equalise the initial level of the knowledge of the (international) students for the Master, an online testing and learning platform is available. The course and the tests are on the K.U.Leuven platform which students can already access from their home country and allowing them to realistically test their chances to succeed for the master. In general, this tool also received positive feedback from the different stakeholders involved. The accessibility to the tool prior to the students' arrival proved to be really important. The developers addressed the issue of workload, stressing that to develop and maintain an online tool demands a lot of effort and might increase workload substantially. The importance of one person in charge who ensures continuity in the process should not be underestimated.

### **Support after the exchange**

As mentioned above, also after students come back from an exchange follow-up is desirable. Return activities aim at debriefing the student/teacher and evaluating the mobility experience, but also at reinforcing the social and content-oriented networks that have arisen during the period actual abroad.

#### *Virtual assessment and evaluation at a distance*

The VM-BASE project was not aiming at the development of new ICT tools, but rather at the effective use of existing tools helping teachers in both the host and the home institution to (virtually) evaluate and assess a stay in another institution. Those tools support common evaluation by teachers at home and in the host institution together, or can be used for evaluation when students are no longer in the foreign country, e.g. when they have failed an exam, or when they need to finish project work after their stay abroad.

#### *Virtual Alumni*

Virtual mobility can sustain contacts after leaving the host university. At the end of the physical exchange, students can keep in touch with their peers, scattered around the world, and finish their common research project, or paper work. They can network in a wider community and share their experiences with each other and with newcomers, shaping the future of European mobility schemes for teaching and learning and establishing a so-called 'Virtual Alumni' organization, to foster a life-long friendship. VM-BASE made a study on how to set up and support such a Virtual Alumni Association as a community of students and teachers who embarked in physical and virtual mobility activities. The study addresses the question, how students and teachers embarked in physical and virtual mobility activities can network and participate in a wider community after their experiences. As a result a typology of possible virtual alumni networks (institution-driven, commission-driven, user-driven and student organisation driven) was produced and three key aspects were identified to be taken into account when setting up such a network, namely: strategy, target group and infrastructure.

#### *Examples*

The "Exam Aquarium", a pilot tested out by TKK-Helsinki University of Technology, is a camera-guarded and computer-equipped room reserved for writing exams and requires

special software designed for writing exams. Teachers create the question database and can verify answers on the Internet. For (exchange) students it offers great flexibility as it allows them to reserve the time to use the exam aquarium in advance and to take exams independently and at a time suitable for themselves (e.g. even after the physical exchange).

K.U.Leuven implemented another example of support after the student exchange through the set up of a support system for oral exams for the Master of European Social Security. For students from other countries who were not able to physically attend the exams a solution was found in the set up of oral examinations at a distance, supported by web conferencing. The support unit, AVNet-KULeuven, guided the teaching team of the programme through the process of selecting the right tool, choosing a realistic scenario, and the dealing with organisational issues. Flashmeeting is a web-based conferencing tool that allows video as well as audio, which increases the interactivity of the meeting. Evaluating the experience, the stakeholders involved agreed that a distance oral exam is most suited (time-consuming) for small groups. This is the reason why this type of exam is most suited for students with re-examinations. Their idea arose that web conferencing could also be used as an alternative option for the defence of end-term papers or to guide the student throughout the program (virtual meeting hour during the week to answer additional questions)

### **E-coaching**

In the case of exchange students face-to-face coaching cannot be realised because of the big geographical distance between teachers, international relations officers, and students. However, nowadays, more and more different tools and electronic communication media emerge that can be used to support the coaching process from a distance. In VM-BASE a very broad definition of e-coaching was used. The 'e'-part of this term stands for 'electronic' and obviously refers to the fact that the coaching is done through technology. With the 'coaching'-part we refer to the (personal) guidance that is needed in the whole process. There cannot be ICT in education without considering and valuing the human aspect. A teacher and/or tutor is needed, to make ICT supported learning possible. It is not so much about the transfer of knowledge or content but more and more about creating the context for it.

The use of ICT in education (e-learning, virtual mobility,...) does not mean that the teacher automatically gets replaced by a tool. On the contrary, the teacher remains particularly relevant, but in a new and different way. The use of ICT is as such innovative but it also brings about a fundamental shift in the way of teaching: the expert/instructor becomes a moderator/coach.

When preparing for an exchange, students need reliable and clear feedback on their questions. When taking a course virtually, they need feedback to be able to estimate their learning progress and to plan the next learning activities. Finally, after a virtual assessment, they need feedback to assess their learning outcomes. Examples of e-coaching methods are therefore manifold: the previously mentioned buddy-system for preparatory support, e-portfolios or weblogs during the stay abroad, a virtual consulting hour of a teacher using chat, a moderated discussion forum, etc. Also peer-assessment and self-assessment is possible when complemented with e-coaching.

In the pilots different tools and e-coaching methods have been tried out. The human factor stands out as being one of the most important aspects. The success of the pilots depends on whether or not the presence of a coach can be felt (even if there is only minor steering of the coach.).

### *Example*

Laurea University of Applied Sciences set up a course, 'Go Abroad' in the framework of the VM-BASE project to support outgoing students. The learning method is a combination of

contact sessions and interactive online guidance. In addition to practical information, online discussions between students and faculty and student diaries/weblogs are used to support learning not only before but also during the exchange. The stakeholders felt that the 'Go Abroad' course has deepened the learning experience of some students remarkably. It was however clear that some students liked online support better than others, and there should be a possibility to modify the course according to the needs of the students. Benefits identified comprised the decreased workload of international coordinators and the harmonisation of the information and support for international student exchange and work placement in the institution.

## **Conclusion**

Blended mobility opens up new possibilities for exchange students to better prepare themselves before their physical exchange and to ensure a solid follow-up after their return. The VM-BASE project has examined, developed and implemented procedures of blended mobility consisting of several pilots for the preparatory and return initiatives for physical Erasmus exchanges. The pilots carried out focused on the orientation and selection of students, preliminary courses for students preparing for a physical exchange and examination facilities at the end or even after the exchange. Next to the pilots the needs- and feasibility of a Virtual Alumni Association for Erasmus Students has been investigated.

All resulting concrete guidelines, validated procedures and recommendations for blended mobility activities and good practices in e-coaching have been gathered in a manual addressing students, teachers, international relation officers and higher education institutions in general.

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