



Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges

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1 INTRODUCTION

This report is carried out within the framework of the VM-BASE project. VM-BASE is an acronym for Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges. As such, the project wants to investigate the possibilities of supporting students virtually before and after their (physical) exchange. The objective of this report is to identify students' and teachers' needs and requirements concerning international student exchange.

The report is divided into two sections: (1) our findings about the students' needs and (2) our findings about the teachers' needs. Students' needs are investigated as a whole, whereas teachers' needs are investigated from two different perspectives: teachers' needs concerning incoming students and teachers' needs concerning outgoing students.

The exchange period is separated in four different phases, which can be identified as following: a) preparatory phase: when a student starts to think about an exchange and search for information, b) before exchange: when a student's application is approved and he/she starts to prepare the actual exchange, c) during exchange: when a student is on the (physical) exchange and d) after exchange: when a student returns back to his/her home institution.

The study methodology includes a literature search and information gathered through questionnaires, interviews and other existing sources at the VM-BASE partner institutions. The list includes Helsinki University of Technology (TKK), Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Catholic University of Leuven (K.U.Leuven), Catholic Polytechnic Leuven (KHLeuven), University of Edinburgh (UofE), University of Tartu (UT), University of West Hungary, Faculty of Geoinformatics (NYME-GEO), EuroPACE ivzw, Coimbra Group, ESU – The European Students' Union and BEST – Board of European Students of Technology.

2 OUR FINDINGS ABOUT THE STUDENTS' NEEDS

Students' motivation for international student exchange seems to vary substantially. According to the Erasmus Student Network Survey (2006), 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. Either way, it is important to understand that motivation plays an important part, when analyzing the needs and expectations of international exchange students.

Moreover, it is important to understand that students, who go to university as the route to a good job, rather than as a cultural and transforming experience, are unlikely to be motivated to study abroad simply in order to get to know a different culture, meet new friends and learn another language. According to Amillo et al., however, this seems to be a driver that is much more strongly valued by the designers of international programs than by the students themselves.

On the other hand, there are also various personal and institutional barriers that represent obstacles to international mobility. Even though not all barriers are of equal importance and not all affect all students in the same way, financial barriers are still, for many students, the major deterrent to study abroad. (Amillo et al. 2005) This also becomes evident in our interviews with the students. Table 1 presents a summary of students' needs and requirements concerning international student exchange.

Preparatory phase	Before exchange	During exchange	After exchange
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More information on both practical and academic matters (in English) - Guarantee of financial security during the exchange - Possibility to hear other students' experiences on student exchange - More support and guidance in study-related issues at home institution - Facilitation of the application procedure - 'Complete international student exchange packages' (courses, funding, accommodation, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More information on both practical and academic matters (in English) - Possibility to hear other students' experiences on student exchange - Contacts with local students and/or teachers before arrival - Language preparation and testing - Cultural preparation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More information on both practical and academic matters (in English) - Counseling / tutoring by the international coordinators and/or teachers of host institution as well as by fellow students - More courses in English - More international teachers and researchers to create an international atmosphere - (More) local language studies - Information about taking exams; possibilities to resit exams - Information about possibilities for an internship after the exchange - Continuous support and guidance from home institution - Help with culture shock 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Information about possibilities to resit exams - Information about possibilities for an internship after the exchange - Recognition of studies; simplification and speed-up of the procedure, information about the 'conversion tables' - Possibility to share own experiences on student exchange - Help with reverse culture shock

1. Students' needs.

In general, students also seem to require more guidance from and communication with their teachers. (EuroPACE. 2006) This concerns not only the international exchange students but all students. The use of ICT is another factor that should be investigated more. According to Valjus, the effective use of ICT requires that all partners have the

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equipment, time, skills and willingness to use new technology. ICT is a tool which in some projects brings considerable benefits, whereas in some other projects its use is not at all relevant. According to van der Wende, students want ICT mainly for convenience. As such, it does not have any intrinsic value.

The availability and accessibility of information in different phases of the exchange seems to be something that most international exchange students accentuate. More information is required on both practical and academic matters (in English). Another thing that most exchange students accentuate is the support and guidance given by their home institution. At present, students are generally more satisfied with the support and guidance given by their host institution than those given by their home institution.

Tutoring (buddy system) and various activities organized during the exchange are highly appreciated by all incoming students. The support and guidance given by other exchange students is also considered important. Students clearly want to share their experiences with and ask for advice from one another. Even according to the Erasmus Student Network Survey (2006), students most often ask either other exchange students (51 %), local students (50 %) or the International Office (50 %) for help when facing problems. Former exchange students are also important motivators, especially in the preparatory phase.

The small number of courses offered in English is one of the major shortages students face during international exchange. Sometimes the number of courses is not even equivalent with the one given at one's home institution. At worst, the language may change in the midst of course. Thus, institutions do need to invest in developing their English language programs. The trend that students are likely to choose English-language courses is clear, although multilingualism is one of the unique features of Europe. According to Tempus Public Foundation, it is also essential to invite international lecturers and include teaching staff mobility while creating English-language courses.

Recognition of studies, in turn, seems to be an eternal problem among all international exchange students. According to the Erasmus Student Network Survey (2006), about half of the respondents (52 %) had all their courses recognized by their home university. 28 % had most of the courses recognized, 13 % only a few and 7 % did not receive any recognition. The procedure for recognizing studies is both time-consuming and complicated. Furthermore, there is seldom guarantee of success. Both students and teachers seem to demand for more international student exchange agreements in order to simplify and speed up this procedure. Students also have a growing need for support and guidance on study-related issues, in general.

Many incoming students would like to make contact with the local students and teachers already before their arrival. This kind of virtual mobility before the exchange is considered to support, not to replace, the physical exchange. Language and cultural preparation is also something, for which there is clearly a need. Students are seldom prepared for the culture and/or reverse culture shock. According to Tempus Public Foundation, the role of intercultural and language preparation courses in increasing mobility is, however, essential. Incoming students do need help when they arrive and

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some information to survive. There is also a necessity to monitor and evaluate these courses and to amend them to reflect the real needs of students.

After the exchange, in turn, many students seem to have a need to share their experiences on the exchange. This is also something that should be taken more advantage of e.g. in the cultural preparation of future exchange students. Student travel and living abroad can be expensive, so it is definitely worth investigating how students' experiences, while they are abroad or once they have returned, can be utilized to bring some benefits to students at the home institution. Some simple ideas are e.g. to have teams of students abroad and at home working together on a project or as aforementioned; to have returning exchange students taking care of the cultural preparation. (Amillo et al. 2005)

3 OUR FINDINGS ABOUT THE TEACHERS' NEEDS

3.1 Teachers' needs concerning incoming students

In general, teachers seem to be quite dissatisfied with the information provision, as far as incoming students are concerned: most teachers would like to get more information about and to get to know their students already before the actual exchange. Also students have shown interest in this kind of pre-exchange communication with local teachers and students. The challenge, which pedagogy in a diverse and multicultural classroom represents for teachers, has also been noticed. Teachers clearly need help with the cultural preparation. More information about the teacher's role in supporting incoming students is also required. More teachers' needs concerning incoming exchange students are summarized in table 2.

Preparatory phase	Before exchange	During exchange	After exchange
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cultural preparation: pedagogy in a diverse and multicultural classroom - Information about the teacher's role in case of problems during the exchange - Less bureaucracy in the selection procedure - Clarification of the roles and responsibilities of students, teachers and international coordinators at home/host institution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General information about the incoming students (number of students, level of English, knowledge of the field of study, cultural background, etc.) - Contacts with the incoming students before arrival - Provision of timely and adequate information so that students can prepare their study plans (in cooperation with the home and host institution) - Students' access to internal services before arrival - Language preparation for students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Language support for students, customized according to the students' skill level - Continuous feedback from students - Help with grading; information about the 'conversion tables' used at student's home institution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'International mentorship network' - Students to market the exchange program he/she has attended - Evaluation and feedback of the exchange - Information about possibilities to resit exams

2. Teachers' needs concerning incoming students.

According to most teachers, incoming students generally seem to have a bigger need for support and guidance than outgoing students. Some also tend to demand or expect special treatment. According to the Erasmus Student Network Survey (2006), approximately one out of ten of the respondents (11.5 %) believed that exchange students were treated favorably. This was mostly because of their lower language skills that they were given more attention to during courses. On the other hand, 8 % of respondents also stated that local students were treated favorably. This came up in e.g. differentiated prices of accommodation, voting rights at the campus, access to lectures, use of university facilities, provision of information, discount on transportation, services and meals.

The linguistic preparation and support of students is also emphasized by several teachers. According to some of our interviewees, students' language and/or ICT skills are not always at the expected level. This is partly a consequence of the fact that no language certificates are usually required. Some exchange students also tend to resist teaching methods they are not familiar with. According to some of our interviewees, this could perhaps be prevented with proper cultural preparation at the host institution. Also, if teachers could make contact with and get to know their students already

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before the exchange, they could perhaps prepare incoming students better for the local manners.

Students' evaluation and feedback on the exchange is highly valued by most teachers. Feedback is welcome both during and after the exchange. Most teachers are also eager to keep in contact with the students after the exchange. Some of our interviewees even suggested creating an international mentorship network, a kind of alumni organization, for the purpose. Through the network, teachers and entire institutions could also strengthen their cooperation with the industrial life. Another thing teachers seem to wish for is that students would market the exchange program he/she has attended after the exchange.

3.2 Teachers' needs concerning outgoing students

In general, teachers seem to have more needs and requirements concerning incoming than outgoing exchange students. According to some of our interviewees, outgoing students can sometimes be so independent that they hardly need any support and/or guidance. On the other hand, most teachers also agree that they can be important motivators or demotivators, when students are thinking about study abroad and, therefore, their role should not be underestimated. Teachers' needs concerning outgoing exchange students are summarized in table 3.

Preparatory phase	Before exchange	During exchange	After exchange
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- More information about different possibilities to study abroad; information on courses- More international student exchange agreements- Preparation for credit transfer	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Provision of timely and adequate information so that students can prepare their study plans (in cooperation with the home and host institution)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Better (virtual) connection with students abroad	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Students to provide information on good practice at the host institution- Help with grading; information about the 'conversion tables' used at student's home institution- Information about possibilities to resit exams

3. Teachers' needs concerning outgoing students.

Teachers' needs concerning outgoing exchange students generally seem to concentrate in the following three phases: preparatory phase, before exchange and after exchange. During exchange, instead, students are considered to be more on their own or at the host institution's responsibility. Better (virtual) connection during exchange is, however, something that both students and teachers seem to wish for. The support and guidance given by the home institution is highly valued by the students. Teachers do it, perhaps, for more academic reasons.

Teachers generally seem eager to assist their students with the exchange start-up. As aforementioned, they are both important motivators and information providers for the outgoing exchange students, especially in the preparatory phase. Before the exchange, in turn, they can help students with the study planning. Students are often also more willing to contact teachers they know than someone in the International Relations Office. When both the home and the host institution are involved in the study planning, also the recognition of studies can be considered to ease off. All this requires, however, equal information delivery. At present, it often seems that teachers are forgotten in this context.

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After the exchange, recognition of studies and credit transfer seem to be the main issue for both students and teachers. Teachers need help with grading and information about the 'conversion tables', whereas students are more interested in ensuring the smooth credit transfer process. Teachers' interest in getting more information about the local grading systems and the potential grading differences between home and host institution is based on the fact that teachers want all their students to be treated equally. No under- or over-grading for anyone. In turn, both students and teachers are interested in getting more information about alternative assessment methods and possibilities to resit exams. This is perhaps an area, where ICT could be exploited more in the future.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Students' motivation for international student exchange varies substantially. Erasmus students are generally less academically-oriented, but more engaged in non-formal skills development than non-Erasmus students. Students, who go to university as the route to a good job, rather than as a cultural and transforming experience, are also unlikely to be motivated to study abroad simply in order to get to know a different culture, meet new friends and learn another language. Either way, it is quite obvious that motivation plays an important part, as far as students' needs are concerned.

Provision of timely and adequate information is something that both students and teachers highly appreciate. Both have also shown interest in the pre-exchange communication and activities with one another. Especially teachers are eager to get to know their students already before the arrival. After the exchange, contacts are mostly kept up through alumni organizations and suchlike. Students' commitment to the alumni activities is, however, often poor. Contacts with other (exchange) students are valued more.

Continuous support and guidance from the home institution are highly valued by the students, but often missing at present. Students have the feeling that they are pretty much on their own during and that nobody cares, while they are abroad on the exchange. Therefore, communication with the home institution can be surprisingly important and should be paid more attention to.

Cultural and linguistic preparation is also needed according to both students and teachers. Culture shock or reverse culture shock, for that matter, are issues that are seldom discussed. The linguistic preparation and support of students are, in turn, emphasized by several teachers. At present, students' language skills are not always at the expected level, which is partly a consequence of the fact that no language certificates are required. Also students seem to appreciate language testing, at least, to some extent.

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.

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