

The Integration of Virtual Mobility in Europe

Helena Bijmens, EuroPACE ivzw

Facts about Student Mobility

Although physical student mobility is still marginal in Europe - in 2000, a mere 2.3% of European students were pursuing their studies in another European country - we notice that mobility is becoming increasingly important for educational policy makers and also universities and colleges place more and more emphasis on the importance of internationalisation. This is born out by the fact that the European Commission has set a goal in its *Integrated Action Programme in Lifelong Learning* whereby in the year 2011, 3.000.000 of all European students should participate in the Erasmus programmeⁱⁱ.

Need for Virtual Mobility

But what about the remaining 80% of students: those students who do not have an opportunity to participate in Erasmus for social, financial or other reasons? Here too there has been tremendous interest in the idea of *Virtual Erasmus* or *Virtual Mobility* schemes, interpreted to mean educational opportunities that are no longer location dependent and allow for collaboration with foreign students and teachers. Opportunities where learners are able to take courses independently of their physical location, be it in their homes, their places of employment or while staying as an Erasmus student at a host university and taking a course from the home university or a third university. Virtual Mobility is enabled through the use of Information and Communication Technology supported environments that include for example videoconferencing, live streaming, collaborative workspaces, and computer mediated conferencing.

Types of Virtual Mobility

Virtual Mobility can be interpreted in many ways, and the European Commission, as well as national agencies and individual institutions have actively promoted Virtual Mobility for some time, mainly through the financial support of projects within the SOCRATES/Minerva programmeⁱⁱⁱ and the eLearning programme^{iv}. Virtual Mobility can include

- Students taking courses at foreign university while staying at home and vice-versa
- complementing the existing physical Erasmus exchange programmes with virtual elements in the preparation and return phase (student selection, language preparation, assessment from a distance, etc.)
- virtual internships in companies abroad
- guest lecturers from foreign universities virtually presenting their lessons to students in other universities

Benefits

Virtual Mobility of teachers and students enables them to benefit linguistically, culturally and educationally from the experience of other European countries and of their (academic) fields of study. Both students and teachers will develop the necessary skills needed in working life where internationalisation is becoming increasingly important.

It can create a sense of European citizenship in teachers and students who learn to work together in crossborder teams. Furthermore, virtual mobility enables European wide exchanges for all those not able to benefit from existing face-to-face programmes, due to social, geographical or other reasons

At the institutional level, virtual mobility initiatives enhance sound competition between institutions and thus contribute to the competitiveness and attractiveness of the educational offer. It provides an enrichment to the regular educational environment of all institutions

Promotion of Virtual Mobility

One of the several innovative projects in the field of Virtual Mobility is the REVE project, supported by the eLearning Programme of the European Commission and coördinated by EuroPACE ivzw. REVE aims to implement real virtual Erasmus schemes in traditional universities and is also developing the necessary support services around it. Find more information about REVE at <http://reve.europace.org/>

However, a coordinated promotion of pioneer activities in the field of Virtual Mobility often lacks and key outputs, results and experiences of pilot projects remain unknown to the target community. As a result, many virtual mobility activities, organised by few early adopters, remain isolated cases and are often considered a nice 'add-on' to a regular course as opposed to being an integral part of it. This attitude towards Virtual Mobility is a hindrance to large-scale collaboration on a European level amongst Higher Education institutions, their staff and their students. In response to the lack of coordinated promotion, the Being Mobile project was set-up. Being Mobile recently started as an Accompanying Measure of the Socrates Programme and wishes to raise awareness about how European cooperation in education can be heightened through Virtual Mobility. Therefore Being Mobile will manage a targeted dissemination activity, in the form of a workshop, a conference, a publication and a website where all initiatives in the field of Virtual Mobility and their outcomes will be promoted. Find more information at <http://www.being-mobile.net>

Links

REVE – Real Virtual Erasmus: <http://reve.europace.org/>

Being Mobile web site: <http://www.being-mobile.net/>

Being Mobile Press Release:

http://www.europace.org/services/projects/beingmobile/press_release_03hb.pdf

Being Mobile Workshops: <http://users.skynet.be/space/>

Contact details

For more information about REVE , please contact Ilse Op de Beeck
(Ilse.opdebeeck@europace.be)

For more information about Being Mobile, please contact Helena Bijmens
(helena.bijmens@europace.be)

At the following address:

EuroPACE ivzw

Kapeldreef 62

3001 Heverlee

Belgium

tel: +32 16 32 75 73

fax: +32 16 32 79 95

email: helena.bijmens@europace.be

website: <http://www.europace.org>

ⁱ http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/en/com/cnc/2003/com2003_0058en01.pdf

ⁱⁱ http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/lex/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2004/com2004_0474en01.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/socrates/minerva/index_en.html

^{iv} http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/elearning/index_en.html