

VIRTUAL SUPPORT FOR MOBILE STUDENTS – WHAT ICT CAN DO TO ENHANCE STUDENT MOBILITY

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Abstract:

One of the key objectives of the Bologna process is the promotion of mobility of students among all participating countries. Currently about 150,000 students per year take part in the ERASMUS student exchange programme and the European Commission strives for a duplication of this number by 2011. But research findings show that there are opportunities for improvement of the support universities provide for mobile students.

The European project VICTORIOUS conducted a large-scale study on ICT support and digital services for mobile students in Europe by means of questionnaires and student interviews. Almost 2400 students were asked about their experiences when studying abroad. Also more than 50 universities all over Europe provided information on how they support incoming and outgoing students by means of ICT. Based on those surveys recommendations have been formulated to all stakeholders in student mobility.

The recently started European project VM-BASE builds further upon the results of the VICTORIOUS research. VM-BASE focuses on virtual activities, which can be used to prepare and follow-up the physical mobility of students to enrich the exchange and make it even more effective and fruitful. Examples are virtual preparatory and return initiatives and the support of teachers in coaching at a distance (e-coaching). The project thus aims at enhancing the impact and efficiency of the Erasmus programme through the set-up and support of a 'blended' Erasmus action.

This article builds up a picture of digital services and support for European students available and presents the challenges of European universities based on the research and activities carried out by the above-mentioned projects. Both projects are part-funded by the European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture.

Keywords: *Erasmus support, student mobility, blended mobility, internationalisation, Bologna process*

1. Physical, virtual and blended mobility in Higher Education

This year the ERASMUS programme celebrates its 20th birthday. Currently about 150,000 students per year take part in the ERASMUS student exchange and get the opportunity to live and study in another country in Europe. Since the programme was adopted in 1987 more than

1.7 million students had the chance to participate in an ERASMUS exchange¹. ERASMUS has been and remains a key factor in the internationalisation of the European higher education systems. On ERASMUS, Ján Figel, European Commissioner in charge of Education, Training, Culture and Multilingualism said “*Encouraging mobility will remain a priority for the Commission in the coming years, as we expect to reach the target of 3 million Erasmus students by 2011 with almost 300,000 students per year.*”².

Despite the evident success of mobility actions, there remain a number of opportunities for improvement. The European project VICTORIOUS conducted a large-scale study on ICT support and digital services for mobile students resulting in a number of recommendations for stakeholders in student mobility, like the students themselves and their student associations, university managers, international relations offices, Erasmus coordinators, as well as university faculties and departments. The findings of the VICTORIOUS project are presented in Section 2.

One of the biggest challenges for student mobility is that many students simply cannot enjoy the benefits of the ERASMUS programme because of financial reasons, as illustrated by the following quote of a Spanish student: “*I always wanted to travel and live abroad but unfortunately the Erasmus money is so little that I did not even considered becoming an Erasmus student seriously.*”³ Also students with restricted mobility do not have the chance to take part in physical mobility actions.

This is where virtual mobility can play a major role. At the elearningeuropa portal virtual mobility is defined as “*the use of information and communication technologies to obtain the same benefits as one would have with physical mobility but without the need to travel*”.⁴ Virtual mobility thus can on the one hand offer a valuable alternative for physical mobility as it enables students to take part in courses at other universities without having to leave their home university and hence without the financial implications. On the other hand virtual mobility can be used to prepare, support and follow-up physical mobility to enrich the latter and to make it even more effective and fruitful⁵. The combination of virtual mobility and physical mobility is generally termed “blended mobility”.

The recently started European project VM-BASE presented in Section 3 focuses on such blended mobility activities, like virtual preparatory and return initiatives and the support of teachers in coaching at a distance (e-coaching). VM-BASE aims at enhancing the impact and efficiency of the Erasmus programme through the set-up and support of a ‘blended’ Erasmus action.

¹ European Parliament, *Working Document No. 7 on the Financial Perspective 2007-2013: Education and training*, p. 14. Available for download at:

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/dt/547/547060/547060en.pdf

² European Commission (2005) Press release.

<http://europa.eu.int/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/05/190&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

³ Clara Benec Earle in ESN. 2007. *ESN survey - The Erasmus experiences*. p. 1. Available for download at: http://www.esn.org/download_esnsurvey_report

⁴ Glossary: Virtual Mobility. <http://www.elearningeuropa.info/main/index.php?page=glossary>

⁵ I. Op de Beeck, H. Bijnens, C. Michielsens, W. Van Petegem, *Extending and supporting physical student mobility through virtual mobility*, 18th SPACE Conference, Nicosia (Cyprus), 23-24 February 2007

2. Digital services for mobile students: Findings of the VICTORIOUS project

The aim of the VICTORIOUS project was to conduct an in-depth analysis of the digital services that are offered to exchange students by both their host university and their home university especially in the fields of ICT supply and quality in e-learning, interoperability of ICT systems between universities, digital repositories and library services. We looked upon physical mobility as a proxy to virtual mobility. We started our research by looking at the nine project partner universities, which are all member of the Coimbra Group, an association of long-established European multidisciplinary universities of high international standard. We followed up those nine case studies with a series of interviews with students currently visiting our own universities and with our own students who had recently completed visits to another university in Europe. The data gathered in the interviews were used to design a student survey that was spread through the Coimbra group network and the networks of the different partners. We received almost 2400 responses over a period of three month (February – April 2006) from students resident in 32 countries (cf. 2.1).

The research on student experiences was complemented by a survey of European universities on services for both incoming and outgoing students in the periods before, during and after the visit. We got 55 returns from different types of higher education institutions in 21 countries (cf. 2.3).

The findings of the VICTORIOUS project resulted in a number of recommendations for all stakeholders in student mobility (cf. 2.4).

2.1. Experiences of mobile students with ICT and digital services – results of the student survey and interviews

The European students who participated in our interviews and surveys were mostly between 20 and 25 years old. They came from 32 countries, and studied at about 400 universities in a wide range of subjects. Most of them were supported by the Erasmus Programme and went on exchange for a few months up to one year. The students came from universities that varied in use of technology, some provided very deeply integrated services online (portals, matriculation, exams, virtual learning environments, e-journals, databases etc) and others provided much lower levels of digital service, and much less integrated services. The transitions students have to cope with when leaving their familiar digital academic environment we termed the ‘digital culture shock’, and we come back to it hereafter (cf. 2.2). Our research showed that the significant variation in ICT provision by universities across Europe is university-specific rather than country-specific⁶.

Let us have a look at some results of the student survey in detail⁷:

Online course information

Most of the students indicated that being well informed about the host university in advance is

⁶ Haywood, D. et al, 2007. *Student Mobility in a Digital World. Final Report of the VICTORIOUS Project*. p. 6. Available for download at <http://www.victorious-project.org>

⁷ Valk, A., Verjans, S., 2007. *Victorious Reference Report 5: The Student Questionnaire*. Available for download at <http://www.coimbra-group.be/victorious/PDF/VIC-F-SS.pdf>

vital for a successful exchange. Almost all students made use of the internet to get information about their host university before their visit. But only 63% of the students managed to find the most basic information about the studies – course information – online before the visit, and not much more – 64% was able to access course information online during the stay (cf. Figure 1).

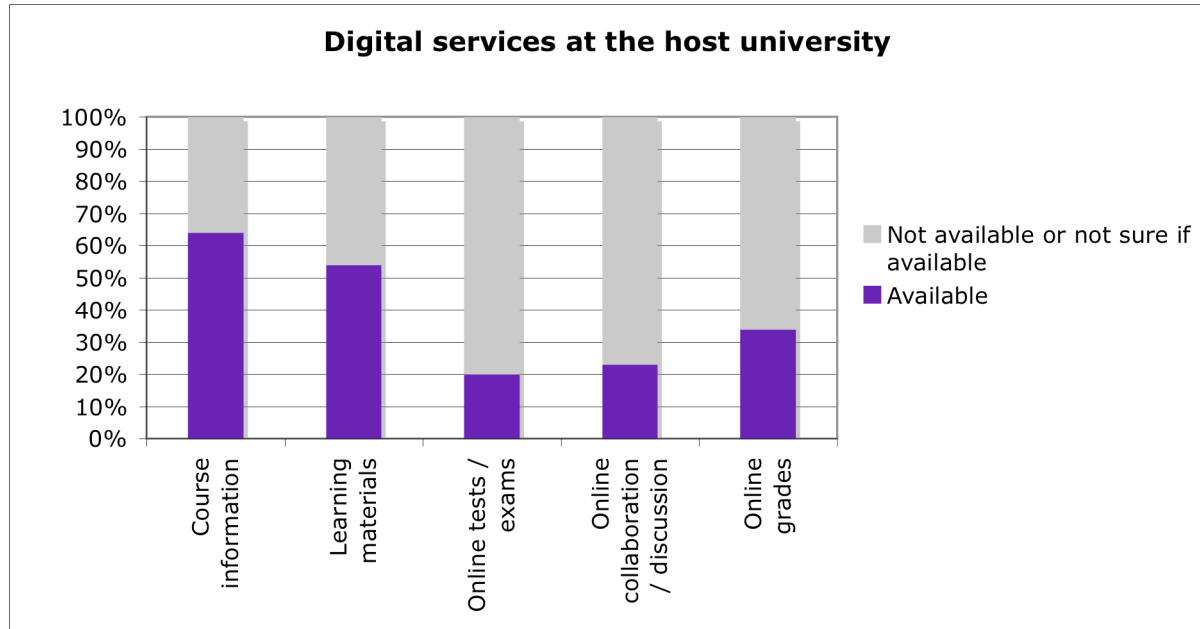


Figure 1: Digital services at the host university

Taking into account that one of the major problems regarding student mobility is the recognition of the studies done abroad and that the courses students intend to take should be agreed beforehand, it is quite obvious that this would require accurate course information and preferably an opportunity to register to the courses before the visit.

Access to computers and internet

One of the main problems for students while at the host institution is access to computers and the internet. 70% of the students took their own laptop with them during the exchange but 75% also used or had to use university computers. Approximately 50% encountered minor or major problems with computer access, mainly because of the number of computers available or restricted opening hours. 25% of the students had problems to connect to the internet at their host university (cf. Figure 2).

In the case of online services at the host university, problems were mainly related to language, a limited availability of some services to exchange students, and lack of support (with 43% reporting little or no support). In general, information provision was weak. It was hard to find, often in the local language only, which is problematic when the subject is technical, and there was insufficient focus on the needs of the visiting students.

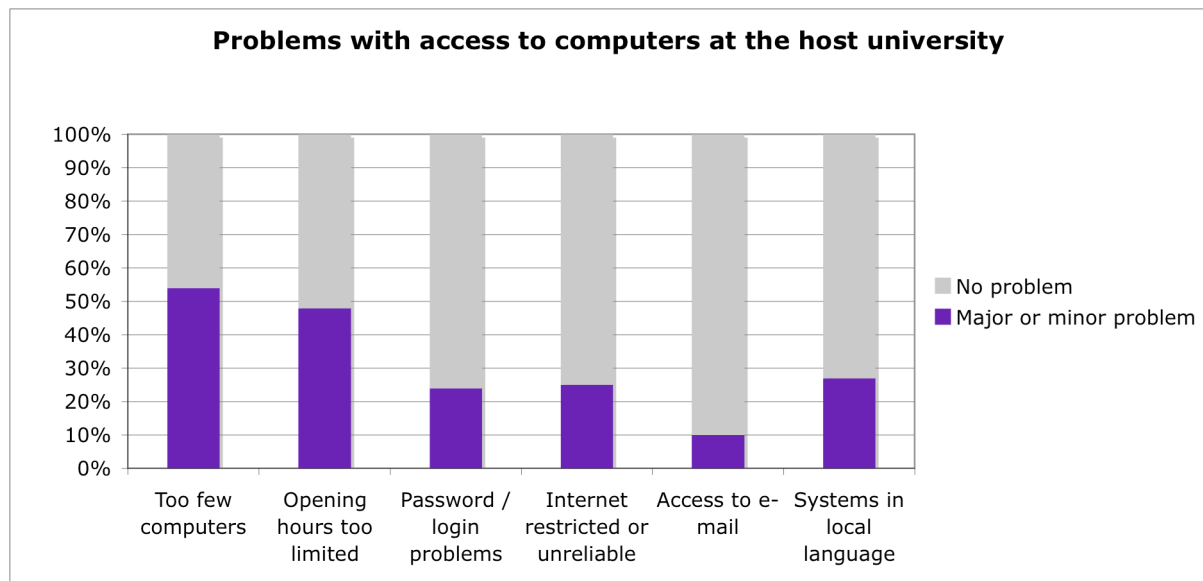


Figure 2: Problems with access to computers at the host university

Students often had to employ resourcefulness to ensure continued access to digital services they need whilst away. These involved methods such as using the digital services of their home university, internet cafes to overcome limited computers or network and sharing passwords with local students when there were long delays in issuing these to exchange students⁸.

2.2. The digital culture shock⁹

Students moving from one university to another will experience varying degrees of ‘discomfort’ in proportion to the magnitude of the differences between the two institutions. The transition from one digital academic environment to another and the problems that come along with it is what we called the ‘digital culture shock’. Differences may be felt for example in these areas:

- Digital library range of materials and rules for access;
- Microcomputer room extent, availability and software/services provided;
- Availability of wireless access points;
- Level of support provided and topics covered;
- Extent of use of e-learning and systems in use;
- General level of off-campus access to student-focused services;
- Provision of email and capacity/features;
- Extent of use of email etc for communications within university.

⁸ Haywood, D. et al, 2007. *Student Mobility in a Digital World. Final Report of the VICTORIOUS Project*. p. 6. Available for download at <http://www.victorious-project.org>

⁹ Haywood, D. et al, 2007. *Student Mobility in a Digital World. Final Report of the VICTORIOUS Project*. p. 35ff. Available for download at <http://www.victorious-project.org>

We developed a methodology for exploring the digital culture shock in visiting students, with a classification scheme using ‘clines’ and degrees of shock, thus:



Figure 3: A SERVICE cline

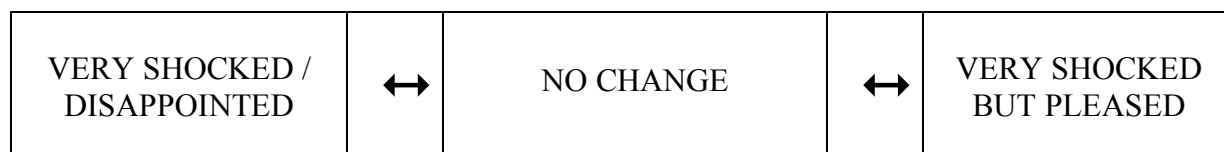


Figure 4: A related CULTURAL SHOCK cline

A student traveling from a university with no or poor services to a university with top quality services will probably feel very shocked but pleased with the services he is offered. Contrariwise a student traveling the other way round will also feel very shocked but in a negative way. He will be disappointed by the services he has to miss. The digital culture shock students may experience can be displayed in the following table (cf. Figure 5), where ☺ symbolises a university with top quality services and ☹ stands for a poorly equipped and serviced university, with ☺ implying an intermediate state.

Satisfaction state	Student	Level	Transition experienced
Very satisfied	A	High	Home ☹ - Host ☺
Satisfied	B		Home ☺ - Host ☺
No change	C	↕	Home ☺ - Host ☺
			Home ☹ - Host ☹
Dissatisfied	D		Home ☹ - Host ☹
Very dissatisfied	E	Low	Home ☺ - Host ☹

Figure 5: Culture shock states and university digital services provision

The information we gathered from students and university staff confirms that these categories of students do indeed exist in the visiting student population, and that universities can and do apply ‘digital cultural shock absorbers’ to minimise the impact of the transition from one university to another.

Possible shock absorbers could be¹⁰:

- Specific induction programmes;
- Assignments to a ‘personal advisor’ on staff who specialises in visiting students;
- Peer assignments in a buddy system i.e. assignments to a mentor (local student) who provides orientation and support at the start or throughout the visit;
- Notification (active or passive) to course leaders about the presence of visiting students on their courses and countries of origin;
- Target key information to visiting students in more than just the local language.

Some of these shock absorbers are recently being implemented in different universities in the context of the VM-BASE project (cf. Section 3).

2.3. Universities provisions for mobile students (university survey)¹¹

The survey of European universities, distributed in September and October 2006 explored the way in which universities were addressing the ICT needs of Erasmus and visiting students. It included questions about services for both incoming and outgoing students, and in the periods before, during and after the visits. The survey was quite complex as it addressed several business areas of the university (International Relations, Library, IT, e-Learning, Student Record Office) and often it could not be completed by a single individual. We received 55 returns from different types of higher education institutions in 21 countries.

In general the university survey confirms the results of the student survey. Most of the universities (about 95%) stated that visiting students are offered the same range of digital services as local students. What services this might be can be rather diverse. This diversity in digital service provision becomes apparent from the open comments on the survey. In one university studying is almost impossible without online access:

“The studying at the university is currently requiring the access to IT services, because the course and exam registration etc are mostly online. The university has several agreements of collaboration with the principle that every student coming to study at the university will be treated equally in this respect.”

Whereas at other universities e-mail or software for academic work is not at all a standard provision:

“At present both e-learning and e-mail services for Erasmus students are activated only upon request by a teacher or by the Erasmus Office Coordinator.”

“The university does not provide software for students for academic work. It provides teachers.”

Improvement is desirable in the provision of information on digital services. Only 39% of the universities indicated that incoming students have full, easy and centralised access to information about digital services. Although most university support services considered that

¹⁰ Baldry, A., 2007. *Final report pilot 2: Improving online/blended courses to be more visiting-student-friendly, Recording, analysing and classifying students’ levels of satisfaction vis-à-vis virtual mobility*. Available for download at <http://www.coimbra-group.be/victorious/PDF/VIC-F-P2.pdf>

¹¹ Zanca, C., 2007. *Victorious Reference Report 7: The University Survey*, available for download at <http://www.coimbra-group.be/victorious/PDF/VIC-F-US.pdf>

they had good websites or pointed to good information elsewhere (for example IT Services or Libraries), they did agree that they were not very aware of the issues of digital services for incoming or outgoing students. Also language is a major issue for visiting students as the universities admit in their comments:

“The same services are available but information and web-based support materials are often limited to local language.”

“The problem is that all the information and support is in local language.”

In general support services rated their services to incoming students more highly than those for outgoing students. Students are granted access to full services only if physically present; most of them get access neither before arrival nor after departure. A minority of universities is developing virtual mobility options at present, but a majority is aware of this emerging field and is considering their way ahead.¹²

2.4. Recommendations for stakeholders

The students who took part in our interviews and survey mostly enjoyed their stay at their host university and described it a worthwhile experience. But our research has also shown that there remain opportunities for improvement for all universities in the way they support their incoming and outgoing students, even for those who generally do this well.

In the final report of the VICTORIOUS project an extended checklist for stakeholders in student mobility can be found.¹³ Those stakeholders include:

- Students intending to undertake a visit,
- The European Commission,
- University Senior Managers in Universities,
- International Relations Offices in Universities,
- Student Record Offices in Universities,
- Libraries, e-learning and IT services in Universities,
- Faculties, Schools & Departments in Universities,
- Erasmus coordinators in Universities,
- Student Associations & Representatives.

All the research findings of VICTORIOUS are gathered in this checklist that can serve as a basis for future activities of all the stakeholders involved in student mobility.

3. Supporting physical mobility by means of virtual mobility: The activities of the VM-BASE project

The VM-BASE project (Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges) builds further upon the results of the VICTORIOUS project. VM-BASE intends to support physical mobile students by virtual activities. Several research findings have shown the need for such ‘blended

¹² Haywood, D. et al, 2007. *Student Mobility in a Digital World. Final Report of the VICTORIOUS Project.* p. 7. Available for download at <http://www.victorious-project.org>

¹³ Haywood, D. et al, 2007. *Student Mobility in a Digital World. Final Report of the VICTORIOUS Project.* p. 52ff. Available for download at <http://www.victorious-project.org>

mobility' actions. For example, the final report of the 2002 Eureka project¹⁴ performed by the European student association AEGEE recommends that *“Erasmus students could be prepared already at their home universities in “outgoing seminars” as well as they could exchange experiences in “return seminars.”*

The report of the international seminar on Bologna and the challenges of e-learning and distance education also 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.”*¹⁵

The VM-BASE project therefore examines, develops and implements virtual preparatory and return initiatives for physical Erasmus exchanges, supporting teachers in coaching at a distance (e-coaching) for both preparatory and return initiatives in blended format in which aspects of physical and virtual mobility are combined and considering the local, regional, national and European facets of such ‘blended mobility’ actions. After an inventory of available materials and a needs analysis, 12 pilots will be identified and carried out. Evaluation and refinement of the pilots will result in recommendations and two manuals.

The key question in the VM-BASE project is: What can we do to better support students before and after their ERASMUS exchange so that they can get the most out of it? It is thus obvious that the opinion of the students is very important. Therefore, two European student organisations, BEST – Board of European Students of Technology and ESIB, recently renamed as ESU – The European Students’ Union, are partners in the project. Workshops and seminars are organised in which the students of these organisations provide input in the project. VM-BASE will also take into account the recommendations and findings of other student organisations, such as AEGEE (cf. above) and the Erasmus Student Network (ESN). Besides VICTORIOUS (cf. Section 2) VM-BASE will also build further on the results of the REVE project.

The REVE (REal Virtual Erasmus) project was aimed at virtual support *during* the physical Erasmus exchange, but some of the findings and pilots within the project are interesting for the support before and after a physical ERASMUS exchange as well. The major output from the REVE project is the Virtual Mobility Manual.¹⁶ This online publication has the aim to introduce Virtual Mobility with all its aspects to teachers of higher education by using concrete examples of Virtual Erasmus courses, to support them while implementing this mobility in their course and thus giving students the opportunity to broaden their study experience.

¹⁴ EURECA European Education Campaign. <http://www.projects.aegee.org/eureca/> & <http://www.projects.aegee.org/eureca/resu.htm>

¹⁵ 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

¹⁶ Bijmens, K., Michielsens, C., Rajagopal, K. (edd.). 2006. *Virtual Mobility Manual. How to teach internationally from your own desk*. REVE project: <http://reve.europace.org/drupal/>

3.1. Virtual support before the physical exchange

Students who filled out the survey of ESN in 2006 report a.o. the following problems:

“Oh, I forgot to mention my problems with accommodation. I could not find anything for one week.”¹⁷

“It seems that there was absolutely no communication between people of International Office and even the day of our arrival nobody was able to help us.”¹⁸

“Exchange students weren’t allowed to take certain classes, they had to choose from a specific list, which didn’t always match their needs.”¹⁹

“The first days were scaring, everybody were speaking Polish, unfortunately, I didn’t know almost nothing in this language.”²⁰

These and other problems can be divided into different categories: problems with orientation, problems with pre-selection and a need for preparatory courses. Therefore, the focus of the VM-BASE project will be on pilots in these topics.

3.1.1. Orientation guidelines

Students often do not get enough information before they go on a physical Erasmus exchange. Problems with orientation range from practical information about accommodation, legal affairs, etc. and general information about the chosen host institution to information about the courses. Topics such as how to select a host institution for a physical Erasmus exchange programme, how to acclimatise with the institution and its location before arrival, how to establish links with new international friends while keeping links with friends at home, etc. will be addressed in three pilots on orientation guidelines and will result in a set of guidelines for institutions shared by all partners in the project to the benefit of their international students.

In this respect, one of the pilots in the project will consist of introducing a virtual ‘buddy system’ in which a local student guides the international student through daily life at the host institution and in the host country. A ‘buddy’ cannot only answer practical questions, but could also be a support for language learning and explain some cultural particularities (cf. below). It will be examined how this buddy system can be supported by online tools.

3.1.2. Pre-selection tools and student selection

¹⁷ Valentinas in ESN. 2007. *ESN survey - The Erasmus experiences*. p. 3. Available for download at: http://www.esn.org/download_esnsurvey_report

¹⁸ Krupnik, S. and Krzaklewska, E. 2007. *Exchange students’ rights. Results of Erasmus Student Network Survey 2006*. Erasmus Student Network. p. 41. Available for download at: http://www.esn.org/download_esnsurvey_report

¹⁹ Krupnik, S. and Krzaklewska, E. 2007. *Exchange students’ rights. Results of Erasmus Student Network Survey 2006*. Erasmus Student Network. p. 29. Available for download at: http://www.esn.org/download_esnsurvey_report

²⁰ Pauline in ESN. 2007. *ESN survey - The Erasmus experiences*. p. 2. Available for download at: http://www.esn.org/download_esnsurvey_report

Students going on an exchange could also benefit from tools and tests to check whether they are prepared for the studies at the host institute of their choice. This involves the use of technology (e.g. on-line questionnaires, audio and web conferences, chat sessions), ways for feedback and remedial exercises, validation and accreditation procedures (if necessary), language effects, etc. VM-BASE wishes to develop codes of good practice in designing such pre-selection tests for students.

From the teachers point of view it is also important to have well-prepared students who reached the same study level in order to take a particular course and who have the necessary language knowledge and other skills. In this respect it could sometimes be useful to have a procedure to select the best students.²¹ When paper applications are not sufficient, student selection can happen via electronic means, such as web conferencing, allowing teaching staff to visualise the candidate and to check the study level, social and language skills of the student.

3.1.3. Preparatory courses

The VM-BASE project considers not only preparatory language courses as being beneficial for exchange students but aims at developing a blueprint for preliminary courses for students preparing for a physical Erasmus exchange 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, and the structure, 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 language courses, culture courses and digital literacy courses do already exist in most universities, they often do not yet exist in a virtual form or are not easily accessible for Erasmus students.

3.2. Virtual support after the physical exchange

Not only before students leave on an exchange support is necessary, 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 actual period abroad.

3.2.1. Virtual Alumni

Virtual mobility can sustain contacts after leaving the host university. “At the end of the physical exchange, students can 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 a life-long friendship.”²²

²¹ For example in Erasmus Mundus programmes in which very specific master courses are taught to a selection of students coming from all over the world. The students need to have a basic knowledge of English and a certain study level. Since the accepted students receive substantial grants from the European Commission, it is important to check whether they really comply with the required qualifications. K.U.Leuven successfully tested the use of web conferencing for this aim in the framework of the REVE project (<http://reve.europace.org/drupal/?q=node/47>).

²² Bijmens, H., Boussemaere, M., Rajagopal, K., Op de Beeck, I. and Van Petegem, W. (edd.). 2006. *European Cooperation in Education through Virtual Mobility. A best-practice manual*. Leuven: EuroPACE ivzw. p. 34. Available for download at: http://www.being-mobile.net/pdf/BM_handbook_final.pdf

VM-BASE will make a study on how to set up and support such a Virtual Alumni Association as a community of students and teachers who embarked in physical and virtual mobility activities. Alumni could share experiences with each other and with newcomers, and help to shape the future of European mobility schemes for teaching and learning. Case studies, like e.g. the alumni community of the Open University in the UK²³, the Alumni Society of the European Student Network²⁴ and the Erasmus Mundus Alumni Association (EMA)²⁵ will be looked upon.

3.2.2. *Virtual assessment and evaluation at a distance*

Ways for virtual assessment and evaluation at a distance, in combination with physical attendance examinations, at the end of an Erasmus stay, or eventually when already back in the home institution are also important, e.g. when students have failed on an exam, or when they need to finish project work after their stay abroad.

While ICT in education, and more specifically a virtual learning environment, is integrated in most higher education institutions, the use of ICT-based assessment is lagging behind. Nevertheless, there are a lot of possibilities and virtual assessment can be organised in several situations: whether or not in a certain place (e.g. in an exam lab with computers and supervision), whether or not on a certain time (taking time zones into account), whether or not under supervision.²⁶ The VM-BASE project is not aiming at the development of new ICT tools, but rather at the effective use of existing tools.

3.3. E-coaching

Virtual assessment and evaluation is closely connected to coaching at a distance, or better e-coaching. Therefore, the VM-BASE project will in all project activities pay particular attention to e-coaching of teachers and students participating in mobility activities and wants to support teachers (and students) in e-coaching for both preparatory and return initiatives in a blended format by providing a manual on good practices in e-coaching. It will describe models, tools and systems looked upon from three angles: technology-media, organisation-logistics, and pedagogy-didactics.

When preparing for an exchange, students need reliable and clear feedback on their questions. When taking a course virtually, they need feedback to be able to estimate their learning progress and to plan the next learning activities.²⁷ Finally, after a virtual assessment, they need feedback to assess their learning outcomes. Examples of e-coaching methods are therefore manifold: the previously mentioned buddy-system for preparatory support, e-portfolios or weblogs during the stay abroad, a virtual consulting hour of a teacher using chat, a moderated discussion forum, etc. Also peer-assessment and self-assessment is possible when complemented with e-coaching.

²³ Open University Alumni. <http://www.esn.org/alumni/>

²⁴ Erasmus Student Network Alumni Society. <http://www.esn.org/alumni/>

²⁵ Erasmus Mundus Alumni. <http://www.erasmusmundus-alumni.eu/>

²⁶ Awouters, V. and Van De Mosselaer, H. 2005. *Evaluation in een ICT-omgeving*. in D'Haese, I. and Valcke, M. (edd.), *Digitaal leren. ICT-toepassingen in het hoger onderwijs*. Tiel: Lannoo Campus, pp. 168-169.

²⁷ Awouters, V. and Van De Mosselaer, H. 2005. *Evaluation in een ICT-omgeving*. in D'Haese, I. and Valcke, M. (edd.), *Digitaal leren. ICT-toepassingen in het hoger onderwijs*. Tiel: Lannoo Campus, p. 172.

4. Conclusions

Research carried out in the framework of the VICTORIOUS project has shown that digital services European universities provide to mobile students show a high level of diversity. This diversity is university-specific rather than country-specific, but even for the top-level universities there are still opportunities for improvement. Students traveling from one digital academic environment to another can experience a ‘digital culture shock’ that can be eased by applying ‘digital cultural shock absorbers’. Possible shock absorbers could be preparatory activities offered to mobile students in a virtual way.

Some of these shock absorbers are recently being implemented in different universities in the context of the VM-BASE project. Real course modules, tools and systems to facilitate the preparation for and follow-up of exchanges do hardly exist nowadays. Preparatory and follow-up virtual mobility actions could support students at a social, cultural and linguistic level, but also with regard to for example the course content. Possibilities on how students could virtually prepare and follow-up their physical exchange are manifold: virtual introductory language and culture courses, eventually also digital literacy courses, virtual pre-selection tests, orientation modules, virtual assessment, etc.

The VM-BASE project will run several pilots on these topics, which will result in recommendations and two manuals, one specifically on e-coaching and one gathering all project results.

5. Acknowledgement

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The REVE project coordinated by EuroPACE ivzw, was a two-year project under the eLearning programme of the European Commission (DG Education & Culture). The project ended on the 31st of December 2006. More information on REVE can be found at <http://reve.europace.org/drupal/>.

The VM-BASE project, coordinated by EuroPACE ivzw, officially started 1st of October 2006 and will run for two years. It is carried out with the support of the European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture, under the Socrates/Minerva programme. Project partners are EuroPACE ivzw, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Coimbra Group, Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven, ESIB – The National Unions of Students in Europe, Tartu Ülikool, BEST – Board of European Students of Technology, University of West-Hungary, Helsinki University of Technology, Laurea-ammattikorkeakoulu and University of Edinburgh. More information on the project is available at <http://vm-base.europace.org/>.