

# NETWORK FOR INTEGRATING VIRTUAL MOBILITY AND EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND CONTINUING EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: THE VIRQUAL PROJECT

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## Abstract

The main objectives of VIRQUAL are to help educational and training institutions to (a) achieve Virtual Mobility, and (b) guarantee EQF implementation through eLearning. VIRQUAL promotes cooperation and joint work among partner organisations and links with related initiatives. Since summer 2010 the consortium has concentrated in three tasks including the preparation of webinars that will take place in during 2011.

**Task 1:** eLearnig and EQF: a comprehensive analysis of the EQF implementation in Europe compiling 32 country reports on EQF/NQF implementation, at levels 5 to 8 has been collected. Additionally, the situation of e-learning in what concerns legislation and practice in each of the 32 countries was also reported. The analysis of the information pack will allow access to updated information on EQF, recognition of competences and e-learning legislation by country as a consulting instrument.

**Task 2:** Three webinars, each one with one expert invited speaker on the general theme of e-learning and EQF followed by an online discussion with the participants and with the participation in other dissemination events.

**Task 3:** How can we support teachers and curriculum developers defining, writing, or choosing high quality learning outcomes? How can we contribute to a global architecture of learning outcomes/competences? What is a useful classification system for learning outcomes/competences? The means to answer these questions is a web-based data base, the ILO repository [www.learning-outcomes.net](http://www.learning-outcomes.net). One of the fundaments of its data structure is the classification of learning outcomes according to EQF which distinguishes knowledge, skills and competences.

## 1. GENERAL INFORMATION AND OBJECTIVES

VIRQUAL, Network for integrating Virtual Mobility and European Qualification Framework in HE and CE Institutions is a project funded with support from the European Commission<sup>1</sup> with the reference 143748-PT-KA3NW. It is coordinated by Universidade do Porto, Portugal. You can find additional information about the project and its network in the project website: <http://virqual.up.pt>

The current partners are Universidade do Porto (coordinator) - PT, EUCEN - BE, Technische Universität Wien - AT, Eesti Infotehnoloogia Sihtasutus - EE, Gábor Dénes Főiskola - HU, Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi - Sürekli Eğitim Merkezi - TR, Universidade Aberta - PT, TECMINHO - PT.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

## **a. General Objectives**

The objectives of VIRQUAL are:

- a) To define, exemplify and promote discussion about using e-learning as a scenario to foster national and international collaboration of Higher Education and Continuing Education organizations to achieve virtual mobility implementation.
- b) To critically assess and exchange results, ideas and innovation about European, national and local policies and initiatives in the area of Virtual Mobility, aiming at identifying obstacles and facilitators for collaboration.
- c) To cooperate in the elaboration and implementation of concrete Virtual Mobility scenarios, by establishing partnerships among the network institutions, and providing solutions and specific tools for different processes and stakeholders involved in the process.
- d) To elaborate, implement, make available and disseminate tools to analyse, support, manage at Institutional level, contributing to improve the Virtual Mobility in Europe while trying to implement EQF requirements.

It is expected that through the results of the VIRQUAL network, other European Higher Education and Continuing Education institutions will find guidance, case studies and tools to integrate Virtual Mobility in their practices, contributing to the construction of a realistic European Learning Space.

## **b. Contribution to EU policies**

The project aims at creating a linkage between Virtual Mobility and the competences relevant for EQF levels 6 and 8. The possible contribution to EU policies can be described as:

- a) The value added to Virtual Mobility through proper assessment can change the status, in societal and professional terms, of e-learning. The proper assessment will be based on the use of adequate types of student acquired competences. Then the quality assurance of the learning through VM may bring more learners, teachers and researchers in populations that have not used e-learning. Results: quality assurance of learning, wider access to learning, inclusion of minorities in the learning process and more efficient use of teaching resources.
- b) A possible establishment of links to make more permeable the flux of courses and of students between VET and HE can be a successful consequence of the model proposed. The criteria and concepts of the model to be designed and tested can be easily adapted to other levels of EQF. That may bring a possible cooperation between ECTS and ECVET. Results: an abridging system incorporating ECTS and ECVET that can make LLL easier for all types of learners, the consolidation of a LLL individualized pathways to encompass different levels of EQF.
- c) The model to be designed and tested can bring a closer approximation between the HE and CE institutions to the professional qualifications defined in EQF. In fact the HE and CE institutions have not adopted the EQF as their benchmarking and that makes the EQF difficult to accept in academic and training environments. Results: a wider acceptance of EQF by teaching organizations and institutions, learning outcomes of courses and degrees defined closer (or as a function) to the EQF competences.

## **2. PROJECT OUTCOMES & RESULTS**

During the first half of the project, VIRQUAL worked in four different Special Interest Groups (SIGs):

### **a. SIG 1: Virtual Mobility, ECTS and E-learning**

Four research questions emerged:

- a) Has the implementation of the EHEA with the European-wide adoption of the ECTS credit system and competence-based curricula effectively helped to foster student mobility so far?
- b) What are the most important differences of Virtual Mobility in regard to Physical Mobility?
- c) What are the most important barriers to virtual mobility (specific requirements, languages, percentage of face-to-face mandatory sessions in the courses, etc)?

- d) Are European Higher Education Institutions applying homogenous criteria when calculating the student workload in online and blended learning courses?

## **b. SIG 2: Fundamental Research**

The project team gathered four different case studies; an evaluation repository of cross-institutional Virtual Campus initiatives across Europe, an operational model of Virtual Mobility in Higher Education and two online respectively blended learning courses were analyzed. To gain a better overview a table was created to display the essential factors of each case study by which it is now possible to think about how to approach the topic in a more beneficial way and where to continue the research. The SWOT analysis performed in this SIG allowed following up information about key factors, weaknesses and opportunities of the case studies in an efficient way.

## **c. SIG 3: E-learning and evaluation of Learning Outcomes of EQF**

Learning outcomes can be seen as the hard currency of educational mobility and recognition, as soon as they are explicitly defined and professionally described. Learning outcomes in combination with adequate assessment procedures can be assumed as one of the main promoters for mobility with respect to both, students and institutions. But the shift to learning outcomes in the EU currently means a multi-speed development within different countries and institutions. To support the majority of institutions which are in or before the first phase of the change process a two fold strategy was proposed:

- a) provision of guidelines and support for writing learning outcomes
- b) web-based repository of best practice examples for learning outcomes

## **d. SIG 4: E-learning Contributions to EQF**

Research on policies and practices was carried out in what concerns to e-learning and virtual campus in Europe, EQF and NQF current state of implementation and Virtual Mobility guidelines. The implementation of the European Qualification Framework is a great opportunity to discuss the role of ICT in learning. HE and CE have an important role to play, based on learning innovation, learning at the workplace and university learning (but we need to define it ourselves).

In order to improve the research, the following lines of work were proposed:

- a) How can e-learning courses contribute to the acquisition of qualifications in different levels of the EQF?
- b) Can it be acquired all types of qualifications through e-learning?
- c) Which are the qualifications acquired by e-learning and the characteristics of these qualifications?
- d) What are the reasons why some qualifications can not be acquired by e-learning?
- e) What are the best scenarios and strategies for e-learning that can be put in place at the level of EQF, Bologna and Lifelong learning?
- f) Are the learning outcomes to be related to learning content (curricula) or to activities to be performed by learners in the workplace or both?
- g) How can the new e-learning strategies using web2.0 and social networks be used within the EQF and NQF plans for implementation?
- h) How can HE and CE institutions certify informal online learning (via the access to open educational resources or any other online open tools)?

## **3. PARTNERSHIPS AND NETWORKING**

The project has worked to create partnerships with other projects, organizations and individuals. It is essential that the sharing of information and the debate about the possible solutions involves a large and rich number of project associated partners. It is possible to register as an associate partner of the project either through the web or contacting directly the project members.

For that reason efficient communication is a crucial process for networking. VIRQUAL is using different communication tools, adjusted to the situation:

- a) A mailing list [virqual@reit.up.pt](mailto:virqual@reit.up.pt) was created in the beginning of the project and was used to contact partners mainly for the administrative processes. During the course of the project and due to changes in contact persons at institutions a Google Group [virqual@googlegroups.com](mailto:virqual@googlegroups.com) was created because it was easier to manage. The e-mail address was maintained for external contacts.
- b) Moodle Forum was the preferred media for communication and discussions about the themes of the project. However, during the course of the project the mailing list was used more frequently. One reason for this was that, from month 6 onwards, the research and development work was done in smaller groups, and larger discussions were more sporadic.

For dissemination and network, other tools were used. The website was produced using Drupal, a Content Management System that allows separating content production from website building. Drupal also facilitates the production of Contents by multiple partners that can be responsible for different areas. Other tools, like ELGG, are being studied for their potential to support networks. The website has at this date a total of 415 visits and a sitemeter is being used to understand the type and duration of the contacts. Finally groups and pages were created in Facebook, LinkedIn and Slideshare to add a social networking dimension. Some participants of the project already have profiles in these sites and use it to network with professional contacts. So this seemed a very natural step to increase VIRQUAL's networking capabilities. Also, it is expected it will be very useful for exploiting results after the third year of VIRQUAL.

## **4. PLANS FOR THE FUTURE**

The project VIRQUAL is now in its final year. After two years of research and model design, VIRQUAL is now prepared to test a model for implementing Virtual Mobility. The poster presented in EDULEARN11 will show a general view of the model and of the testing approach, hoping to reach an interested audience. The model has three components, each one developed by one of the taskforces of the project.

### **a. TASK 1 – A GUIDE FOR VIRTUAL MOBILITY**

This guide intends to provide a general introduction to the topic of virtual mobility (VM) in Europe, contributing to Higher and Continuing Education Institutions which offer e-Learning courses to implement Virtual Mobility in the framework of the European Higher Education Area. The main aim is to help establishing a common understanding on possible organizational, pedagogical and technical approaches to the implementation of Virtual Mobility within the European Qualification Framework.

It intends to be a step-by-step guide that may be used by students, course developers or Institutions, to help them to achieve Virtual Mobility in a diversity of scenarios. When referring to Virtual Mobility in the context of the European Qualification Framework, we are aiming at extending the current Erasmus experience by intensive use of ICT. Virtual Mobility lacks several components of the physical mobility, of course, but can offer other dimensions, including different learning pathways, creation of virtual communities, collaborative projects, and international cooperation with a lower investment.

### **b. TASK 2 – E-LEARNING AND EQF**

Task 2 has collected and analysed comprehensive data of the EQF implementation in Europe, compiling 32 country reports on EQF/NQF implementation, at levels 5 to 8. The report also includes the situation of e-learning in what concerns legislation and practice in each of the 32 countries.

For the model, the information will be presented in a format that allows for quick overview of the situation in a given country or comparison between different countries. This tool intends to contribute to the identification of potential obstacles and facilitators in Virtual Mobility scenarios that may include one or more countries. The information gathered constitutes the legal framework, at National and European level, that should be considered in Virtual Mobility situations.

### **c. TASK 3 – A GLOBAL ARCHITECTURE OF INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES**

Task 3 developed tools and strategies to define, describe, write and assess Learning Outcomes. These tools help teachers and course developers to define the individual Learning Outcomes but that also to relate them to the correspondent modules and levels of the EQF Framework. The tool consists of a web-database, structured accordingly to the EQF levels and types of LOs and that uses other

classification systems like ISCED code and ERASMUS subject code for better definition of LOs. The development of this tool was complex and included several intermediate tests with real users to achieve a version that is complete but not over-descriptive.

The main idea behind this work is that clear LOs are essential to achieve academic mobility, physical or virtual, to achieve transparency in Education and recognition. However, writing high quality LOs is not an easy task, not even for experienced teachers. This task intends to provide tools that facilitate the process but also, wants to provide examples, best practices that will guide other teachers in the process of defining, describing and assessing LOs. These examples as well as the templates will be compiled in the repository [www.learning-outcome.net](http://www.learning-outcome.net). This part of the model plays a crucial role in the achievement of Virtual Mobility. It defines what students are intended to learn and this should be fundamental for an informed decision when choosing a course to attend. Also, a clear statement of the Intended Learning Outcomes will provide the basis for the definition of assessment strategies, contributing for the whole education process.