EPICS: New Opportunities For

International Student Mobility

EPICS
for Virtual Erasmus

EADTU

Education and Culture DG
Lifelong Learning Programme

1. INTRODUCTION

In the political and societal discourse of developments in higher education, students' (and teachers') mobility has become increasingly important. But talking about student mobility usually means talking about physical mobility. You will immediately think of students in their early twenties packing their suitcases and spending several months abroad. It means living and learning in a foreign country. But what about the majority of students who don't participate in a physical mobility scheme? Or older students, engaged in family and work life, the disabled, the less well off who cannot get a room in L'Auberge Espagnole? What about the lifelong learner everyone is talking about?

Since employment in most segments of society is becoming increasingly more international, trans-national cooperation and international skills and competences are becoming more important and an essential part of any higher education programme, reflecting common practice in academia (research, innovation, development of professions, networks and societies). In practice however, higher education institutions struggle to realise this objective. Mobility is a reality for only a minority of students. Currently, only an estimated 4% receive an Erasmus grant at some stage during their studies. The vast majority of students is still studying within national boundaries, which seems to be in total contradiction to their "real life". This contradiction cannot be solved with current mobility schemes only.

The objective of this paper is to introduce virtual mobility in general and EPICS for Virtual Exchange in particular as a supplement to the present models of international student mobility in higher education. EPICS for Virtual Exchange can become an important contributor as it offers mobility for potentially all students. It clearly has its very own profile and legitimacy, being neither superior nor inferior to other mobility schemes, but complementing and reinforcing them. It is mirroring both the physical and virtual world of students and staff, exceeding all bounds and borders.

2. DESCRIPTION OF VIRTUAL MOBILITY

Virtual teaching and learning is increasingly part of higher education in any university, that is using advanced learning environments and technologies. These involve learning communities, wiki-based constructive learning, cross campus networks, digital libraries and resources, etc. They have created new opportunities for accessibility, interactivity, personalised learning and multiple campus participation. Of course, this creates also new chances for international teaching and learning. It extends the physical international environment to a virtual/on line international environment, as is the case in any other segment of society. It extends the classical opportunities of physical mobility, which is well known and mainly promoted by the successful Erasmus Scheme of the European Commission, to new opportunities of virtual mobility.

Virtual mobility serves as a purposeful opportunity, a more flexible and cheaper mobility scheme, fitting the needs of potentially all students, including non-physical mobile students and lifelong learners. As a general term, virtual mobility "offers access to courses and study schemes in a foreign country and allows for communication activities with teachers and fellow students abroad via the new information and communication technologies." (EADTU Task Force on Virtual Mobility, 2004). Hence, it extends the prospects of physical mobility to many international learning objectives (new academic content, international community learning, intercultural skills, communication skills, language skills), however not replacing all of them (i.e. learning a particular foreign language or assimilating a particular foreign culture at a deep level).

Virtual Exchange offers all students the possibility of sampling a course module/ a seminar/ a joint project/ a joint thesis package from a other university in another European country, in order to learn or to construct new content in an international setting and to develop intercultural skills. By taking a module from another country, students will have the opportunity to open a window on a different academic content and approach, a comparative view, a different culture, and to meet students from different countries through virtual forums, possibly combined with telephone and video. All of this, without the expense and upheaval of leaving home and enriching the curriculum of the home university.

2.1 Some official statements on virtual mobility

The discussion launched by the European Commission on its Green Paper on Learning Mobility[1] has revealed some interesting statements on virtual mobility.

On the future of learning mobility, e.g. the Dutch government says that technology offers opportunities which were not available in the past and increases the possibilities of virtual and physical mobility. Through the online accessibility of information and knowledge, the physical presence abroad is in many cases not needed anymore. The future European policy should take this new context as a starting point. This requires a comprehensive actualisation of the European policy on learning mobility so far. Finally, the potential of virtual mobility should be utilized on a European scale[2].

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[1]   Commission of the European Communities, Green Paper, Promoting the learning mobility of young people, Brussels 8.07.2009, COM (2009), 329 final, 22p.
[2]   Toekomst van mobiliteit van leren; Kabinetsreactie op het Groenboek leermobiliteit van jongeren bevorderen (6 November 2009), p.21-24

In the recent NUS Guide to studying abroad, the British National Union of Students states that "the 20 percent target for student mobility of the Council of Ministers of Education is exceptionally challenging and will take considerable effort, as well as a strategic approach, but even this would leave 80% of the students without the experience of studying abroad. We must think more creatively about how we truly internationalise our institutions and integrate virtual mobility into our curriculum more broadly." [3]

In an advice to the government, the Flemish Council of Higher Education agrees with the Bologna Follow Up Group that only physical mobility should count for the 20 percent mobility benchmark of the Council of Ministers. However, the Council states that different forms of mobility, like physical and virtual mobility, should complete and reinforce each other. The higher education institution should define its international policy and introduce a fully fledged internationalisation culture within the institution accordingly. Different forms of mobility should support and complement each other. It is important to understand that e.g. virtual mobility can give the initial impetus to an effective physical mobility. [4]

2.2   Added value of the virtual mobility model

Hence, virtual mobility should not only be considered as an instrument to enrich physical mobility but as an innovative and fully fledged form of international mobility per se. It can add new and innovative educational opportunities, with the additional possibility to create an environment for several international universities simultaneously, rather than remaining in only one host and one home university like a physical mobility scheme usually provides. It can offer more varied modes of study which can be shorter, less time specific and place independent, as well as supply more personalised and more specialised opportunities for the student. It includes collaborative learning in online student communities, virtual seminars, virtual projects, joint thesis work, constructive group learning around wiki-like activities with different stakeholders involved, etc. An international experience by virtual mobility therefore is not restricted to one university or country and group of fellow students. Further the skills gained in virtual mobility reflect the skills needed in today's labour market, such as intercultural skills, the ability to communicate and cooperate in an online environment and proficiency in modern ICT and web 2.0 technologies.
International virtual mobility will in that sense not only contribute to the original vision of the Erasmus programme on a truly European scale, but also add a new flexibility and breadth to the ambition of European student mobility. Therefore virtual mobility appears to be a way in which the ambitions of both the Bologna Declaration, as confirmed by the European Ministers of Education (Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve), and the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission can be realised on a larger scale.

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[3]   Introduction to NUS Guide to studying abroad and European higher education, National Union of Students, january 2010, p. 3
[4]   Raad voor Hoger Onderwijs, Advies over studentenmobiliteit, 24 June 2010, p. 14

2.3   Opportunities by Virtual Mobility

Within EADTU and other European networks, several virtual mobility initiatives and programmes are already running. These activities have shown the benefit of virtual mobility in comparison with physical mobility [5]. They help to overcome its obstacles and to mobilise students who are less likely to participate or even excluded from participation in international studying. To highlight a few: In the project e-move: an operational analysis of virtual mobility (2006-2007) several virtual mobility courses were developed and implemented, especially in the field of humanities. In addition recommendations and procedures for wide scale applications have been published. With REVE (2005-2006) a manual on virtual mobility was published, giving support to teaching staff in implementing virtual mobility. In VM-base (2006-2008) a fully fledged 'blended' Exchange action was setup and supported in order to enhance the success of the Erasmus programme. The Net-Active project (2006-2008) initiated a European network of Master courses by intercontinental virtual mobility with Latin America. And finally CSVM (2006-2008) helped to bring distance students into online working via virtual internships and thus stimulate their employability.

Of course, international teaching and learning can also be designed as a combination of physical and virtual mobility. The advantages of any form of mobility are closely related to the learning outcomes envisaged. But in any form of mobility the experience of international cooperation should belong to the core. While the intercultural experience and language learning will be more intense during a physical stay abroad, virtual mobility can also contribute to this though the outcomes may not be exactly the same. As physical mobility offers the best possible opportunity to experience other cultures and social environments, Virtual mobility focuses more on complementarities of academic content and approaches, alternative learning activities and environments, communication with international peers and staff, exchange of experience and cooperation, coping with organizations in foreign countries which do not work in the same way as the same kind of organizations do at home, etc.. Moreover, multiple software is developed to facilitate effective teaching and learning in this context.

To make the best use of the outcomes of the former virtual mobility projects funded by the European Commission and to capture and validate the underlying knowledge and experiences gathered in the different projects, a Virtual Exchange scheme has now been developed to be integrated as an action in the Erasmus Programme. Only by mainstreaming the practices developed in the former pilots, the full potential of virtual mobility will be exploited.

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[5]   For further information on a selection of these projects please view the following links:

e-move: an operational analysis of virtual mobility (http://www.eadtu.nl/virtualmobility/); REVE project: The Europace network of traditional universities in virtual mobility (http://reve.europace.org/partners/index.php); Venus: virtual and E-Mobility for Networking Universities in Society (http://www.venus-project.net/); VM-base: virtual mobility before and after student exchange (http://vm-base.europace.org); Sputnic: technology enhanced international educational cooperation (http://sputnic.Europace .org); Net-Active: European network of Master courses by intercontinental virtual mobility with Latin America (http://www.net-active.info/); CSVM: Cross-Sector virtual mobility (http://www.eadtu.nl/csvm/);

3. DESCRIPTION OF VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

With the further development of new learning environments and new educational models, the full use of available ICT in virtual higher education is likely to be one of the most important driving forces in the academic world for the next ten years. The main challenge for the Erasmus Programme of the European Commission is therefore now the inclusion of innovative models for international student mobility. Already, the former virtual mobility projects have proved to be a mobility action line in itself as well as an important extension to physical mobility. Virtual mobility increases the number of students in mobility schemes at all ages and in circumstances that would normally be prevent participation. Potentially, all students can participate without exceptions. On the other hand it provides an extension to the course offerings of the student's home university. This is in the interests of the home university's competitive positioning as well as a service to their students.

Besides this, there is clearly added value in the learning of skills and key competencies for international employability through the use of ICT supported participation with a multilingual approach. Already, virtual internships show the possibility of online employment in an international context. Further, the virtual mobility programmes are forming an extension to the existing physical university cooperation models.

Therefore, this Virtual Exchange scheme has been developed to become an integral part of the Erasmus Programme. The virtual scheme will contribute to increased number of students involved in mobility schemes and will enable more universities to be connected within international mobility exchange models.

3.1   EPICS for Virtual Erasmus: From pilot to mainstream

This Virtual Exchange model was developed as part of the EPICS (European Portal of International Courses and Services) project. Its ambition is to bring virtual mobility out of the pilot phase and enhance it to the mainstream of European higher education by facilitating the integration of students and curricula in the European higher education area. In practice this means that:

- Virtual Exchange is based on established mobility schemes by bi- and multilateral agreements between universities.
- Students can find selected courses from other universities directly on the website of their home university.
- Available courses are pre-assessed and recognised by student's home university.
  No negotiation from the student is needed.
- The content of the international courses is coherent with the home university programme
- Free of charge for students, except for study materials and books.

Virtual Exchange was designed in close correspondence with the running mode of the well established Physical Erasmus Programme. The major consequence of this decision was that the core of the ECTS agreements is respected, which is also the basis of the Physical Erasmus scheme. The ECTS documents constitute a widely used and accepted way of communicating those elements of information which are useful for all learners (including mobile and non-mobile students), academic and administrative staff, employers and other stakeholders. Using ECTS key documents correctly ensures transparency and enhances quality in higher education.

3.2   Core ECTS based features

In the current Erasmus Programme there are four key documents that are essential to any exchange:
1. *The Course Catalogue*
2. *Student Application Form*
3. *Learning Agreement*
4. *Transcript of Records*

All four key documents are to be used for Virtual Exchange as well as an additional institutional agreement for Virtual Exchange.

1. Course Catalogue
This is the regular guide for all students attending the institution. All information should be detailed, user-friendly and up-to-date. The catalogue should be published on the institution's website so that all interested parties can easily access it. It should be published sufficiently in advance for students to make their choices. The publication should be available on the website, not only in the local language, but preferably also in another widely-used language in order to enhance transparency at international level.

→   In the Virtual Exchange scheme, courses from another institution are offered to the students by means of a customised window at their home institution. Students therefore can see all courses from other universities that are accepted as Virtual Exchange courses by their home institution. They form a natural extension to the home institution's own course guide.

2. Student Application Form
This form contains all the essential information about a mobile student that a prospective host institution needs.
→   This form will also be used in the Virtual Exchange listing of all the courses a student wants to take/takes as part of a Virtual Exchange stay.

3. Learning Agreement
By signing a Learning Agreement the student enters into an agreement to follow the course/module on line, the foreign higher education institution agrees to deliver the course/module and the student's home institution agrees to grant credits for the achievement of the expected learning outcomes. The Agreement must be signed by the home institution, the host institution and the student. Those signing on behalf of the two institutions must be in a formal position of authority which allows them to commit the institutions. A student should not be asked to negotiate academic recognition with individual academic staff members.
→   Such a Learning Agreement will also be used in Virtual Exchange.

4. Transcript of Records

This is an important document for the student and institution. It ensures that students have an accurate and up-to-date record of their progress, the educational components they have taken, the number of ECTS credits they have achieved and the grades they have been awarded. The ECTS Transcript of Records is such a certification, in an agreed format. It is an important formal document, providing evidence of progress and recognition.

→   Such a Transcript of Records will also be kept in Virtual Exchange.

Thus Virtual Exchange follows the Physical Erasmus model closely in its formal processes as well as in documentation.

4. SPECIFIC VIRTUAL EXCHANGE CRITERIA

For the Virtual Exchange model several specific criteria apply. These have been agreed upon by the initiating universities represented within the EPICS for Virtual Erasmus project.

5. Institutional agreement
In addition an Institutional Agreement will be signed. It lists the courses one or each institution has agreed to accept from another institution as part of their Virtual Exchange mobility scheme. It also refers to the terms and conditions of the Virtual Exchange scheme as listed in 11 paragraphs:

§1   The modules that are subject of the agreement will each have a value of at least 5 ECTS credits.

§2   The transfer of all ECTS credits for each module and full recognition of the module towards the student's degree at the home institution will be guaranteed, if the module is successfully completed.

§3   International collaboration will be an integral part of any module that is subject of a Virtual Exchange agreement. A Virtual Exchange student will be collaborating with fellow students in group discussions, on assignments or in alternative ways.

§4   The home and the host institution as well as the Virtual Exchange student will sign a Learning Agreement.

§5   The examination of the module will take place in the country in which the home institution of the Virtual Exchange student is based. The student taking the module will not have to travel to a foreign country but should be given the possibility to do the examination either on the campus of the home institution, at a study centre of the host institution, at an embassy or any other facility that is provided by the host institution.

§6   Travelling abroad should not be a mandatory element of Virtual Exchange. However those Virtual Exchange students who wish to participate in face-to-face activities, including examinations, which are part of their Virtual Exchange module, will not be prevented from doing so.

§7   The examination will be done in the original language of the module or an alternative language the module provider offers to Virtual Exchange students as stated in the module description.

§8   Quality Assurance is the responsibility of the module provider. The home institution's selection of the modules it wishes to include in a Virtual Exchange scheme will be based on its own quality criteria.

§9   The module provider will decide on the maximum number of students from the home institution it will accommodate in each module which is the subject of this agreement. The number is stated in the Institutional Agreement.

§10   The general principle of Virtual Exchange is that the institution providing the module will grant a fee waiver to Virtual Exchange students. This institution will determine the number of Virtual Exchange students receiving a fee waiver for each module which is the subject of this agreement.

§11   Staff mobility as part of Virtual Exchange will include a physical stay at the partner institution, incorporating a teaching task.

Course template

All information regarding the course delivery, administrative and learning support, examinations and the course language and other relevant aspects is given in a course template. The template is compliant with the ECTS course descriptors and the additional ECTS requirements for on line and distance courses. Completed templates are stored in a database on EPICS. The courses in the database have been made available to international students by the providing institution and are accessible via a search engine.

Funding schemes

To ensure the future of Virtual Exchange we need to establish a funding structure which fits the objectives and the business models of on line and distance education (e.g. emphasis should be on refunding the additional costs). This is still under discussion.
Currently we can distinguish three models of students studying abroad:
a) Distance education: universities charge the regular costs to the students; based on university – student agreement. Therefore not a mobility scheme between universities.
b) Virtual Exchange model: universities give a fee waiver to the students, except for study material. This is funded by universities themselves, based on university – university agreement; temporarily and for restricted number of students only.
C) Virtual Erasmus model: universities give a fee waiver to the students, except for study material and receive funding for their additional costs; based on university – university agreement with support by European Commission. Formalised and full mainstreamed programme.

EPICS: European Portal for International Courses and Services

The portal contains a:
- Database on distance courses with subcategories of Virtual Exchange courses, meaning without extra fees for the students, except for study materials if applicable.
- A service portal for students, including a study guide for on line learning, contacts of every uni-versity, administrative information, library links, ECTS explained to students, language skills tests.
- A service portal for staff, including guidelines for online and distance teaching and lear-ning, a quick reference guide, library links, information on all institutions that have submit-ted courses to the database, tools for (multimedia) teaching and learning support, formats for Virtual Exchange agreements examples of good practice
- Virtual Exchange Information Package containing all relevant information on the scheme, the submission of courses and the set-up of a partnership.
- A glossary and wiki as well as several other services like virtual meeting rooms are availa-ble on EPICS.

Conclusions

The EPICS project on mainstreaming virtual mobility has resulted in a Virtual Exchange model that is agreed upon by 10 Open and traditional universities. Already interest in joining this model has been shown by dozens of other universities looking for new opportunities for international student and staff mobility. The participating universities will in the end of 2010 start with the Virtual Exchange scheme to mainstream virtual mobility for their students. Virtual Exchange will not only enrich the university's curricula, but certainly offer an international experience for their students directly rela-ted to new competencies and skills needed in an international employment market.

Its innovative approach and design that is fully inline with the well established and highly valued Erasmus Programme offers a unique opportunity to extend Physical Erasmus with a Virtual Exchange scheme. This so-called Virtual Erasmus scheme could formalize and support the student mobility schemes to increase the number of students benefiting from academic mobility schemes. Not, of course, by replacing the successful physical mobility model but extending and strengthening it by virtual mobility and using the full potential of ICT in supporting higher education for the years to come.

Correspondence

European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU)
att George Ubachs, Managing Director
Valkenburgerweg 177, 6419 AT Heerlen
P.O. box 2960, 6401 DL Heerlen
The Netherlands
Tel: +31 (0)45 5762214
E-mail: secretariat@eadtu.eu
Internet: www.eadtu.eu

Overview of partners

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