

HOME AND AWAY: ET- SOLUTIONS FOR MOBILE STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

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Abstract

Mobility of students, teachers and staff has always been one of the most important features of universities. But the growing success of Erasmus and other exchange programmes have revealed a new need for students to get more and better guidance and support. Virtual Mobility, enabled by the use of educational technologies (ET), therefore is becoming increasingly popular as a substitute and/or complement to the traditional mobility programmes in order to support the mobile student of tomorrow in an efficient and effective way.

This paper first provides the experiences gained in three pilots conducted in the framework of the European VM-BASE-project, that make use of a variety of technologies and tools to virtually support physically mobile students in one way or another. In most cases, a blended approach was adopted, in which these virtual activities have been combined with face-to-face experiences. Based on the pilot results, guidelines for International Relations Offices and student mobility coordinators have been formulated.

The paper furthermore introduces the EPICS project which aims to work from Virtual Mobility projects such as VM-BASE towards mainstream Virtual Erasmus schemes and programmes.

Key Words:

Virtual Mobility, educational technologies, Erasmus, student mobility, blended mobility, internationalisation

1. Introduction

The importance of 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. In 2007, the Erasmus programme¹ celebrated its 20th anniversary. The Erasmus programme is probably one of the best-known actions of the European Commission, encouraging student as well as staff mobility, and aiming to enhance the quality and to reinforce the European dimension of higher education. Erasmus has been and remains a key factor in the internationalisation of the European higher education systems. Few, if any, programmes launched by the European Union have had a similar Europe-wide reach. The Erasmus website indicates that around 90% of European universities take part in

the programme and approximately 1.7 million students have participated since it started in 1987. More than 3,100 higher education institutions in 31 countries are participating in the Erasmus programme, and even more are waiting to join.ⁱⁱ In the academic year 2006-2007, 159,324 European students participated in the Erasmus programmes.

On Erasmus, Ján Figel', European Commissioner in charge of Education, Training, Culture and Youth said: "Europe needs more and better mobility at all levels, and Erasmus is an excellent way forward. (...) The European Commission's vision is that participation in the Erasmus programme should be the general rule, rather than the exception, for both students and teachers (European Commission, 2008)ⁱⁱⁱ." The EU Lifelong Learning Programme^{iv}, established in 2006, includes the essential but also ambitious objective of having three million individual participants in student mobility by 2012.

Erasmus has given European university students the chance of studying and living in a foreign country and has reached the status of a social and cultural phenomenon. The months spent abroad are a turning point in the lives of thousands of individuals. Studies show that a period spent abroad not only enriches students' lives in the academic field but also in the acquisition of intercultural skills and self-reliance. Staff exchanges have similar beneficial effects, both for the people participating and for the home and host institutions. But despite the evident success of Erasmus, and including other mobility actions, there are still serious challenges. The statistics and the research emphasise the limits of what can be achieved through the current mechanism. There remains room for improvement in particular with regard to adequacy of grants, recognition of study periods, numerical access and student services. Only by supplementing the current physical mobility schemes with institutionalised Virtual Mobility schemes ("virtual Erasmus") the opportunities of achieving the goals set in student mobility can be approached.

2. The EuroPACE approach to Virtual Mobility

Within the EuroPACE network^v several initiatives have been taken to show the added value of Virtual Mobility next to physical mobility programmes such as Erasmus. One of these initiatives was "Being Mobile"^{vi}. Being Mobile was a one year European Project promoting the concept of Virtual Mobility. Its aim was to raise awareness as to how European cooperation in education can be heightened through Virtual Mobility. The Being Mobile team started to collect good-practices in Virtual Mobility and based on these made a definition and categorisation of Virtual Mobility initiatives.

In its final manual^{vii}, the Being Mobile project defines Virtual Mobility in Higher Education Institutions as follows: "Virtual Mobility is a form of learning which consists of virtual components through an ICT supported learning environment that includes cross-border collaboration with people from different backgrounds and cultures working and studying together, having, as its main purpose, the enhancement of intercultural understanding and the exchange of knowledge".

The definition highlights the richness of the experience and the similarities with the Erasmus exchange programme. However, Virtual Mobility goes beyond virtual Erasmus. It is more than just a copy of the traditional Erasmus programme and it can take many forms.

Based on the definition four main types were identified amongst the good-practices^{viii}:

- A virtual course (as part of a programme) or seminar (series) at a Higher Education Institution: This category focuses on the virtual course as part of a whole study programme at a HEI or a virtual seminar or seminar series, also in the framework of a HEI. Here, students (or citizens) only engage in Virtual Mobility for a single course or seminar (series) and the rest of their learning activities take place in the traditional way.
- A whole programme at a Higher Education Institution: This second type of Virtual Mobility activity is an entire virtual study programme at a HEI giving students from different countries the chance to take this study programme without having to go abroad for a whole academic year.
- Virtual student placements: Through (educational) technologies, students can enjoy some form of virtual placement with a foreign company. Virtual placements also provide a practical preparation for new ways of working, where the use of tools like videoconferencing, and collaborative workspaces will be commonplace. They are organised between an institution and a company in a different country. Virtual placements in companies in particular give students a real-life experience in a corporate setting through international collaborative team work and enable the educational institution to internationalise its course offer and adapt it to the dynamics of the current economy.
- Virtual support activities to physical exchange: Through educational technologies, students who take part in a physical Erasmus exchange Virtual Mobility, can be better prepared and coached.

Looking at the typology and reflecting about which types have become more or less mainstream, we see many examples of the first three types, but the fourth type “Virtual support activities to physical exchange”, is underrepresented and less documented. Research data from real experiences and practical advice on the way educational technologies can assist exchange students to gain the maximum out of their stay abroad, was missing.

However, this type of Virtual Mobility can have many advantages, described as follows in the Being Mobile manual:

“Virtual Mobility opens up possibilities to both better prepare and follow-up students who take part in a physical Erasmus exchange. Student selection can take place via electronic means, such as videoconferencing or web-conferencing, allowing teaching staff to put a face on a candidate and to check social and language skills. Later, a preparatory language and “cultural integration” course could be provided by the host institution supported via ICT. At the end of the physical exchange, students can also keep in touch with their peers, scattered around the world, and finish their common research project, or paper work. They can also establish a so-called ‘Virtual Alumni’ organisation, to foster life-long friendships and networks.”

EuroPACE therefore started the VM-BASE project^{ix} at the end of 2006. VM-BASE stands for “Virtual Mobility Before and After a Student Exchange”. During this European Commission supported project, the team explored the options for extending, supporting, complementing and improving physical student mobility through Virtual Mobility activities. VM-BASE promotes a blended approach towards mobility: combining aspects of physical and Virtual Mobility to maximise the advantages of both.

This blended approach is in line with the results of, for example, the Eureka project^x, carried out by the European student association AEGEE, which recommends among

other things that “Erasmus students could be prepared already at their home universities in ‘outgoing seminars’ on the one hand, but could also exchange experiences in ‘return seminars’ on the other hand”. The report also states that “every student should have the right to attend a language course that enables him/her to follow the academic programme” at the host university and that “short-term exchanges and virtual exchanges could be innovations”.

Also the report of the seminar on “Bologna and the challenges of e-learning and distance education” in Ghent (2004)^{xi} places special emphasis on the supportive function Virtual Mobility can play for physical mobility and indicates that “Virtual Mobility must be used to enrich and support physical mobility by better preparing it, providing effective follow-up means for it, and offering the possibility to stay in contact with the home institution while abroad. It can also offer (at least part of) the benefits of physical mobility for those who are otherwise unable to attend courses abroad.”

In order to come to concrete recommendations for all stakeholders in student mobility, the VM-BASE partners investigated through several international pilots how physical exchanges can be better supported in its preparatory, execution and follow-up phase and which particular educational technology services would be needed for this. The pilots targeted both incoming and outgoing students, and focused each time on one or more of the following support mechanisms:

Before a physical exchange:

- Information provision about the host institution;
- Selection of students;
- Preparatory courses (language, culture,...).

During a physical exchange

- E-coaching.

After a physical exchange

- Flexible assessment methods;
- Evaluation and feedback of the exchange;
- Virtual alumni.

3. Three international pilot examples

In the following sections the experiences from three different international pilots are described. The first one focuses on support before a physical exchange, the second during an exchange and the third one after the exchange. In the VM-BASE manual^{xii} several more pilots are described, also on the other types of support.

3.1 Student selection through the 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 K.U.Leuven^{xiii}, 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, taught at the faculty, were converted to an online version and integrated in Toledo, the Blackboard platform of K.U.Leuven, resulting in an online testing- and learning tool. The tests make use of Questionmark Perception. The learning platform is built up out of learning units. After an initial test the user is being redirected to the learning platform. In case the user fails the test, he/she is being advised to review the theory of the respective chapter; in case he/she passes the test he/she can move on to the next chapter. The learning units can be downloaded and printed in PDF format.

A website manual and a discussion board are integrated to offer support to users. Students are expected to post their questions and remarks on the discussion board to allow fellow students to give answers. The course team only intervenes when wrong solutions to exercises are posted.

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. The bachelor students from K.U.Leuven, who were involved in the developing process, seemed to like the platform as such but did not understand why this tool was being created for and used by foreign students and not by them. For this reason, K.U.Leuven bachelor students were also given access and made use of the theory, exercises and tests to prepare for their exams. The foreign students confirmed their need to improve their level of statistical knowledge, after trying out the tool. Although students get access after approval of their file, the team noticed that they only start using it actively in the summer months. This is probably due to the fact that at the moment of getting access, most students are still involved in and occupied with other study programmes etc.

The developer of the tool has experienced considerable challenges during the process. Different departments of the university were involved to offer support regarding technical and pedagogical matters. It proved to be rather hard from time to time to reach the right people for support or to streamline communication between supporting departments. The continuous evolution of online tools, like the Questionmark Perception module, was considered to be another challenge.

The following guidelines and recommendations came out of this pilot:

- It is advisable to conduct some benchmarking as preparation before starting to develop an online platform instead of starting from scratch;
- Students are given access to the tool after their file is approved. At this point they are not yet enrolled at K.U.Leuven. This procedure allows for students to check out their abilities to succeed in the International Master before they make their decision to enrol;
- To develop and maintain an online tool, demands a lot of effort and might increase the workload substantially. It is therefore advisable to engage one person to conduct the task and to be really focused in getting the job done. This will contribute to the quality of the online modules and opens possibilities to really follow-up the users. Even more important is to ensure continuity in work. It has proven to be quite difficult to have a personnel shift in the middle of the developing phase;

- The developing team has chosen to only put material online that is not liable to constant updates. This reduces maintenance afterwards and decreases the workload substantially;

3.2 E-coaching through the “Go abroad”-study unit of the Laurea University of Applied Sciences

Laurea University of Applied Sciences^{xiv} in Finland offers its students various opportunities to study abroad. Outgoing international student mobility consists of student exchanges and placements abroad. Studies abroad strengthen such key competences needed in working life as language skills, understanding of cultures and cooperation skills, as well as give students an opportunity to deepen their knowledge of their future profession and to complete studies that aren't offered at Laurea or elsewhere in Finland.

Laurea participates in various mobility programmes, including Erasmus, and has a wide international cooperation network, with the main focus on higher education institutions in the EU. International student mobility requires long-term commitment and careful planning from the student. Therefore, Laurea organises various informative events on mobility each term. Exchanges are supported by guidelines and preparation courses offered to those who are going abroad. Preparation courses could earlier be taken in person or online. Their purpose is to prepare the student for successful operation in the studying and working environment of a different country. In addition to the prep-courses, students are supported by the international coordinators and faculty of Laurea and host institutions, tutors at the placements and other students during the whole mobility process; before, during and after exchange. The roles of different actors differ depending on the phase of the mobility.

Laurea's existing prep-course for outgoing exchange students however did not meet the current needs. Feedback collected from all outgoing students after their return to Finland stated that they were not fully satisfied with the preparation for exchange. Students needed more information especially on:

- Practical arrangements (e.g. application, grants, documents needed, accommodation);
- Studies that can be completed abroad, the host institution and especially the details of the course;
- Location (country, area, city) and cultural encounters (culture shock, also the return shock).

The coordinators of international activities also felt that the preparation should be developed, with emphasis on e.g. learning agreement, planning of contents of exchange and involving tutor teachers to the mobility process. International student mobility should also be better connected to student's development in globalisation competence, as it is a central part of curricula at Laurea, and encourage students to get familiar with R&D activities at the host institution and find out possible project ideas.

The development project started in January 2007 by analysing two questionnaires of needs returned by former exchange students and a process simulation of Laurea's outgoing international student exchange. Three main questions were brought out: What should the contents of preparation for exchange be? What should be developed in the process? Which methods of implementation should be used?

It became clear in the discussion that some more preparation before the exchange and much more support during the exchange were needed to meet the needs of students and respond to the feedback. 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 also contact with other exchange students was found 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 a new study unit for supporting international student mobility was created:

- Blended learning (some parts virtually, some parts face-to-face);
- Better integration of the exchange to studies and personal learning agreement;
- Deepening the contents of the exchange: professional development, benchmarking ideas concerning R&D, LbD (learning methods);
- Continuance throughout the whole mobility process (before, during and after exchange).

The “Go Abroad” pilot study unit was planned and was taken into use in May 2007 with the first group of students, continuing until the end of the autumn term exchange, i.e. January 2008. A second group of students started in the pilot study unit in autumn 2007 and continued to the end of their spring semester abroad in 2008. This allowed for experiences in peer support also. The pilot study unit was evaluated and plans for future were made in spring 2008: the course had received positive feedback and was developed further as well as disseminated inside Laurea to all other units (starting from April 2008).

The course now includes an interactive online discussion forum for students before, during and after exchange and the possibility for e-tutoring and e-support during the exchange. The course is delivered using blended learning, in the e-learning platform called Optima.

The main conclusion of the development project is the importance to support not just the exchange, but students’ learning process as a whole. The pilot study unit “Go Abroad” has deepened the learning experience of some students remarkably. 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.

It was however clear that some students like online support better than others, and there should be a possibility to modify the course according to the needs of the students (e.g. based on earlier experiences, content of the exchange). The students also used other Internet-based forums, e.g. other virtual courses or work spaces, during their xchange. These were partly overlapping with “Go Abroad” and resulted in decreased motivation. All in all, the discussion forum and the information included were very good, but the course assignments should be developed further.

The use of the model workspace of “Go Abroad”, which was created in the pilot project, will harmonise the information and support for international student exchange and work placement in Laurea.

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

The Master programme European Social Security at K.U.Leuven provides a specialised, highly research based study of social security from a legal, economic, social policy, administrative and philosophical perspective based on a strong comparative framework which focuses upon the provision of social protection right across Europe. This post-graduate programme combines electronic long-distance learning from home with two short stays of ten days each at the K.U.Leuven. The programme can be followed on a full-time (1 year) or part-time (2 years) basis. The Master programme blends regular with distance learning: students receive introductory courses in Leuven at the start of the academic year after which they study from their own campus or home supported by an (e-) coach. Assessment is also blended: open book exams take place online, written exams in a remote coordination centre and oral exams at the end of the year, back in Leuven.

In the academic year 2007-2008 not all oral examinations however could be organised face-to-face in Leuven. Some of the enrolled students came from countries where there was no remote coordination centre while the oral defence of the paper at the end of the Master was made obligatory. A solution was found in the set up of oral examinations at a distance, supported by web-conferencing. The support unit, AVNet-KULeuven, guided the teaching team of the Master through the process of selecting the right tool, choosing a realistic scenario, and dealing with organisational issues. In January 2008, the exams were organised through FlashMeeting^{xv}. FlashMeeting is a web-based conferencing tool that allows video as well as audio, which increases the interactivity of the meeting. Typically a meeting is pre-booked by a registered user. A URL, containing a unique password for the meeting, is returned by the FlashMeeting server. The person who has made the booking passes this on to the people that wish to participate, who simply click on the link to enter into the meeting at the arranged time. During the meeting one person speaks (i.e. broadcasts) at a time. Other people can simultaneously contribute using text chat, the whiteboard, or emoticons etc. while waiting for their turn to speak. This way the meeting is ordered, controlled and easy to follow. A replay of the meeting is instantly available after the meeting is finished, to those with the unique replay URL.

The stakeholders in this pilot provided the following feedback:

- The quality of the exam was considered to be the same as with a face-to-face oral exam. In comparison with written exams, the professor even had the impression to be able to test more in depth this way. The possibility of watching a recording of the exam was considered to be a plus: In case of doubt, the recording allows for the teacher to make a more correct evaluation; In case of dispute between the involved parties, the recording can also prove to be really helpful. In this pilot, students made no objection towards the recording of their exams. However, for privacy reasons, this point needs to be taken into account!
- The inevitable problem of control exists. In this pilot, a creative solution was found in asking the student to show his/her environment (desk). In addition to this, students were asked to position their webcam in a way that the person is clearly visible;
- It takes a considerable amount of time for both the student and the teacher to get used to the medium. Both parties had no experience with oral distance exams. Students experienced the lack of facial expressions and body language (caused by low resolution webcams) as a limitation. Making the exam preparation in front of the webcam takes some time to get used to as well. The organisation of this oral exam was intensive in terms of time and staff, as well in

the preparatory phase (planning) as during the exam itself (support). Prior to the exam, all students were contacted regarding the setup of the exam. A trial was done, during half a day, to get acquainted with the tool. During the exam, two assistants were present, apart from the teacher. The exam itself took half a day (for 5 students only). One assistant ensured the planning, organisation and communication towards the students: providing the exam questions through email, providing hyperlink to the meeting place.... In case of a delay, this assistant adapted the planning. The second assistant guided the students on a technical level: entering the meeting room, checking camera and sound, control on lurking, etc.

- Connectivity problems are inevitable and could be a big challenge/problem for the organisation of the oral exam. Some students needed to turn off their firewall settings. One of the students had a weak Internet connection, which caused delays and was very time consuming;
- Delays and changes to the exam programme could have been a factor of stress for certain students (sometimes as an addition to the 'stress' of the new exam approach). Different from a face-to-face exam where eventual delays are immediately visible to the students, explicit initiative is needed from the teacher or the assistants communicating this delay to the students in a 'virtual setting'.

On the basis of these experiences, the coordinators considered web-conferencing as a solid alternative for real live exams, offering the same quality (and even more possibilities, for example, recording the exam. However, organising oral exams at a distance can be very time-consuming. Therefore it is most suited for small groups or, for example, only for those students who have to do a re-examination.

Web-conferencing can also be used as an alternative option for the defence of end-term papers or to coach the student throughout the process (virtual meeting hour during the week to answer additional questions).

4. The role of International Relations Offices

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. In order, to even improve their support services towards these students, the VM-BASE team formulated some general recommendations for them. International Relations Officers and student mobility coordinators are recommended to:

- 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), for both incoming and outgoing students. In general incoming students are looked after better but there is a need to support outgoing students as well;
- Use a blended approach where virtual support activities are accompanied once in a while by face-to-face meetings;
- Offer all necessary information for mobile students in a coordinated way. Therefore, it is best to centralise information on an institutional website that is easy to access, well structured and regularly updated. This should also be communicated to the exchange students;

- Offer multilingual information that, apart from academic information, also covers 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, to share experiences and to monitor online discussions.
- Cooperate with IT services or e-learning units to get aware about new IT tools that can 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.

5. A look into the future

For innovation in education in general, it is of the highest importance that networks such as EuroPACE can continue to function as a test-bed, an observatory, a research and expertise centre.

Even if today, some of the models and educational schemes developed by organisations like EuroPACE are slowly entering mainstream education, there will always be a need for testing new models, new applications and new developments in a creative and open environment before they reach the maturity and the stability needed for large-scale (sustainable) implementation.

Considering the rich experiences gathered through many years of research, implementation and policy activities, EuroPACE is in a position to share knowledge, to stimulate dialogue and to contribute to new, more mature approaches of technology-enhanced education.

In collaboration with its member institutions and partner organisations at national and international level, EuroPACE will therefore continue: to grow in e-competence (i.e. to develop the knowledge and competences of its individual and institutional members/partners); to move its activities beyond the traditional institutions of education towards diverse groups of lifelong learners (including informal learning); to monitor (and influence) ongoing changes and to stimulate creativity and experiments in a spirit of openness; to lobby for the integration of new models such as Virtual Mobility in mainstream education.

Therefore, EuroPACE is currently also participating in the EPICS project coordinated by EADTU - European Association of Distance Teaching Universities^{xvi}. Both networks have been engaged in initiatives and programmes related to Virtual Mobility which have shown the added value of Virtual Mobility next to physical mobility. Some of the more recent projects dealing with Virtual Mobility include the above-mentioned BEING MOBILE and VM-BASE projects. Other examples are REVE (Real Virtual Erasmus)^{xvii}, VENUS (Virtual and E-Mobility for Networking Universities in Society)^{xviii}, E-MOVE (An operational conception of Virtual Mobility)^{xix}, CSVM (Stimulating European Employability through Cross Sector Virtual Mobility)^{xx}, ... Each project targeting different aspects of Virtual Mobility for different groups of participants.

Virtual Mobility is however often still “locked” in these several isolated (pilot) projects and therefore only available to a restricted number of universities and students. The EPICS project will now work towards mainstream provision of Virtual Mobility by offering international courses clearly as integral part of the university study programmes. The main objective of EPICS therefore is to move from project based Virtual Mobility towards the realisation of a Virtual Erasmus programme/scheme.

The project will support universities in organising Virtual Mobility as part of their study offerings by sharing gained expertise and experiences, build on the existing networks in Virtual Mobility and broaden these with increased involvement of universities and staff.

EPICS envisages the following outcomes:

- A shared expertise and experiences of Virtual Mobility-coordinators : One of the main goals of this project is to integrate the available expertise and experience with Virtual Mobility to set the basis for a European Virtual Erasmus programme. The core-group will therefore present good practices of organising Virtual Mobility and possibilities to overcome common obstacles like assessment on-line, enrolment, recognition of credits etc., address Virtual Mobility specific issues and present possible solutions. This will be partly shared material from earlier projects and partly new produced material by combined efforts.
- An extension of networks of Virtual Mobility: By combining existing networks in Virtual Mobility, the project will have a strong basis for an immediate institutionalisation of a European Virtual Mobility community. This community already represents numerous participating universities involved in stimulating student mobility. The interchange of the involved networks and dynamic to establish new networks will generate more international courses available to students. By including these courses in the university's mainstream study programmes EPICS will increase the visibility and accessibility of international courses to students and consequently their participation.
- An EPICS portal: The project will contribute to increased numbers of European Virtual Mobility courses and services as well as increased numbers of universities that share courses and services in Europe. The internationalisation of courses will be technically supported by developing a European Portal for International Courses and Services (EPICS).

By combining the available knowledge and experience as well as the existing networks in Virtual Mobility, the project will have a strong basis for an immediate institutionalisation of a European Virtual Mobility community. The EPICS portal will offer the necessary technical infrastructure to support staff and students in organising and participating in Virtual Mobility schemes and establishes the basis for a Virtual Erasmus programme.

6. Conclusions

The Bologna Declaration is considered to be a strategic starting point for European education and training systems to support mobility, flexibility, comparability and internationalisation. The position of the International Relations Offices of the universities is crucial in this process. But also, teaching and the university support staff have a key role to play in making this vision a reality. To enhance internationalisation of universities and support mobility, the authors have explored the possibilities of "Virtual Erasmus" or "Virtual Mobility" whereby educational technologies are used in addition to the physical exchange programmes. It can provide different dimensions of mobility, including the creation of virtual learning communities, virtual projects, the involvement

of many universities simultaneously in a project or course, the facilitation of international collaborative learning and teaching, virtual assessment etc.

This paper explored in particular the options for extending, supporting and complementing physical student mobility through Virtual Mobility activities. In particular, it gathered the outcomes and experiences of the VM-BASE (Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges) project which aimed to improve the quality of student exchanges by offering virtual support, both before, during and after physical mobility. The pilots that were conducted and described in this paper provided practical guidelines and recommendations for the stakeholders involved in organising student mobility. We hope they will be of value and give inspiration to everybody who is considering engaging in similar activities.

Building further on the results of its pilots, the authors are now engaging in new activities, such as EPICS, which focus on sharing expertise and good-practices with stakeholders in the field of Virtual Mobility and Virtual Erasmus. It is only when all stakeholders recognise the benefits of organising Virtual Mobility activities that they really will be integrated in mainstream education and become sustainable in the long term.

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^x EURECA European Education Campaign. <http://www.projects.aegee.org/eureca/> & <http://www.projects.aegee.org/eureca/resu.htm>

^{xi} Report on the international seminar Bologna and the Challenges of e-learning and distance education. Ghent 4-5 June 2004. p. 9. http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/EN/Bol_sem/Seminars/040604Ghent/040605_Report.pdf

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^{xiv} Laurea University of Applied Sciences. <http://www.laurea.fi>

^{xv} FlashMeeting. <http://flashmeeting.open.ac.uk/home.html>

^{xvi} European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU).
<http://www.eadtu.nl>

^{xvii} REVE (Real Virtual Erasmus) project. <http://reve.europace.org>

^{xviii} VENUS (Virtual and E-mobility for Networking Universities in Society) project.
<http://www.venus-project.net>

^{xix} E-MOVE (An operational conception of virtual mobility) project.
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^{xx} CSVM (Stimulating European Employability through Cross Sector Virtual Mobility) project. <http://www.eadtu.nl/csvm/>