

Home & Away

Coaching exchange students from a distance

Summary booklet and recommendations

1. Introduction

The importance of student mobility and inter-university exchange programmes is vastly increasing and the issue currently occupies a significant place in the agendas of educational policy makers and higher education institutions. Mobility of students, teachers and staff has always been one of the most important features of universities.

Mobility in space, geographical mobility, 'real' mobility, physical mobility... are all terms used to refer to students and teachers in higher education "physically" moving to another institution inside or outside their own country to study or teach for a limited time. Different types or aspects of mobility can be distinguished. Programme mobility - in which mobile students take part in an organised mobility programme - is nowadays considered to be the major mobility engine. Erasmus is probably the best-known of such programmes but there are several others: Erasmus Mundus, Tempus, Ceepus, Nordplus, etc. just to name a few.

Since the second half of the 1990s the notion of virtual mobility has also gained currency in the context of the internationalisation of higher education institutions, due to the growing significance of distance learning and e-learning. The elearningeuropa.info portal defines virtual mobility as: "The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to obtain the same benefits as one would have with physical mobility but without the need to travel". This definition clearly shows the two different elements of virtual mobility. Virtual mobility is juxtaposed with the real mobility of "academic pilgrims" and contributes to the internationalisation of education by encouraging (cross-border) cooperation between different education institutions. Secondly, it is linked to the new possibilities opened through the use of ICT-supported environments that include, for example, videoconferencing, live streaming, collaborative workspaces, and computer-mediated conferencing.

While in many cases virtual mobility represents a valuable alternative solution to physical mobility for those who miss out on a physical exchange, there seems to be general agreement that it is not a substitute for real mobility. Virtual mobility is, on the other hand, becoming increasingly popular as a complement to traditional mobility programmes. It can be used to prepare, support and follow-up physical mobility to enrich the latter and to make it even more effective and fruitful.

When aspects of physical and virtual mobility are combined in order to maximise the advantages of both, it is defined as 'blended mobility' or - if applied to the Erasmus programme - 'blended Erasmus'.

The VM-BASE project (Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges), supported under the European Commissions' Socrates Minerva programme

(DG Education and Culture) has looked further into this concept of blended mobility. The project was carried out by several European higher education institutions, networks and student organisations, bringing together all stakeholders involved in the exchange process and investigating, through the development of several pilots, how student and teachers can apply blended mobility to enhance physical exchange and create a better experience for all. This booklet introduces the core concepts, studies, activities and pilot courses conducted by the VM-BASE partners and provides a summary of the main guidelines and recommendations arising from the project work which we hope will be of value to everybody involved in student mobility.

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

In the initial phase of the VM-BASE project a study was conducted aimed at presenting an overview of the state-of-the-art in virtual exchange support measures for incoming and outgoing (Erasmus) students. The study report focuses on the following themes: information available for exchange students, selection of students, flexible assessment methods, language and cultural preparation, e-coaching as well as evaluation and feedback of the exchange. The methodology included a literature search and information gathered through a questionnaire at the VM-BASE partner institutions.

The study indicates that both support of and services for incoming and outgoing exchange students vary substantially. In general, incoming students are given considerably more attention than outgoing students. However, there are also differences between partner institutions.

Both the size and the structure of the organisation as well as the number of exchange students, among other things, affect how the 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. As far as organisation 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 programmes are also more fixed.

The websites of the higher education institutions are the integral tool for disseminating key institutional information and for promoting institutional identities to the general public. The provision of timely and adequate information is, however, 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 major deficiency.

The selection of students is usually done by the home institution. The most important selection criteria include academic background, study results, personality and motivation. However, in some cases, the selection criteria is purely based on study results. This is considered somewhat problematic, since it can exclude highly motivated students, who have had less success in their studies, from the study abroad experience.

The level of cultural and linguistic support as well as the availability of e-coaching also varies notably among the partner institutions. Language testing, in turn, is considered almost non-existent. 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. Finally, the use of alternative assessment methods is something that could be utilised more.

3. Defining the needs of students and teachers involved in international student exchange

As well as the state-of-the-art overview, a needs analysis was carried out to identify students' and teachers' needs and requirements in the different phases of international student exchange (preparatory phase, before exchange, during exchange and after exchange). Students' needs were investigated as a whole, whereas teachers' needs were investigated from two different perspectives: teachers' needs concerning incoming students and teachers' needs concerning outgoing students. The study methodology

included a literature search and information gathered through questionnaires, interviews and other existing sources at the VM-BASE partner institutions.

The study confirms that students' motivation for international student exchange varies substantially. Non-Erasmus students are generally more academically-oriented than 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 quite obvious that motivation also plays an important role, 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. Teachers are especially keen to get to know their students before arrival. After the exchange, contacts are mostly kept up through alumni organizations and similar activities. 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 is highly appreciated by the students, but often missing at present. Students have the feeling that they are pretty much on their own and that nobody cares, while they are abroad on the exchange. Therefore, communication with the home institution can be extremely important and should be given more attention.

As already indicated above, cultural and linguistic preparation needs more attention 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, emphasised 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 considerably 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 three concerns that students and teachers face. Also, students' access to internal services before and after the exchange is considered extremely important.

4. Prototyping and piloting of support initiatives for the different exchange phases

4.1 E-coaching exchange students

Due to the increase of internationalisation, international teaching practices, part-time education, etc. it increasingly happens that students need to be coached from a distance. For exchange students in particular, face-to-face coaching is often hard to put into practise because of the geographical distance between teachers, students and International Relations Officers. The emergence of different tools and electronic communication media nowadays opens up the opportunity to support the coaching process from a distance or to let teachers from both home and host institution jointly guide the student through the exchange process.

When investigating online teaching and learning, one comes across many different terms describing the process. The VM-BASE consortium uses the term 'e-coaching' and does so in a very broad interpretation. The 'e'-part of the term stands for 'electronic' and obviously refers to the fact that the coaching is done through technology. The 'coaching'-part refers to the (personal) guidance that is needed in the whole process. Information and communication technologies should not be used in education without considering and valuing this human aspect. The use of ICT does not imply that the teacher automatically gets replaced by a tool. On the contrary, the teacher and/or tutor remains particularly relevant.

The use of ICT does bring about a fundamental shift in teaching methods: the expert/instructor becomes a moderator/coach. It is no longer about the transfer of knowledge or content but more and more about creating a context for it.

Being an e-coach is not solely reserved for teaching staff. A variety of people can perform the important role of e-coach for exchange students: external teachers or external experts, fellow students, Erasmus coordinators in the faculties, or International Relations Officers and other staff working at the international offices.

E-coaching is a new competence and requires particular skills from those involved in the e-coaching process. An interdisciplinary approach is necessary and an e-coach needs to master both hard and soft skills. In this context, the

VM-BASE consortium highlights four important aspects of e-coaching: technological, organisational, content and social aspects.

First of all, stakeholders need to be acquainted with technology and there must be attention for the users of the technology (usability). The learning process furthermore needs to be organised, group activities need to be planned, appointments with students need to be made, etc. Last but not least, the pedagogical aspects have to be taken into account: the e-coach must be well informed both socially and content-wise and must also be able to give different types of feedback to the students: both content-related (informative, reflecting, correcting ...) and not content-related (administrative, motivating...).

In the VM-BASE project each of the pilot courses tried out different tools and e-coaching methods. As already indicated above, the human factor stands out as being one of the most important aspects and the success of activities often depended on whether or not the presence of an e-coach could be felt.

In the following sections, two of the VM-BASE pilot courses are presented. Both 'blended' courses focus on e-coaching outgoing students before, during and after their physical exchange.

Pilot: Go Abroad – Laurea University of Applied Sciences

Laurea University of Applied Sciences offers its students various opportunities to study abroad. Exchanges are supported by preparation courses that can be taken in person or online. In addition, students are supported by the international coordinators and faculty of Laurea and the host institution.

Laurea's previous prep-course for outgoing exchange students however did not meet their needs. Feedback collected from all outgoing students after their return stated that they were not fully satisfied with the preparation for their exchange. The development project started in January 2007 by analysing two questionnaires of needs returned by former exchange students.

It became clear that some more preparation before the exchange and much more support during the exchange were needed and the conclusion was that the prep-course should last from the preparation to the evaluation of the exchange. Instead of a prep-course it should be a study unit "support of international mobility". In addition to the contact with tutor teachers, contact with other exchange students was also found to be very important. Blended learning, a combination of e-learning and contact sessions, was found to be an optimal method of implementation.

Based on these ideas the “Go Abroad” pilot study unit for supporting international student mobility was created and put into use in May 2007 with the first group of students, continuing until the end of the autumn term exchange. A second group of students started in the pilot in autumn 2007 and continued to the end of their spring semester abroad in 2008.

The course includes an interactive online discussion forum for students before, during and after the exchange and the possibility for e-tutoring and e-support during the exchange. Students are also required to do several assignments. The course is delivered using blended learning, in the e-learning platform called Optima.

The course received positive feedback from the students who evaluated the pilot. Students were clearly more satisfied with the support they got from their home institution.

Pilot: Virtual Window for Study Abroad – University of Tartu

Annually, approximately 300 to 400 students of the University of Tartu use the mobility support services of the central administrative office to prepare themselves for a study abroad period. Information concerning related topics and requirements was partially available on the various websites of the university, and was provided to students when they came to consult a study abroad adviser at the office or during information days. Feedback from former exchange students however suggested the need for the development of an online study abroad preparation course to assist students in finding comprehensive information and create a valuable tool for experience sharing among future outgoing students and students currently studying abroad.

Efforts were made to integrate the existing information sources in an online course “Virtual Window for Study Abroad”. The students studying abroad were invited to contribute as co-advisors by sharing experience and giving some practical hints not necessarily discussed on official websites or information brochures.

The virtual learning environment used for the study abroad preparation course is WebCT, as e-learning, at the University of Tartu, mostly takes place in this environment. The course was developed and administered by the International Student Service staff. Study abroad advisors, who were to instruct the students on this course, added information and consulted students parallel to the course.

The first students were given access to the course in February 2008. They were the students about to leave for a hosting institution abroad. Students studying abroad at the time were requested to also join the course and stay actively involved until the end June (the end of the second run). Although the number of students initially joining the course was modest (around 15), the initial feedback was positive. As assumed, it indicated that the most beneficial part of the course was the support discussion forum with fellow students. The amount and structure of materials displayed was generally assessed as user-friendly and easily digestible. Yet, there were some comments on materials being too extensive and partially irrelevant. Also, the second run of the course, launched in April 2008 and including around 180 future outgoing students, proved to be a successful experience. Advisors commented that there were significantly fewer students visiting the central office for information than had previously been the case.

4.2 Virtual Mobility before a physical exchange

The two pilots described above were already two examples of how students can be better prepared for their exchange. There are many ways in which students can virtually prepare for their physical Erasmus. While the advantages seem obvious (teachers will benefit from better prepared students, and students themselves are more focused and productive during their Erasmus stay) real course modules, tools and systems to facilitate the preparation of exchange students are rare.

The VM-BASE project aimed to address this need and has developed several types of pilots in three areas: orientation guidelines, pre-selection tests and preparative courses. In the following sections several of those pilot courses are presented giving inspiration and recommendations to those intending to engage in similar activities.

4.2.1 Orientation guidelines

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

It is thus important for institutions to provide incoming students with complete and up-to-date information on both practical and academic issues.

The next three pilots from the VM-BASE project present several different ways in which this kind of 'orientation' information can be passed on to exchange students.

Pilot: Virtual Buddy System – Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven

The Virtual Buddy System is a pilot organised by the Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven (KHLeuven). The main aims for setting up the system were to gather information on the students' needs related to physical exchanges (what information do they need, when should it be provided and by whom) and trying to involve students of the host institution more actively in the process of getting information about the cultural, educational and practical aspects of the exchange.

More concretely, KHLeuven developed a 'matchmaking service' to link incoming students already before their arrival with local students from KHLeuven. The international coordinator makes the matches and informs both parties who their buddy is and how they can reach him/her.

The pilot was done a first time from October 2006 until February 2007. The technology applied in this first run was e-mail. A year later a second pilot run took place. The system basically remained the same, but some new virtual components were added and the students were encouraged to not only use e-mail as a virtual means of communication, but also Skype and MSN.

The 'virtual buddies' made the integration of the incoming students easier and swifter by providing them with all necessary practical information. Especially in the period before their arrival and during the first couple of weeks of their stay the incoming students reported they felt less insecure and better taken care of.

But also the buddies themselves have enjoyed a lot of the benefits of an exchange programme (practising foreign languages, building international friendships, etc.), even without having to move physically. Last but not least, the teachers, the International Office and the KHLeuven as such benefited from the buddy system as the buddies helped them to take care of the incoming students.

Pilot: TKK Multimedia presentation and virtual student interviews – TKK

This pilot was carried out by the International Relations Office, PR & Communication office and Lifelong Learning Institute Dipoli (TKK Dipoli) at Helsinki University of Technology (TKK). The pilot consisted of two parts: a TKK multimedia presentation and five student interviews, and it was

conducted during the academic year 2007-2008. The purpose of the pilot was to offer general information about TKK through visual means (multimedia presentation) and to give potential exchange students the chance to hear other students' experiences on student exchange at TKK (video interviews). The multimedia presentation is available both on DVD and on the TKK website. The student interviews are available on the student union's website. On average, students' feedback on the multimedia presentation and the student interviews was positive. Focusing more on the visual means of representing information for (incoming) students was considered a good thing. The student interviews were considered more personal, and the information given through them more informal and "off-the-record" than in the multimedia presentation. The interviews were also seen as types of visual blogs, through which the students, who were on an exchange, could share their experiences. In turn, the advantage of the "visually impressive" and high quality multimedia presentation on DVD is that it is also very suitable for promotional purposes.

Pilot: Virtual Exchange of Students Mobility Experience - University of West Hungary, Department of Geoinformatics

For the VM-BASE project, the teachers of the Faculty of Geoinformatics at the University of West Hungary, set up a pilot called 'Virtual Exchange of Student Mobility Experience' focusing on outgoing students.

Student motivation and the availability of useful information are of crucial importance to increase the number of exchanges and the success of the exchange programmes. Students considering going on an exchange might be more convinced by their colleagues, who have already lived through the experience.

In the past, the exchange students finishing their mobility activities provided a text document in which they presented their experiences. The amount of useful information in these documents was minimal because only a few topics were dealt with. The set-up of a collaborative, online content management system appeared to be a suitable alternative. During the exchange, the students report their experiences in online diaries or blogs. A diary or blog can contain some private or public data that is being categorised through tags. They can use free tagging in order to categorise the blog entries.

Through the combination of all the blog entries, a thematic information set was organised named Mobility Guide. Students who spend a learning period at a partner university regularly refresh information related to this institution in

the Mobility Guide. Through the categorisation, outgoing students can find the right answers to their questions.

At the time of writing, it is too early to know what kind of changes might have to be implemented in the future. Experience shows however that students find the portal easy to use for blogging.

4.2.2 Pre-selection tools & student selection

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 and have well-prepared students that reach a certain study level for following a particular course. When paper applications are not sufficient, student selection can happen via electronic means, such as webconferencing, allowing teaching staff to visualise the candidate and to check the study level, but also the social and language skills of the student.

Pilot: Online education and evaluation tool of the Faculty of Kinesiology and Rehabilitation Sciences – Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

The International Master in Physiotherapy is a two-year Master programme in English at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (K.U.Leuven), aimed at foreign kinesiology students who already have a bachelor degree.

Experiences from an existing international programme at the Faculty of Kinesiology and Rehabilitation Sciences showed the differences in level of statistical knowledge between bachelor students from K.U.Leuven and bachelor students from institutions abroad. This was probably due to the great emphasis K.U.Leuven imposes on statistics and research methods in general in comparison to other institutions.

For this reason, the programme officer decided to develop a tool to test and improve the statistical knowledge of foreign students, prior to their arrival at the university. To that end, two courses on statistics were converted to an online version and integrated into Toledo, the learning platform of K.U.Leuven (consisting of Blackboard and Questionmark Perception), resulting in an online testing- and learning tool.

After an initial test the user was being redirected to the learning platform. When the user fails the test, he was being advised to review the theory of the respective chapter, when the user passes the test he can move on to the next chapter.

In general the tool received positive reactions from the different stakeholders involved. Professors in research methods at the faculty were enthusiastic towards the initiative, given their experiences with the low level of statistical knowledge of foreign students.

But of course the international students themselves are the ones who benefit most from this pilot, because they know exactly what is expected from them and they can all start at the same level of knowledge at the beginning of the Master. After trying out the tool, many of the foreign students indeed became aware of their need to improve their level of statistical knowledge.

A positive aspect in this respect is that the incoming students are given access to the tool after their file is approved at K.U.Leuven and when they are still at home. At this point they are not yet officially enrolled at the university. This procedure allows for students to check out their abilities to succeed in the International Master before they make their final decision to enrol.

4.2.3 Preparatory courses

A last type of virtual support activities before a physical exchange are the preparatory courses. The VM-BASE project investigated the concept of such preliminary courses 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 already exist in most universities, they often do not yet exist in a virtual form or are not easily accessible for Erasmus students.

Pilot: Multilingual Survival Kit in GIS – University of West Hungary, Department of Geoinformatics

Studies in Geographic Information Systems (GIS) at the Faculty of Geoinformatics at the University of West Hungary are very specific. A good knowledge of the technical vocabulary used during the practical and fieldwork is fundamental. On the one hand the pilot aimed to prepare incoming students in the use of Hungarian. On the other hand, outgoing students also need training in German and English. Therefore the decision was made to initially develop a trilingual course in English, German and Hungarian.

Within the framework of the pilot, a wiki has been developed. Participants collaborate to develop a compilation of specific vocabulary and terms linked to the GIS topic. One teacher coaches the participants.

Each course was developed in the virtual learning environment of Moodle software and integrated into the faculties' portal where the students can access the platform. Each course also contains guidelines (requirements, how to edit in a wiki), a wiki, several forums and a questionnaire template in order to collect feedback.

A first run took place in February 2008 with a group of 4 Erasmus students. In July 2008 there were two parallel runs. One focused on English, Hungarian and German, the other on English and Russian for a specific group of people (Kazak and Tajik teachers from a Tempus project, coming to Hungary for training on GIS in August).

In the first run the students started to work directly on the wiki without too detailed guidelines, but it soon became clear that this was not the way to go: the wiki had an anarchic development, both teacher and students got lost and initial goals were not reached. Experiences from the second run show that by creating clear, step by step guidelines which are also displayed step by step and which are closely followed up by the teacher, this problem could be solved successfully. At the end, the WIKI had a large coverage of terms, the structure was balanced and the trilingual aspect was reached.

4.3 Virtual Mobility after a physical exchange

Not only is support necessary before students leave on an exchange, but 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.

This section again presents several VM-BASE pilots and centres on two main themes: virtual assessment and evaluation of exchange students at a distance and virtual alumni.

4.3.1 Virtual assessment and evaluation at a distance

The VM-BASE project aimed 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 can 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.

Pilot: Virtual feedback and information system – Laurea University of Applied Sciences

The aim of this pilot was to develop the mobility-related feedback system of Laurea University of Applied Sciences so that it would be better placed to support the internationally mobile students' reflection of their own experiences. Also it wanted to produce information for the prospective and future exchange students in an interesting and useful way.

Feedback from all mobile students is collected through an online questionnaire, which contains both multiple choice and open questions. The students also have to fill out a short description or report of the exchange. These are published in an International Relations Management System database which is open to all students and staff.

These descriptions were at first pretty brief, and did not include a lot of reflection of the own experiences. This limited their usability for the future outgoing exchange students.

In January 2008, a group of international coordinators and students who returned from exchanges were gathered to plan and make a first version of a new system. The group considered different online possibilities, but decided to create an interactive map that would present Laurea's students opportunities for student exchanges through student experiences and a few facts, using pictures, videos and links as much as possible. A Google-based map was chosen due to its usability and features. Content for the map (i.e. information for each of Laurea's international student mobility partners) was gathered from several sources including Laurea's former exchange students

The idea was to make the map fun to explore, thus acting as a motivator, encouraging students towards mobility and inspiring them about internationalisation. This is often the initial step towards going abroad. Once the decision to go abroad has been made, the future exchange students require more information, but specifically about the target area /country they have chosen. This information is at best provided by the exchange students who have been on an exchange at the same area/country.

The outcomes of the pilot project have not yet been fully utilised. The pilot project group however anticipates that the new international student mobility information tool will further encourage reflection which will deepen students learning experience remarkably. The tool is also expected to be of great

assistance to prospective exchange students which was already indicated by the initial comments from former exchange students while information for the map was being gathered.

Pilot: Exam aquarium – TKK

An exam aquarium is a camera-guarded and computer-equipped room reserved for writing exams. It is a web-based examination system, which requires special software designed explicitly for writing exams. In the aquarium, a student independently takes an exam at a time suitable for him/herself. Teachers create the question database. Students enter the exams as usual and reserve the time to use the exam aquarium.

The purpose of this pilot was to determine the suitability of an exam aquarium at Helsinki University of Technology (TKK). Additionally, TKK wanted to investigate the possibilities of bringing more flexibility for the incoming and outgoing exchange students and whether students could do an exam also for another (foreign) institution and not just for TKK.

The pilot was carried out by the Department of Surveying, Main Library, Teaching and Learning Development, Language Centre and The Student Union of TKK. During the pilot (academic year 2007 – 2008), the exam aquarium was physically located at the Main Library. Altogether, eight courses and five examiners participated in the pilot. Additionally, students were able to re-write their maturity tests.

During the pilot, feedback was gathered from all project-participating parties (students, teachers and library staff), and the general opinion was really positive. The exam aquarium was considered suitable for all courses and, especially, for exams including essays and multiple choice questions. Challenges associated with the use of mathematical signs and calculation, as well as the few technical problems however still need to be taken care of.

All students involved in the project were willing to use the exam aquarium also in the future. Privacy, flexibility in entering and taking exams and possibility to structure and revise one's answers were some of the major strengths according to students. The weaknesses, in turn, included small writing space and limited text processing and editing.

Teachers saw the exam aquarium, first and foremost, as a service for students, not a mainstream type of activity. This naturally raised the question of motivation – are the teachers really motivated to continue working with the exam aquarium?

The library staff, who were responsible for the reception of the students during the pilot, were in turn very pleased with the experiment and interested in continuing the work.

Pilot: Supporting oral exams at a distance for the Master of European Social Security – Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

The Master programme European Social Security at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven provides a specialised, highly research based study of social security. This post-graduate programme combines electronic long-distance learning from home with two short stays of ten days each at the K.U.Leuven.

In October students come to Leuven for two weeks to give all participants the same starting basis. Afterwards students go back to their home country. They are supported online by the teachers. In April students again come to Leuven. For taking their exams, students have different options: they can do an open book exam online, or do a written exam in a remote coordination centre under the supervision of a contact person, or do an oral exam when they are in Leuven.

However, in the academic year 2007-2008, the organisers of the Master felt the need to organise exams at a distance (e-assessment). Some students were coming from countries where there is neither a contact person nor an exam centre. Furthermore, for a Master exam it became obligatory to do the exam orally. And finally, there were some courses for which an open book exam was simply not the most suitable format.

In January 2008, the exams for one of the courses within the Master were organised for the first time through webconferencing (FlashMeeting).

Experiences with this technology proved to be very positive. The quality of the exam was considered to be the same as that of a face-to-face oral exam and the possibility of recording the exam and watching it afterwards for a second time was considered to be a plus.

However, the way of doing exams through webconferencing is most suited for smaller groups of students. The organisation of the exams was intensive in terms of needed time and staff, both in the preparatory phase (planning) as during the exam itself (support). It also takes time for both the student and teacher to get used to the medium. And obviously, also connectivity problems are inevitable and can be a big challenge for the organisation of such exams at a distance.

4.3.2 Virtual alumni

One of the activities carried out in the VM-BASE project was a study on how to set up a Virtual Alumni Association as a community of students and teachers who engaged in physical and virtual mobility activities.

More concretely, this study addressed the question, how students and teachers who embarked on physical and virtual mobility activities can network and participate in a wider community after their experiences. Different case studies helped to answer some of the most important questions related to this topic: 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 find success factors, etc. Also recommendations on how to set up and support a Virtual Alumni Association are outlined.

According to the American Heritage Dictionary, an *alumnus* (pl. *alumni*) is a male graduate or former student of a school, college, or university, whereas an *alumni association* is an association of these alumni. In the study, the term *virtual alumni association* refers to an alumni association, of which members (*virtual alumni*) have attended either physical mobility programmes or virtual mobility programmes. The virtual alumni primarily interact via communication media, the Internet, rather than face-to-face for social, professional and educational purposes.

For most people, (virtual) alumni associations serve as the means of communication and collaboration with other students and alumni. In addition, they provide a forum for networking and sharing of experiences. Through these associations, students and alumni can also keep in touch not only with their peers, but also with their former teachers and institutions. Several institutions and employers also emphasise the importance of alumni associations.

On the other hand, these networks are also faced with a set of challenges. The alumni relations culture in Europe, the fundamental shift in the way students and alumni relate, communicate, decide and advocate, as well as the strong internationalisation are just a few examples. However, the recent years have also seen a notable increase in the attention paid to alumni networks worldwide.

There can be seen four main drivers contributing to this increase in attention: mutual economic and social advantage, life-long networking, internationalization and professionalisation. Understanding the significance of these four main drivers is indeed of high importance. A functional network also requires a long-term institutional vision, a well-crafted strategic plan,

effective and efficient execution at an operational level, and most of all, a desire to succeed.

In the study, the different types of alumni networks are divided into four categories: (1) commission driven networks, (2) institution driven networks, (3) user driven networks and (4) student organisation driven networks. In several case studies, the different concepts, as well as their strengths and weaknesses are discussed in more detail. The case studies include Erasmus Mundus Students and Alumni Association (EMA), Alumni for Europe (AfE), the OU Alumni, PoliAlumni, DAAD Alumni, Facebook and MySpace, LinkedIn, Erasmus Student Network Alumni Society and BEST AlumniNet. When setting up an (international) alumni network, there are a few fundamental aspects to be taken into account. These include strategy, target group and infrastructure. Building network strategy, defining target groups and their needs, as well as developing practical infrastructure are all essential to avoid the early pitfalls. A virtual association, where members can access services globally and equitably 24/7, also requires strong commitment from its developers, including constant maintenance, development, monitoring and censorship.

Pilot: VALE (KHLeuven Erasmus Alumni Network) – Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven

One of the results of a large involvement in Erasmus exchange programmes is that the Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven has a vast group of Erasmus alumni. But although KHLeuven goes to great lengths to keep in touch with its Belgian alumni, no organised efforts were made to keep in touch with the Erasmus alumni.

In January 2008 it was decided to go for a more structured approach and to start up a more formal Erasmus Alumni Network.

The main aims or goals for setting up this system were to support and maintain connections, encourage personal contacts and to exchange interesting experiences and helpful information (for example on cultural issues, study or career opportunities). It can also be seen as a means to do lifelong networking, for the alumni as well as the former host institution.

After careful consideration, the KHLeuven opted to use Facebook. The concept of the Facebook group was created and put online between March and May 2008. The Erasmus students of KHLeuven from the past two academic years and from the current academic year were invited via e-mail to join the online group VALE. VALE is a Latin word, but is also used in English and means

'farewell'. In this case, it also stands for **Virtual Alumni network** for students who have come to **Leuven University College** on an Erasmus exchange. Although the project was well received by the different stakeholders involved and got many responses at the start, it came to a standstill rather quickly. The pilot has clearly shown that creating and especially maintaining a virtual alumni network, is quite a challenge and asks for careful consideration and organisation. Also, while Facebook has clear advantages and is a tool that is easily available and accessible for everybody, there are also some disadvantages to be taken into account: for example the value of the information can sometimes be questioned, the functioning heavily depends on the input of users and is therefore quite unpredictable, and sometimes even unsustainable.

5. Evaluating Virtual Mobility pilots

When teachers or support staff in student services, begin to explore new ways to support students before, during and after their experiences of studying at a university in another country, they often start with an idea that they develop into a small test bed 'pilot', before deciding to expand the scale to reach all their students who participate in physical mobility programmes. Designing the pilot well, then evaluating the outcomes and making any necessary adjustments, are key stages in moving successfully to full-scale operation. The VM-BASE project was designed to contain these key stages, as partners chose ideas for testing, took them through their pilot stages, and then evaluated the outcomes.

It is helpful to be clear from the outset about what type of evaluation is needed, as the best evaluation data are gathered if the process is planned from the beginning. The aspects of evaluation that need to be considered are amongst others: is it going to be a formative or summative evaluation, is the evaluation done by yourself or by an external and independent evaluator, are you going to use quantitative or qualitative methods, how are you planning to gather and analyse the evaluation data, etc.

If you intend to use the evaluation to persuade others of the effectiveness of your pilot in demonstrating the value of your new activity, it is recommended to summarise all the findings and the evidence in a short evaluation report.

6. Guidelines & recommendations for stakeholders in student mobility

Through the development of several pilot courses and initiatives presented in the previous chapters, as well as through the organisation of awareness raising events, the VM-BASE project has put much effort into moving virtual and blended mobility from a project level into the mainstream strategic goals of the participating institutions and networks.

Measures at different levels (institutional, regional, national and European) need to be looked at now and in future initiatives. This chapter formulates guidelines and recommendations for the main stakeholders involved in student mobility. The guidelines have been derived from lessons learnt from the pilots, discussions during our workshops and events and discussions between the partners in the VM-BASE consortium.

6.1 For Students intending to undertake an exchange

Higher education institutions can set up many different kinds of virtual or blended mobility activities to prepare, support and follow-up their exchange students. It is essential however that the exchange students themselves realise the importance of good preparation and are proactive in the whole process. They should try to make the most of their mobility experience by grasping all opportunities they are offered.

As a future exchange student, you should make sure to:

- Start preparing in time. This means to start preparations at least six months before. Anticipate your actions before going. Make a timeline and a “to do list” for your exchange. Look for other students’ experiences and share your own as well on forums, websites, blogs;
- Take a look at your host institutions’ website, since a lot of information is available there. Information on the student life and your new environment might also be available on tourism websites;
- Try to get in contact with students or student organisations of your host institution. Maybe the institution has a buddy system that links you automatically to one of your fellow students. Another option is to check online social communities, like Facebook groups;

- Learn or practice the (eventual) new language of the host institution and try to enrol in any of the available virtual language courses at your host (or home) institution.

Other actions to think about before you leave might include a search for virtual courses that are available before the exchange, or considering the set up of your laptop and if it is going to be appropriate for the new circumstances.

When returning from an exchange, opportunities exist to stay in contact with your host institution and its students or to share your own experiences with students who are preparing for their exchange.

After your exchange, you can for example:

- Join one of your host institution's (online) alumni organisation. Maybe a group is active on one of the social networking sites;
- Stay in contact with the International Office and make yourself available for sharing and giving advice to others. This could include the creation of a portfolio about an individual's personal development during an exchange;
- Try to improve the situation in your university/town/country based on what you learned in your exchange e.g. give feedback to professors or the university on the exchange procedures;
- Enrol in a virtual mobility programme at another institution after your return.

6.2 For Student Associations & Representatives

Several student representatives from student associations have been actively involved in the project, playing an important role in the validation of the proposed initiatives and giving recommendations from their students' point of view. Based on their feedback, a clear role for student organisations was identified in contributing to the support before, during and after a physical student exchange.

As a student association or a student representative you can:

- Proactively involve exchange students. Do not take for granted that they will automatically come to you;

- Make the most of existing tools and don't reinvent the wheel. Make available all activities and information (in English) on websites;
- Integrate with the other stakeholders at the higher education institution or with other student organisations;
- Value the feedback, ideas, human resources, new perspectives given by exchange students as it might prove to be very useful for your association;
- Encourage your own members to have an "internationalisation at home" experience by getting involved in the support of exchange students.

6.3 For Teachers & Tutors

Teachers and academic tutors have been involved in the development of the pilot courses and the assessment procedures and have contributed substantially during several workshops concerning e-coaching. They are key players in the implementation of blended mobility and e-coaching activities in their own courses.

As a teacher or tutor you can:

- Follow the progress of your outgoing students and organise virtual support with academic matters if needed;
- Provide virtual support for both incoming and outgoing exchange students. It is important however not to neglect the importance of face-to-face support as well in order to develop a blended approach;
- Try to become part of a team or keep in contact with people within your institution who have the necessary competences and skills to support exchange students through ICT, in case you are not that familiar with the use of ICT for educational purposes yourself;
- Communicate with the International Relations Office or other student mobility coordinators within your institution;
- Allow and encourage students, after returning, to share their speciality/discipline related study experience with others.

6.4 For (senior) managers in Higher Education Institutions

Higher education institutions' management staff should acknowledge the importance of virtual initiatives and methods that support physical mobility

within their recognition of the importance of student mobility in general. The best way to move forward is to recognise these issues both publicly and explicitly.

In order to really enhance the process towards the implementation of blended mobility activities in mainstream education, you can:

- Give virtual activities and courses to support exchange students a place in the university structure and policy. Go for long term solutions as much as possible;
- Link all stakeholders involved in student mobility within the institution. Teachers, International Relations Officers and IT people or e-learning experts all have their own specific expertise when it comes to supporting exchange students. It is important to realise that if something goes wrong in the communication between the different services/departments, nothing turns out right, even when you have the best schemes and virtual platforms. Therefore, facilitate and ensure coordination and communication between all, bring expertise together and pool resources. Be aware that involving all stakeholders could be a slow process requiring time;
- Exchange knowledge by organising training and workshops in how educational tools and technologies can be used for the support of exchange students. Make sure that this expertise is university-wide available;
- Be open to the 'bottom-up approach'. See what is already happening within your institution. However, know that the bottom-up approach is a long road and support from the university top remains necessary;
- Identify examples of good practice also beyond your own institution (including through university networks, nationally and internationally, to which you belong) and disseminate and implement them in your own university;
- Recognise and value the staff at International Relations Offices who are organising virtual support activities. Also motivate teachers and reward them to be involved in innovative initiatives in the field.

6.5 For International Relations Offices and student mobility coordinators

International Relations Offices are key actors and have the necessary knowledge and expertise when it comes to supporting mobile students. It

seems the “natural” unit for taking up responsibilities in this respect. Staff working at International Relations Offices and student mobility coordinators are often the direct contact persons for exchange students, both incoming and outgoing, and in that sense they obviously have an important role to play.

As an International Relations Officers and student mobility coordinators you can:

- Organise virtual preparation courses for incoming students. These courses should include some basic training of the hosting country's native language;
- Support mobility in *all* the stages of the process (before, during and after). Also provide support for both incoming and outgoing students. In general incoming students are looked after better but there is a need for support to outgoing students as well;
- Use a blended approach. It is strongly recommended to accompany virtual support activities once in a while by face-to-face meetings;
- Offer all necessary information for mobile students in a coordinated way. Centralise information on an institutional website that is easy to access, well structured and regularly updated. Communicate to the exchange students where they can find everything;
- Focus the information (preferably in several languages) on sharing academic (e.g. course information), practical and social issues. Make sure to provide “honest” information that is useful for the students, and not purely “marketing material”;
- Use former exchange students and students associations as a source of information to assist the future outgoing and incoming students, especially at practical level;
- Use attractive and user-friendly tools to communicate with students. Stimulate and facilitate students’ experience sharing with the help of virtual tools and also monitor and follow online discussions;
- Cooperate with IT services or e-learning units getting knowledge about new IT tools to facilitate student communication;
- Cooperate with faculty and teachers who are close to the teaching and learning process of the exchanges students and make information on incoming students (numbers, countries of origin, etc.) available to teaching staff.

6.6 For central support services in Higher Education Institutions

Central support services in Higher Education institutions include for example e-learning or IT services, libraries, student record offices, etc. Also they can play an important role in the promotion and the quality enhancement of e-coaching in their institutions.

They can for example:

- Address the needs of mobile students by putting as much information as possible online;
- Make IT services available everywhere, facilitate Internet access (and not only on campus);
- Create newsletters and other methods of raising awareness on the existence of the library, IT and other services that are offered to international students;
- Treat international students as local students. Give them the same access and digital rights;
- Cooperate with other stakeholders involved and train them in the use of ICT.

6.7 For networks of Higher Education Institutions

Networks of higher education institutions are pre-eminently good disseminators. Through the dissemination of information via their own communication channels they can influence (e.g. stimulate, support, advise, etc.) their members in the implementation of blended mobility and e-coaching in mainstream activities.

As a network you can:

- Promote awareness and distribute information about blended mobility support activities among their members;
- Get your members involved: identify expertise, existing information, good practice examples, interesting projects within the network;
- Organise training and workshops bringing all stakeholders together (technology people, teachers, International Offices, students or student representatives) to exchange best practices, disseminate project results, etc.;
- Facilitate and create links between universities (through workshops or EU projects...);

- Support students who are on an exchange between network members and try to implement the VM-BASE ideas in the member institutions;
- Bring together all stakeholders involved;
- Try to have an impact on EU policies, influencing European, national and regional education agencies.

6.8 For the European Commission & national and regional policy makers

Policy makers on all levels (European, national or regional) play a crucial role in the promotion and awareness raising of the blended mobility and e-coaching concepts through a top-down approach.

They can:

- Promote awareness, disseminate and distribute information on the topic, especially through the educational agencies in the different countries;
- Make sure that the national agencies take information seriously that is provided by higher education institutions;
- Maintain funding for innovation at appropriate level;
- Signal the importance of virtual support initiatives and put them into practice;
- Think about how closely related projects could be linked, bring them together in a coordinated way. Make for example a website where all the outputs of projects can be found;
- Ensure that methodologies are taken up in mobility programmes with third countries. Much of the work done now focuses on mobility within Europe but applied methodologies could be even of more importance to those students who are physically further away.