



Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges

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Abstract: This paper was presented during the Online Educa Berlin conference, presenting VM-BASE and the different pilots developed withing the project.

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EXTENDING AND SUPPORTING PHYSICAL STUDENT MOBILITY THROUGH VIRTUAL MOBILITY: THE VM-BASE EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

In 2007 the 20th anniversary of the ERASMUS programme is celebrated. ERASMUS has been and remains a key factor in the internationalisation of the European higher education systems. Despite the evident success of mobility actions, research findings have shown there remain a number of opportunities for improvement.¹ In the following we want to look at the possibilities of extending, supporting and improving physical student mobility through virtual mobility.

The VM-BASE project (Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges) examines, develops and implements procedures of 'blended mobility', in which aspects of physical and virtual mobility are combined in order to maximize the advantages of both approaches. The project focuses on virtual preparatory and return initiatives for physical Erasmus exchanges, supporting teachers in coaching at a distance (e-coaching) and considering the local, regional, national and European aspects of such

¹ More information on this issue can be found in following papers:

- Op de Beeck I., Bijmens H., Michielsens C. & Van Petegem W., *Extending and Supporting Physical Student Mobility through Virtual Mobility*. Proceedings of the 18th SPACE Annual Conference "Learning by Sharing in Higher Education, Nicosia, Cyprus, March 21-24, 2007. 11 pages on CD-ROM.

- Mrose N., Haywood J., Michielsens C., Op de Beeck I. & Van Petegem W. *Virtual support for Mobile Students – What ICT can do to enhance Student Mobility*. Proceedings of the EUNIS 2007 conference "Innovation for European Era", Grenoble, France, June 26-29, 2007. 13 pages on CD-ROM.

'blended mobility' actions. To this end several pilots are set up within the framework of the project.

Virtual support *before* the exchange

Preparatory virtual mobility actions can support students at a social, cultural and linguistic level, but also with regard to for example the course content. Possibilities on how students could virtually prepare their physical Erasmus are manifold. However, real course modules, tools and systems to facilitate the preparation of exchange students do hardly exist nowadays.

The VM-BASE project aims to address this need and wants to create orientation guidelines, to develop codes of good practices in designing pre-selection tests and to create 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 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 is not the objective of the VM-BASE project to intervene with this communication strategy. Nevertheless, some common topics about studying abroad (e.g. how to select a host institution for a physical Erasmus exchange program, how to acclimatise with the institution and its location before arrival, how to establish links with new international friends, etc.) will result in a set of guidelines for institutions to the benefit of their international students.

Within VM-BASE pilot courses such as the "Virtual Window to Study Abroad" (University of Tartu) (online course combined with forum on which experiences among former and future outgoing students can be shared) and the blended course "Go Abroad" (Laurea University of Applied Sciences) are developed to prepare outgoing students for their physical exchange.

Another approach is the "Virtual Buddy System" which will be introduced at the Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven. 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. The functioning of this system and its effects on the incoming students and their performance at KHLeuven will be evaluated.

Pre-selection tools

Students going on an exchange could also benefit from tools and tests to assess themselves in how far they are prepared for the studies at the host institute of their choice. VM-BASE wishes to develop codes of good practice in designing such pre-selection tests for students

The Katholieke Universiteit Leuven is for example 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. It allows them to realistically test their chances to succeed for the master. Eventually, the aim is to have all modules that are given in the bachelor-years available for international students.

Preparatory courses

The VM-BASE project considers not only language courses as being beneficial for exchange students but aims at developing a blueprint for 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.

In VM-BASE the Faculty of Geoinformatics at the University of West-Hungary is developing a multilingual survival kit in Geographic Information Systems, which will be a course in a virtual learning environment for exchange students, preparing them for the technology used during practical and field work. The main language of the course will be English but the special technical terms and the description of the terms used in GIS, surveying and field measurement will be provided in three different languages (English/German/Hungarian).

Virtual support *after* the exchange

Not only before students leave for an exchange support is necessary, 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 abroad.

Virtual assessment and evaluation at a distance

VM-BASE aims 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 could support common evaluation by teachers at home and in the host institution together, or could 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.

In this respect, the suitability of an “exam aquarium” is tested at Helsinki University of Technology². The exam aquarium 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

² Exam aquariums are already used at several universities in Finland. For example at Lappeenranta University of Technology: http://www.lut.fi/en/contacts/exam_aquarium.html

the exam aquarium in advance and to take exams independently and at a time suitable for themselves (e.g. even after the physical exchange).

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 also establish a so-called 'Virtual Alumni' organization, to foster a life-long friendship."³

VM-BASE will make a study on how to set up and support such a Virtual Alumni Association and will look at how students and teachers that embarked in physical and virtual mobility activities can network in a wider community after their experience. Alumni could share experiences with each other and with newcomers, and help to shape the future of European mobility schemes for teaching and learning.

Case studies, like e.g. the Erasmus Mundus Alumni Association (EMA)⁴, the alumni community of the Open University in the UK⁵, the Alumni Society of the European Student Network⁶ can help addressing questions such as: Who are the alumni? What is their profile? What are they interested in? How can ICT tools help? What are the big challenges and success factors?

Conclusion

The VM-BASE project addresses the topic of virtual support before and after physical Erasmus exchanges, and some of the key issues that need to be solved before really being able to implement virtual support.

The major activity of the project consists of several pilots focusing 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 need and feasibility of a Virtual Alumni Association for Erasmus students is being investigated.

Students, teachers, international relation officers as well as higher education institutions in general will benefit from the results of VM-BASE which will be collected in

³ Bijnens, H., Boussemaere, M., Rajagopal, K., Op de Beeck, I. and W. Van Petegem (eds.). 2006. *European Cooperation in Education through Virtual Mobility. A best-practice manual*. Leuven: EuroPACE ivzw. p. 34. http://www.being-mobile.net/pdf/BM_handbook_final.pdf

⁴ The Erasmus Mundus Alumni Association (EMA), which was launched in June 2006 by the European Commission together with student representatives from all Erasmus Mundus programmes. The association is free to join for Erasmus Mundus students and graduates. The website currently offers a searchable database of (former) students in which they can register and identify fellow alumni, a message board for communication between alumni, an online newsletter, etc. For the coming years student committees are working to make available even more services (e.g. bi-annual magazine, career section,...). <http://www.erasmusmundus-alumni.eu/>

⁵ Open University Alumni. <http://www.esn.org/alumni/>

⁶ Erasmus Student Network Alumni Society. <http://www.esn.org/alumni/>

a manual with concrete guidelines, validated procedures and recommendations for blended mobility activities and a manual on good practices in e-coaching.

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More information available at <http://vm-base.europace.org/>.