



Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges

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

Document title: VM-BASE Overview of state-of-the-art in virtual exchange support measures

Date of issue: August 31st 2007

Version: v0.3

Author(s): Ulla Rintala

Contributors to the document
(incl. quality review): Anna-Kaarina Kairamo

Contact name: Ulla Rintala

Organisation: TKK

Address: P.O. Box 8000, FIN-02015 TKK, Finland

Telephone: +358 50 544 2957

Email: ulla.rintala@tkk.fi

Number of pages: 13

Abstract: Overview of state-of-the-art in virtual exchange support measures (WP4)

Confidentiality status: Partners only



Socrates
Minerva

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 appearing

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION	2
2	MEASURES FOR INCOMING STUDENTS.....	3
2.1	General information	3
2.2	Information available for the students.....	4
2.3	Selection of students	5
2.4	Language preparation.....	5
2.5	Cultural preparation	6
2.6	E-coaching.....	6
2.7	Assessment methods	7
2.8	Evaluation and feedback	7
3	MEASURES FOR OUTGOING STUDENTS	8
3.1	General information	8
3.2	Information available for the students.....	8
3.3	Selection of students	9
3.4	Language preparation.....	10
3.5	Cultural preparation	10
3.6	E-coaching.....	11
3.7	Assessment methods	11
3.8	Evaluation and feedback	11
4	CONCLUSIONS	12

LIST OF REFERENCES

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 present an overview of state-of-the-art in virtual exchange support measures.

The report is divided into two sections: (1) measures for incoming students and (2) measures for outgoing students. Some activities may, however, support both groups of students and several purposes. The report focuses on following themes:

- Information available for exchange students
- Selection of students
- Flexible assessment methods
- Language preparation
- Cultural preparation
- E-coaching
- Evaluation and feedback of the exchange

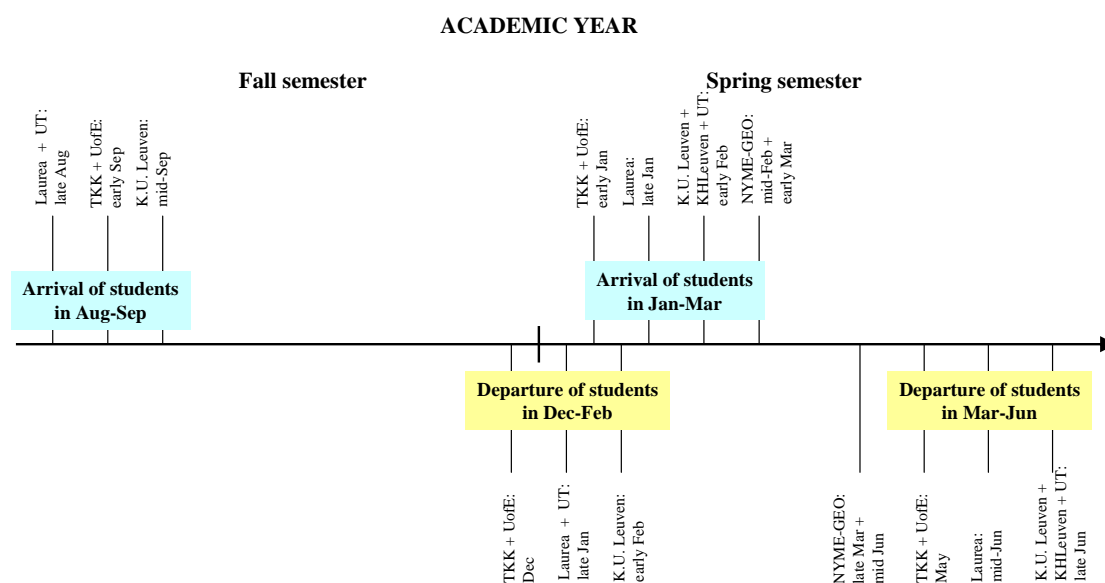
The study methodology includes a literature search and information gathered through a questionnaire at the VM-BASE partner institutions. The questionnaire was conducted during spring 2007 at the following institutions: Helsinki University of Technology (TKK), Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Catholic University of Leuven (K.U.Leuven), Catholic Polytechnic Leuven (KHLeuven), University of Edinburgh (UofE), University of Tartu (UT) and University of West Hungary, Faculty of Geoinformatics (NYME-GEO).

Other institutions involved in the VM-BASE project are EuroPACE ivzw, Coimbra Group, ESU – The European Students' Union and BEST – Board of European Students of Technology.

2 MEASURES FOR INCOMING STUDENTS

2.1 General information

The arrival of incoming exchange students is often scheduled in the beginning of each semester. The departure, in turn, is scheduled at the end of semester. The start and end dates depend on both the exchange program and its duration; whether it is a half-year or a full-year exchange. As shown in picture 1, some minor variations exist in the semester start and end dates of different institutions.



1. *General calendar for the most important exchange programs: the arrival and departure of incoming exchange students at TKK, Laurea, K.U.Leuven, KHLeuven, UofE, UT and NYME-GEO. (NB: KHLeuven and NYME-GEO offer exchange placements only during the spring semester.)*

The aforementioned variations naturally also cause some unwanted consequences. When discussing the incompatible semester timings of one's home and host institution, there are a number of problems that arise. Potential time gaps before and/or after the exchange can, at worst, cause delays in one's studies. International joint projects, such as virtual orientation courses and other joint activities, are also somewhat challenging.

The number of incoming exchange students also varies substantially among the partner institutions. The number of students annually involved in the international student exchange is somewhere between 10 and 800 students per institution. Many, but not all, of them are in the Erasmus program.

Both the size and the structure of the organization as well as the number of incoming exchange students, among other things, affect how the students can be supported during the entire process. Smaller institutions with less exchange students are generally better able to support their students as well as to try new activities than bigger institutions with more exchange students.

Overview of state-of-the-art in virtual exchange support measures

As far as organization structure is concerned, non-universities generally seem to be more flexible with their activities and better able to offer personal support and guidance to their students than universities. On the other hand, the exchange programs are also more fixed. Non-university students have less freedom to plan their exchange than university students. Finally, there are the country-specific variations that need to be taken into account. Also, students are different. Some simply need more support and guidance than others.

2.2 Information available for the students

Institutional websites are the integral tool for disseminating key institutional information and for promoting institutional identities to the general public. Links to the existing public online information for incoming exchange students at TKK, Laurea, K.U.Leuven, KHLeuven, UofE, UT and NYME-GEO are provided in table 1.

1. Links to the existing online public information for incoming exchange students.

Name of institution:	Link to the existing online information (EN):
TKK	http://kva.tkk.fi/en/In/index.html
Laurea	http://www.laurea.fi/net/en/04_Apply_to_Laurea/06_Exchange_Programmes_/index.jsp
K.U. Leuven	http://www.kuleuven.be/english/
KHLeuven	http://www.khleuven.be/english_pages
UofE	www.international.ed.ac.uk
UT	http://www.ut.ee/studentoffice
NYME-GEO	http://www.ceepus.info ; http://www.geo.info.hu/en/

All aforementioned websites provide general information concerning student exchange at the institution in question. The CEEPUS network makes the only exception. Most information is available in English, which is extremely important. As language can also become an issue if the students cannot understand the information they are given. According to the Erasmus Student Network Survey (2006), students regularly face problems with the information retrieval at their host institution due to language barriers.

Sometimes the information can also be placed in a password-restricted area, in which case access to service is usually provided only after the arrival. Exceptions can be made, but only for good reason. The question is why? In this case, common practice does not seem to equate with best practice. Without the ability to join the university online and be issued with the necessary user-id and password, the students are effectively cut off from the institution system. (Final Report of the VICTORIOUS Project. 2007)

Providing good information and making it easy for the students to find is extremely important. According to the Final Report of the VICTORIOUS Project (2007), many

Overview of state-of-the-art in virtual exchange support measures

institutions have a rather positive view about the information being readily available at their individual websites. However, from the student perspective, this is more often not the case in reality.

Other methods of information provision (during exchange) include handouts, e-newsletters, electronic message boards and special information sessions, among other things. On some campuses, there are also international meeting centers or suchlike for the international and internationally-minded students. Some institutions have also invested in an entire virtual learning environment, such as 'Toledo', which they use for the provision of information.

2.3 Selection of students

In the case of the incoming exchange students, the selection is usually done by the sending institution based on mutual agreements. Only seldom is there a special commission or suchlike responsible for the selection. Students are usually required a sufficient knowledge of English. However, this is seldom tested.

Online application systems and other electronic services are becoming more and more common. However, as many as three out of seven institutions still reported that they have no electronic services available for the procedure. Most exchange programs are managed on both central and unit level. Practices vary widely among the partner institutions.

2.4 Language preparation

Incoming exchange students, just like any other students, are offered language courses throughout the academic year. In addition, some institutions offer intensive pre-semester language courses just for the exchange students. The number of online courses is almost non-existent. In some cases, there are no language courses at all available in the local language at the host institution.

All Erasmus students are offered Erasmus Intensive Language Courses (EILC). The EILC's, a scheme supported by the European Commission, are specialized courses in the less widely used and less taught European Union languages and the languages of other countries participating in Erasmus. The EILC's give Erasmus students the opportunity to study the language of the host country for 3-8 weeks. The courses usually take place in the host country.

Official statements documenting students' knowledge of a certain language (usually English) are uncommon. In general, there is no or very little testing. Only one partner institution reported that it requires an official statement from the student that documents that he/she has sufficient skills in English. The document must be signed by a professor at the student's home institution. Only applicants, whose mother tongue is either the local language or English, are exempted from this.

Interestingly, one of the partner institutions also reported that it encourages the exchange students to take language courses also in other, not just in the local or English language. According to a recent student survey, this is, however, not always the case. According to the Erasmus Student Network Survey (2006), students

Overview of state-of-the-art in virtual exchange support measures

sometimes have difficulties trying to study other languages, because as exchange students they are expected to improve their local and/or English language skills only.

Students are usually informed about the possibilities for language preparation through the institutional websites. Information letters or suchlike, sent to the students before arrival, are also common. Finally, a so-called language-buddy system, where local and foreign students could teach one another, is in planning phase at one of the partner institutions.

2.5 Cultural preparation

The cultural preparation of students covers everything from the host country's culture to the exam procedures and student life of the host institution. There are, thus, lots of things that need to be taken into account. The importance of cultural preparation and orientation before and during the exchange should not be underestimated.

Incoming exchange students are offered cultural preparation through various means: guides, websites, courses and orientation days. Tutoring (buddy system) and friendship family programs are also quite common and, especially the buddy system, popular among the students.

Preparation for the actual culture shock and/or reverse culture shock is, however, often forgotten. Students are seldom even aware of the phenomenon. Despite the fact, experiencing culture shock or some symptoms of it is almost inevitable. Through proper preparation students can understand the phenomenon and its possible causes and, perhaps, decrease its effects.

Student organizations also play an important role in the cultural support of incoming exchange students by organizing various activities and offering facilities and buddies for the exchange students. Alumni activities and suchlike are, in turn, quite uncommon at all partner institutions.

2.6 E-coaching

Two out of seven institutions reported that there is no e-coaching as such available for the incoming students. However, the personnel of international student services are always reachable, in case students need support and guidance on any issues. In this type of communication, email is the most common tool for communication.

Other institutions provide e-coaching mostly via email and Skype before and/or during the exchange. Digital learning platforms are also used, but only during some teaching and learning activities. There is no e-coaching as such available after the exchange.

Four out of seven institutions reported that they offer e-coaching provided by other students (tutors). This type of e-coaching often relates to cultural preparation and takes place before and during the exchange, but also after the exchange depending on the students. The personnel of international student services, in turn, deal with study-related issues.

Overview of state-of-the-art in virtual exchange support measures

In general, e-coaching is considered as a good option for supporting incoming students, especially in the preparatory phase. In some cases, it can even be considered to reduce language barriers and, thus, to ease communication between teachers and students.

At present, e-coaching is offered mainly just bilaterally. Thus, there is no community building among incoming students. This is perhaps something that could be considered more in the future. On the other hand, e-coaching also raises the question of responsibility and resources as well as commitment. Why should e-coaching be offered to students? What is the added value of it?

2.7 Assessment methods

In general, there seem to be very few alternative assessment methods in use. Most institutions prefer that the exchange students take their exams physically at the course-providing institution. Exceptions can be made, but for good reason. Students also need to take the initiative. Virtual assessment methods are uncommon.

However, one of the partner institutions reported that it has tested post-exchange virtual exams for some of its exchange students. The exams were arranged as a Skype conference together with the students' home institution. In some cases, the exam has also been sent via email or fax and returned the same way. This requires, however, that supervision during the exam is provided by the home institution.

Videoconferencing is another method that has been thought out. The idea is that students could both make their exams and be evaluated through videoconferencing. The use of videoconferencing is practical, especially, if it is necessary to involve teachers also from the sending institution. A so-called exam aquarium (a net based virtual exam system) is also in planning phase and will be piloted in fall 2007 at another partner institution.

Experiences with the use of virtual assessment methods are generally quite good. However, the use is somewhat challenging, since the different methods often require attendance and commitment from both sides; both the home and the host institution. Also, certain technical provisions have to be available at both institutions.

2.8 Evaluation and feedback

Most institutions reported that they regularly collect feedback from the exchange students. The most common way of collecting feedback is through various questionnaires. Only one institution reported that it also organizes evaluation discussions between the incoming students and international coordinators.

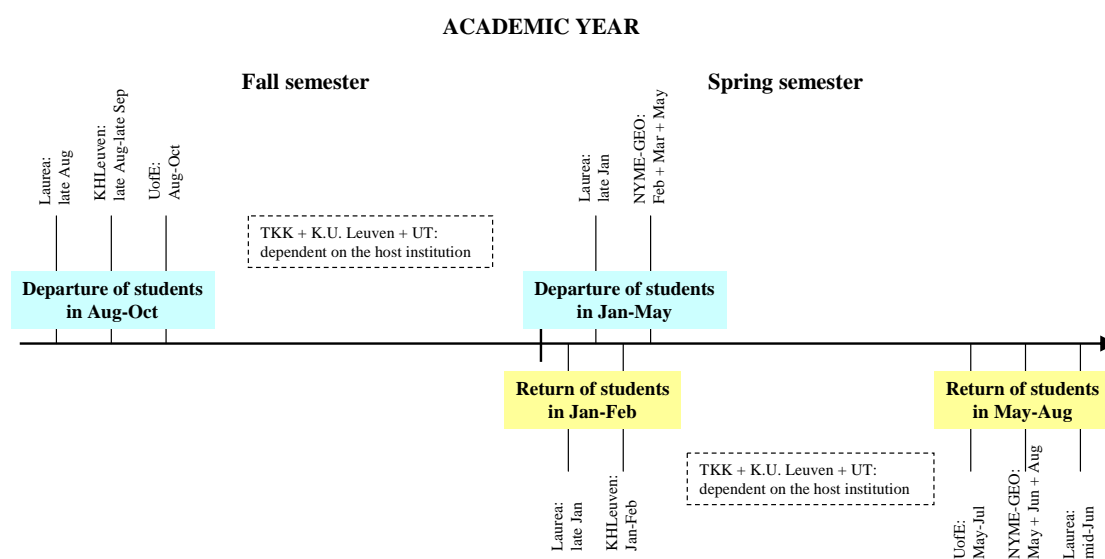
Two out of seven institutions reported that there are no systematic methods for the evaluation or collection of feedback at their institution. Only the Erasmus students are regularly requested to give feedback through the official Erasmus questionnaire.

Feedback is collected in the different phases of exchange, usually closer to departure. Questions may deal with general issues, accommodation and everything in between. Feedback forms are usually available in electronic and/or paper format.

3 MEASURES FOR OUTGOING STUDENTS

3.1 General information

There are considerable variations in the times of departure and return of outgoing exchange students (see picture 2). The schedule is often dependent on the host institution, and the home institution does not always even know when its students are departing or returning. Also, application deadlines vary substantially. Only seldom is the acceptance of applications year-round. The number of students annually involved in the international student exchange is somewhere between 10 and 600 students per partner institution.



2. *General calendar for the most important exchange programs: the departure and return of outgoing exchange students at TKK, Laurea, K.U. Leuven, KHLeuven, UofE, UT and NYME-GEO. (NB: The students of KHLeuven go for an exchange during the fall semester of their 3rd year only. The students of NYME-GEO, in turn, go for an exchange during the spring semester only.)*

The support and guidance given to the outgoing exchange students also depend on the size and the structure of the organization as well as on the number of incoming exchange students, among other things. However, according to the Final Report of the VICTORIOUS Project (2007), services for incoming students are generally rated more highly than those for outgoing students. This is perhaps due to the ‘out of sight, out of mind’ aspect, but also due to the assumption that the only services students need are the ones at their host university. (Final Report of the VICTORIOUS Project. 2007)

3.2 Information available for the students

Links to the existing public online information for outgoing exchange students at TKK, Laurea, K.U.Leuven, KHLeuven, UofE, UT and NYME-GEO are provided in table 2. There are no English websites publicly available at K.U. Leuven, KHLeuven

Overview of state-of-the-art in virtual exchange support measures

or University of Tartu. Other institutions do provide information also in English, but the quality is varied.

2. Links to the existing online public information for outgoing exchange students.

Name of institution:	Link to the existing online information (EN, EE, FI, HU, NL):
TKK	http://kva.tkk.fi/fi/index.html (FI) http://kva.tkk.fi/en/Out/index.html (EN)
Laurea	http://www.laurea.fi/net/fi/02_Opiskelu/06_Kansainvalisyys_opinnoissa/06_Opiskelu_ulkomailla/index.jsp (FI) http://www.laurea.fi/net/en/02_Studies/08_Internationalisation_of_studies/06_Studies_Abroad/index.jsp (EN)
K.U. Leuven	http://www.kuleuven.be/internationaal/ (NL) <i>No website available.</i> (EN)
KHLeuven	http://www.khleuven.be/internationalisering (NL) <i>No website available.</i> (EN)
UofE	http://www.international.ed.ac.uk/exchanges/index.html (EN)
UT	http://www.ut.ee/valismaa (EE) <i>No website available.</i> (EN)
NYME-GEO	http://www.geo.info.hu/erasmus (HU) http://www.ceepus.info (EN)

All aforementioned websites provide general information about the different possibilities to study abroad. A lot of information is also provided face-to-face in information sessions and suchlike. Personal contact is also considered important. Not everything can or should be done virtually.

The TU Exchange Program Database (available at: <http://uitwisseling.tudelft.nl/>) is an example of good practice information provision at Delft University of Technology (TU Delft). The website is for the students of TU Delft, who want to find information on studying in a foreign country. The website includes information about the universities, with which TU Delft has an exchange program, and some important links. It is publicly available in both Dutch and English.

According to the Erasmus Student Network Survey (2006), students are generally not very satisfied with the provision of information at their home institution. Satisfaction with the provision of information at host institution is, in turn, slightly better. There are also huge differences between countries. According to the Erasmus Student Network Survey (2006), the most satisfied students in both categories are from Finland.

3.3 Selection of students

Most institutions reported that the most important selection criteria include academic background, study results, personality and motivation. Language skills also play an important role, especially, if the working language is other than English. Motivation letters or suchlike are relatively common, but only seldom are students personally interviewed or official recommendations required.

Overview of state-of-the-art in virtual exchange support measures

On the other hand, there are also institutions whose selection criteria purely base on study results. Applicants may be ranked according to their study success (average credits earned per year, average marks) and only the best ones are allowed to go. At least, this is case where there are more applicants for a program than places available. Alternatively, students who may have failed two or more subjects at the end of the study year previous to their exchange are not allowed to go.

This kind of selection, which is purely based on quantitative criteria, is somewhat problematic. It excludes highly motivated students, who have had less success in their studies, from the study abroad experience without good reason. This is not a good way to support student mobility.

Most exchange programs are managed on both central and unit level. The selection of students, in turn, mostly takes place at departmental level. Four out of seven institutions reported that there are no electronic services available for the selection procedure.

3.4 Language preparation

All students are offered language courses at their home institution throughout the academic year. However, there are no preparation courses as such available. The linguistic preparation is often taken care of by the host institution. The aforementioned Erasmus Intensive Language Courses (EILC) are also common among the Erasmus students. Language certificates are seldom required.

3.5 Cultural preparation

The experiences of former exchange students are widely exploited in the cultural preparation of outgoing exchange students. Thoughts and experiences are shared in exchange reports, international fairs and suchlike and in special group meetings. At many institutions, cultural information is also given by the incoming exchange students. Attendance is usually voluntary.

One of the partner institutions reported that it organizes special courses for all outgoing exchange students. An online course is provided four times a year, whereas unit- and field-specific prep-courses are given only twice a year. International coordinators also play an important role in the general support.

Another partner institution is planning on creating international student exchange blogs. The blogs are planned for fall 2007. The idea is that some students could be paid to write a diary electronically and mount it. In the future, the blogs would also give a historic record to support and advice other exchange students.

Post-exchange cultural support is generally something that is paid very little attention to. However, research has shown that the so-called reverse culture shock or re-entry shock is often as frequent and hard as the initial culture shock. It is also an inevitable part of the study abroad experience and should, therefore, be taken into account better.

3.6 E-coaching

In general, there is very little e-coaching available for outgoing students at any of the partner institutions. Support and coaching are done mostly via email, when needed. Three out of seven institutions reported that there is no e-coaching at all available for outgoing students.

At one of the partner institutions, some prep-courses are completed partly online, when coordinators and other students answer the questions of outgoing students in virtual discussion areas. This type of e-coaching is used mainly before exchange. Some students are offered online courses with digital materials and communication tools over an e-learning portal.

All institutions agree that there is great potential in e-coaching. At the moment, email is the most common tool for communication, but there has also been discussion about how to improve, diversify and extend the e-coaching services. More attention has also been paid to the professors' involvement in coaching in general.

3.7 Assessment methods

As far as outgoing students are concerned, the use of alternative assessment methods is almost non-existent. Most institutions prefer that students take the exams physically at the institution where they actually followed the course. Exceptions can be made, but this usually requires student initiative and, even then, the decision is up to the professors.

E-learning portals are used as a method of virtual student assessment in some cases. At two out of seven institutions, outgoing students can also take (online) courses while on an exchange. However, exams still need to be taken physically at the home institution. The aforementioned exam aquarium could be one solution also for the outgoing students.

3.8 Evaluation and feedback

The evaluation of exchange is compulsory at all institutions. However, tools and methods vary some. Most students are asked either to fill in a questionnaire or to write a report on their exchange for the home institution. In addition, oral feedback sessions are organized at, at least, two out of seven institutions. In some cases, students are also asked to participate in the information days organized for students interested in going on an exchange.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The support of and services for incoming and outgoing exchange students seems to vary substantially. In general, the incoming students are paid a lot more attention to than the outgoing students. However, there are also huge differences between the partner institutions. Both the size and the structure of the organization as well as the number of exchange students, among other things, affect how the students can be supported.

Institutional websites are the integral tool for disseminating key institutional information and for promoting institutional identities to the general public. However, the provision of timely and adequate information is often considered somewhat insufficient, especially among the students. In some cases, there is no information available in English, only in the local language. This is also a huge deficiency.

The selection of students is usually done by the sending institution. The most important selection criteria include academic background, study results, personality and motivation. However, in some cases, the selection criteria purely base on study results. This is considered somewhat problematic, since it excludes highly motivated students, who have had less success in their studies, from the study abroad experience without good reason.

The level of cultural and linguistic support as well as the availability of e-coaching also varies among the partner institutions. However, one thing that they all have in common is the lack of good, concise and efficient language testing. Only one partner institution reported that it requires an official statement from the student that documents that he/she has sufficient skills in English.

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. Also, the use of alternative assessment methods is something that could be utilized more.

LIST OF REFERENCES

Coimbra Group, University of Bristol, University of Edinburgh, University of Granada, University of Groningen, University of Leuven, University of Pavia, University of Siena & University of Turku (2007)

Student Mobility in a Digital World – Final Report of the VICTORIUS Project

Available: <http://www.coimbra->

[group.be/victorious/VIC%20Final%20Report%20print%20version.pdf](http://www.coimbra-group.be/victorious/VIC%20Final%20Report%20print%20version.pdf).

Krupnik, Seweryn, Krzaklewska, Ewa & Erasmus Student Network (2006)

The experience of studying abroad for exchange students in Europe – Erasmus Student Network Survey 2006 in partnership with Petrus Communications.