



Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges

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EXTENDING AND SUPPORTING PHYSICAL STUDENT MOBILITY THROUGH VIRTUAL MOBILITY

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Abstract

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. Moreover, one of the biggest challenges left is that many students simply cannot enjoy the benefits of the programme because of financial reasons.

Virtual mobility can offer a valuable alternative here as it makes possible that students take part in courses at other universities without having to leave their home university. Virtual mobility can furthermore be used to prepare and follow-up physical mobility to enrich the latter and make it even more effective and fruitful.

Procedures of 'blended mobility', in which aspects of physical and virtual mobility are combined in order to maximize the advantages of both approaches to student and teacher mobility across Europe should be further examined, developed and implemented.

In this paper we will gather results of projects that studied key issues of implementing virtual mobility. We will also look more in detail at the VM-BASE project (Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges). VM-BASE focuses on virtual preparatory and return initiatives for physical Erasmus exchanges, supporting teachers in coaching at a distance (e-coaching) for both preparatory and return initiatives in blended format and considering the local, regional, national and European considerations of such 'blended mobility' actions. The project officially started 1 October 2006 and will run for two years.

Key Words: *virtual mobility, Erasmus, student mobility, blended mobility, internationalisation*

1 Introduction

In 2007 the 20th anniversary of the Erasmus programme is celebrated. The Erasmus programme is most probably one of the best-known actions of the European Commission, encouraging student as well as teacher mobility, and promoting transnational cooperation projects among universities across Europe. Erasmus has been and remains a key factor in the internationalisation of the European higher education systems. Currently 2199 European higher education institutions in 31 countries are participating in the Erasmus programme.¹ 87 percent of all mobile students in European programmes in 2002/03 were Erasmus students.² 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 and it has reached the status of a social and cultural phenomenon. The months spent abroad are a turning point in the lives of thousands of individuals.

Despite the evident success of mobility actions, research findings have shown there remain a number of opportunities for improvement. Moreover, one of the biggest challenges left is that many students simply cannot enjoy the benefits of the programme because of financial reasons as the Erasmus grant often remains far too low especially for students from less favourable financial backgrounds.³

In this paper we want to look at the possibilities of extending, supporting and improving physical student mobility through virtual mobility.

2 Virtual mobility extending and supporting physical mobility

At the elearningeuropa portal virtual mobility is defined as “the use of information and communication technologies to obtain the same benefits as one would have with physical mobility but without the need to travel”.⁴ Virtual mobility thus can on the one hand offer a valuable alternative for physical mobility as it enables students to take part in courses at other universities without having to leave their home university and hence without the financial implications. On the other hand virtual mobility can be used to prepare, support and follow-up physical mobility to enrich the latter and to make it even more effective and fruitful.

It was already indicated above that research findings in this area show a number of opportunities for improving student mobility experiences. For example, the final report of the 2002 Eureka project⁵ performed by the European student association AEGEE gives amongst others following recommendations:

- Erasmus students could be prepared already at their home universities in “outgoing seminars” as well as they could exchange experiences in “return seminars”
- Every student should have the right to attend a language course that enables him/her to follow the academic programme.
- Short term exchanges and virtual exchanges could be innovations.

The report of the international seminar on Bologna and the challenges of e-learning and distance education also indicates that “virtual mobility must be used to enrich and support physical mobility by better preparing it, providing effective follow-up means for

it, and offering the possibility to stay in contact with the home institution while abroad. It can also offer (at least part of) the benefits of physical mobility for those who are otherwise unable to attend courses abroad.”⁶

Furthermore, it is in line with the findings of the cEVU project:⁷ “Although student mobility is increasing, not every student will be able to spend a part of his or her studies at another European university. By distance learning, however, students can take part in courses at all of the other universities in the partnership without leaving their home university. Conversely, exchange students can keep in touch with their home university, and even take courses at home, while studying abroad. (..) this virtual mobility can also prepare and follow-up physical mobility (...). More over, such virtual campus will also enable flexible combinations of rather traditional distance learning and technology supported presence learning.”

To summarize: virtual Erasmus or virtual mobility can thus both include taking courses abroad while staying at the home university and vice-versa and/or complementing the existing physical Erasmus exchange programmes with virtual preparatory and follow-up activities. Through the use of ICT, students and teachers can experience international exchanges of expertise while staying at home.

3 Supporting the mobile student of tomorrow

The findings above show that procedures of ‘blended mobility’ or ‘blended Erasmus’, in which aspects of physical and virtual mobility are combined in order to maximize the advantages of both approaches to student and teacher mobility across Europe should be further examined, developed and implemented.

What can higher education institutions do to support the mobile student of tomorrow? In the following paragraphs we will look more into detail at results of projects that studied key issues of virtual mobility. More in particular we will describe activities of the VM-BASE project (Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges). This project officially started 1 October 2006 and will run for two years. The overall goal of VM-BASE is exactly to further develop and implement procedures of this ‘blended mobility’. The project focuses on virtual preparatory and return initiatives for physical Erasmus exchanges, supporting teachers in coaching at a distance (e-coaching) for both preparatory and return initiatives in blended format. Results of the project will be gathered in an extensive manual on ‘blended mobility’, with concrete and validated procedures and recommendations for blended mobility activities at institutional, network and European level.

One can think of course of virtual support *during* the physical Erasmus exchange as well as virtual mobility activities replacing the physical Erasmus. The online manual “How to teach internationally from your own desk?” created in the framework of the REVE project can offer in this respect inspiration for teachers that wish to implement virtual mobility into their course.⁸ The manual elaborates on several types of virtual Erasmus courses and gives practical examples of courses with best practices, information on working collaboration models and implementation procedures including aspects such as localisation, accreditation and agreements.

In the following paragraphs we will however focus on possible virtual support activities for the phases *before* and *after* a physical exchange.

3.1 Virtual support before the physical Erasmus exchange

Real course modules, tools and systems to facilitate the preparation of students from their home country for a stay abroad do hardly exist nowadays. Preparatory virtual mobility actions could 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: virtual introductory language and culture courses, eventually also digital literacy courses, virtual pre-selection tests, orientation modules, etc.

The needs analysis performed in the framework of the ESMOS project⁹ recommends following improvements for the phases before the exchange:

- support on content of courses, selection of courses, learning culture
- information on cultural matters (cultural shock (phases a student goes through) through a seminar on intercultural learning or by an online course
- information on everyday life (accommodation, transport system, etc. e.g. through online information or by linking students preparing for a stay abroad with students who returned
- language courses (e.g. through online courses or face to face seminars)

The impact of these preparatory activities on students seems obvious: they will be well-prepared, focused and more productive during their Erasmus visit. As students will be better prepared teachers will benefit as well.

The VM-BASE project aims to address the above-mentioned needs and wants to create a blueprint for digital preparative courses, to develop codes of good practices in designing pre-selection test and to create orientation guidelines.

3.1.1 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.

Outcomes of the Victorious project show that almost all students had sought information about their host university on the Internet before they left their home university. (...) In some universities, good information was available on the web, while in some others, there was no information at all.¹⁰

It is thus important for institutions to have complete and up to date websites with relevant academic and practical data for all students, including incoming students.

Each university is used to address foreign students in its own way through websites or other information channels, in a language they prefer. 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 while

keeping links with friends at home, etc.) will result in a set of guidelines for institutions shared by all partners in the project to the benefit of their international students.

3.1.2 Course information

Once students are abroad, they often find that they are unable to follow the courses selected prior to their departure (courses simply do not exist any longer, courses appear to be only available in the local language, it is not possible to attend courses because of overlapping timetables, etc.). This problem is attributable to unsuitable courses being selected by the student and inadequate or outdated information about courses on university websites.

When abroad it proves to be very time consuming to rectify the situation and select new courses. Sometimes it is even not possible anymore for the student to get ECTS¹¹ recognition for the newly selected courses. Online information on courses that mobile students can take could easily be provided beforehand. Institutions should ensure that correct information is available (on their websites) before the students start their virtual or physical courses abroad.

Recommendations given by the participants of the Virtual Mobility Forum¹² in this respect are (1) to provide a searchable database of courses and programs, which fulfils the ECTS-label requirements (2) to make sure (course) information and website are not only be available in the local language but also at least in English (3) to put information not only on the university website but also test if the information is available via the European portals PLOTEUS¹³ and Study-in-Europe¹⁴.

3.1.3 Pre-selection tools & student selection

Students going on an exchange could benefit also from tools and tests to assess themselves in how far they are prepared for the studies at the host institute of their choice. This is related to practical issues like the use of technology (e.g. on-line questionnaires, on-line audio and video conferences, chat sessions), ways for feedback and remedial exercises, validation and accreditation procedures (if necessary), language effects, etc. VM-BASE wishes to develop codes of good practice in designing such pre-selection tests for students

From the teachers point of view it is also important to have well-prepared students that reach a certain study level for following a particular course and that have the necessary language and other skills. In this respect it could be very useful to have a procedure to select the best students. Student selection can happen via electronic means, such as videoconferencing or webconferencing, allowing teaching staff to put a face on a candidate and to check social and language skills (see also paragraph 4.2).

3.1.4 Preparatory courses

The final report of the UK Socrates Erasmus Council on Experience Erasmus reveals that two thirds of the institutions considered that competence in the host language is

important for Erasmus students. Language training was provided in the host country in many cases. However, relatively little language training was provided in the host country. (...) Arrangements for or provision of language training is not sufficient not always well known or not appropriate (...) There should be wider provision of and better publicised, language courses in the home institution, taught as a tool across all disciplines.¹⁵

Where most institutions do offer language courses, the expectation amongst students arises that other services would be provided in English too. However, findings of the VICTORIOUS project show that exchange students have problems accessing and using (digital) libraries and virtual learning environments. Technical guidelines and rules are rarely provided in foreign languages. Moreover, differences in systems between universities means that the students need to learn some skills anew, e.g. information literacy skills. Exchange students “need information and access to the university systems as soon as they arrive, indeed ideally before arrival at the host university so that they do not feel cut off and isolated.”¹⁶

The VM-BASE project therefore 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, and the structure, 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 language courses, culture courses and digital literacy 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 this respect it could be interesting to look at the existing ‘buddy system’ in which a local student guides the international student through daily life at the host institution and in the host country. A ‘buddy’ cannot only answer practical questions, but could also be a support for language learning and explain some cultural particularities. It should be further examined how this buddy system could be supported by online tools.

3.2 *Virtual support after the physical Erasmus exchange*

Not only before students leave on 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 actual period abroad.

3.2.1 *Virtual assessment and evaluation at a distance*

Ways for virtual assessment and evaluation at a distance, in combination with physical attendance examinations, at the end of an Erasmus stay, or eventually when already back in the home institution are important.

The VM-BASE project is 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 evaluate and to 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 on an exam, or when they need to finish project work after their stay abroad.

3.2.2 *Virtual Alumni*

The final report of the UK Socrates Erasmus Council on Experience Erasmus indicates there is a big gap in information about Erasmus students after they have graduated. Former Erasmus students were identified as the greatest resource of the Erasmus programme. They could be a valuable factor in increasing student mobility. They are the best resources to entice others, disseminate and publicise the advantages of the Erasmus experience. The problem of locating alumni was addressed. There is a need to compile a list of past students. An alumni database was thought to be an important tool in life long learning, as it would encourage graduates to remain in contact with their former institution and perhaps even return to take refresher courses. The alumni database being developed within the framework of Erasmus Mundus Action 4 was thought to be a possible model on which to base this. (...) Institutions' arrangements for keeping in touch with their former Erasmus students appeared to be patchy at best and institutions should address this.¹⁷

The Victorious project noted in this respect that most students lost their 'connection' to their host institution after they had returned home.¹⁸

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."¹⁹

VM-BASE will make 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. Alumni could share experiences with each other and with newcomers, and help to shape the future of European mobility schemes for teaching and learning.

The study will address the question how students and teachers embarked in physical and virtual mobility activities can network and participate in a wider community after their experience. Case studies, like e.g. the alumni community of the Open University in the UK²⁰, the Alumni Society of the European Student Network²¹ could help in answering the most important questions: Who are the alumni? What is their profile? What are they interested in? Why do they want to network? How can ICT tools help? What are the big challenges? Can we identify success factors?

3.3 E-coaching

Last but not least, the VM-BASE project will pay in all project activities particular attention to coaching, or better e-coaching of teachers and students participating in mobility activities and wants to support teachers (and students) in coaching at a distance (or e-coaching) for both preparatory and return initiatives in a blended format.

4 Example: virtual support for the Erasmus Mundus Master programmes

In the following paragraph we take a look at two examples of virtual support activities for the Erasmus Mundus Master programmes.

4.1 What is Erasmus Mundus?

The Erasmus Mundus Programme is defined as a 'co-operation and mobility programme in the field of higher education'. The Erasmus Mundus page on the website of the European Union cites: "the programme is intended to strengthen European co-operation and international links in higher education by supporting high-quality European Masters Courses, by enabling students and visiting scholars from around the world to engage in postgraduate study at European universities, as well as by encouraging the outgoing mobility of European students and scholars towards third countries."²²

Physical mobility is a key factor in these Master's programmes. Students need to spend part of the study period in two different participating universities. This physical mobility can be complemented with virtual mobility activities during the study period.

4.2 Student selection²³

One particular virtual mobility activity that supports the physical mobility in this international Master's programme is the use of user-friendly communication tools for the selection of students. Students accepted in Erasmus Mundus programmes receive substantial grants from the European Commission during their studies. The organisers of the programmes are hence under the obligation to select the best students for their programme. To get a better picture of the capabilities of potential students, traditional paper-based selection has been complemented with virtual communication.

K.U.Leuven tested this idea in the framework of the REVE project²⁴. In one of their Erasmus Mundus Master Programmes (EMM in Adapted Physical Activity²⁵), the coordinators have chosen for a two-tier selection procedure. The first phase being based on a traditional paper application, the second phase including a virtual selection interview for the withheld candidates using FlashMeeting²⁶, a webconferencing tool developed by the Open University UK.

The teachers and staff members that took part in this pilot selection procedure were very satisfied with the results. The introduction of webconference-based selection answered a growing need with the programme organisers who were increasingly

confronted with the shortcomings of paper-based selection. Especially the assessment of students' language skills played a key role in choosing this methodology.

4.3 Erasmus Mundus Alumni Association²⁷

In June 2006 the European Commission together with student representatives from all Erasmus Mundus programmes launched the Erasmus Mundus Alumni Association (EMA). The association is free to join for Erasmus Mundus students and graduates. The website currently offers Erasmus Mundus students 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. Amongst others, all Erasmus Mundus alumni will be given the opportunity to create a prestigious forwarding e-mail address, featuring the ".eu" domain, a bi-annual magazine will be created, and a fully up-to-date and easy to access career section will be available on the website with information on jobs, traineeships, internships, career fairs, etc..

5 Conclusion

Despite the evident success of (physical) mobility actions, research has shown there remain a number of opportunities for improvement. In this paper we have examined how virtual mobility can extend and support physical student mobility.

Virtual mobility can offer a valuable alternative for physical exchanges as it enables students to take part in courses at other universities without having to leave their home university. Virtual mobility can furthermore be used to prepare and follow-up physical mobility to enrich the latter and make it even more effective and fruitful.

Procedures of 'blended mobility', in which aspects of physical and virtual mobility are combined in order to maximize the advantages of both approaches to student and teacher mobility across Europe should be further examined, developed and implemented.

The VM-BASE project focuses on virtual preparatory and return initiatives for physical Erasmus exchanges, supporting teachers in coaching at a distance (e-coaching) for both preparatory and return initiatives in blended format. The paper elaborated first on virtual support activities *before* the physical exchange, such as orientation guidelines, course information, pre-selection tools and student selection, and preparatory courses. An example of webconference-based selection of Erasmus Mundus programmes was presented. Furthermore, this paper looked deeper into virtual support activities *after* the physical exchange, such as virtual assessment and evaluation at a distance, and the idea of a Virtual Alumni Association for exchange students. The Erasmus Mundus Alumni Association could here be taken as an example.

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More information on the project is available at <http://vm-base.europace.org/>.

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