EPICS: Towards a virtual Erasmus scheme

George Ubachs¹, Christina Brey¹, Ilse Op de Beeck²

¹EADTU, ²EuroPACE ivzw

Key words: virtual Erasmus, virtual mobility

Abstract:

The main objective of the EPICS project is to increase student mobility throughout Europe and to support the realisation of a European Higher Education Area. Building on former virtual mobility projects, EPICS is developing a virtual Erasmus scheme in which students have the opportunity and benefits of participating in other university programmes and courses without the necessity of being physically mobile. EPICS wants to bring virtual mobility out of the pilot phase and works towards mainstream provision of virtual mobility by offering international courses as integral part of the university study programmes. To this end, the project is developing the supporting infrastructure of a European Portal for International Courses and Services (EPICS).

1 Introduction & background

Internationalisation and mobility of students, teachers and staff have since long been important features of universities. Mostly in response to the challenges brought about by globalisation, higher education institutions are integrating an international dimension into their research and teaching. One of the main objectives of internationalisation or international education is the development of intercultural competence or intercultural sensitivity. Physical mobility and study abroad programmes such as Erasmus [1] are one method of preparing the citizens of tomorrow who are globally aware and culturally sensitive. Many higher education institutions today also extend these kind of initiatives by organising (aspects of) ‘internationalisation at home’, whereby universities integrate elements of international learning into their curricula.

Also political initiatives on promoting international mobility go back a long way. In this respect, the Bologna Declaration [2] (1999) is considered to be a strategic starting point for European education and training systems to support mobility, flexibility, comparability and internationalisation. Ten years later, this issue is still found highly relevant: in 2009, the Conference of European Ministers of Education put forward in the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué [3] that “in 2020, at least 20 % of those graduating in the European Higher Education Area should have had a study or training period abroad”.

Despite these new ambitions, the focus of the Erasmus programme (as well as other initiatives) is kept on physical mobility, only partially serving the needs of today’s on campus students, and even less the needs of part time and off campus learners. Therefore, the ambitious goal of reaching 20% mobility by 2020 might be difficult to attain, if the current
physical mobility schemes are not supplemented with new schemes, more in particular virtual mobility. The possibilities of “virtual Erasmus” or “virtual mobility” whereby educational technologies are used in addition to the physical exchange programmes are manifold and can enhance internationalisation of universities and support mobility.

This paper will introduce virtual mobility and virtual Erasmus as an opportunity for potentially the entire group of students and hence as a supplement to the present types of international student mobility in higher education, exploiting the full potential of the natural environment of staff and students, which includes their online environment. Furthermore, the paper presents results of the EPICS project [4]. In answer to the background described above, this EU-funded project has been set up with the aim to increase the number of student mobility throughout Europe and to support the realisation of a European Higher Education Area by organising a virtual Erasmus scheme in which students have the opportunity and benefits of participating in other university programmes and courses without the necessity of being physically mobile.

2 From physical Erasmus to virtual Erasmus

Mobility in space, geographical mobility, ‘real’ mobility, physical mobility… are all terms used to refer to students and teachers in higher education “physically” moving to another institution inside or outside their own country to study or teach for a limited time. Different types or aspects of mobility can be distinguished. Programme mobility - in which mobile students take part in an organised mobility programme - is nowadays considered to be the major mobility engine. Erasmus is probably the best-known of such programmes but there are several others: Erasmus Mundus [5], Tempus [6], Ceepus [7], Nordplus [8], etc. just to name a few.

However, research carried out so far indicate the limits of what can be achieved through these current mechanisms. Physical mobility is a rich experience, but expensive for the society, the university and the student. Physical mobility will most probably never fulfil its promise of international mobility for the vast majority of students as part of their academic education, neither from a perspective of the demand for mobility, nor regarding the infrastructure and funding for it. In addition physical mobility schemes do not fit the needs of lifelong learners engaged in family and work, students that are unable to leave home for several weeks and months.

Since the second half of the 1990s the notion of virtual mobility has gained currency in the context of the internationalisation of higher education institutions and due to the growing significance of distance learning and e-learning. Through virtual mobility activities a ‘virtual Erasmus’ scheme can be obtained. Such a virtual Erasmus scheme constitutes of educational opportunities that are no longer location dependent and allow – without expensive and sometimes difficult travel schedules – for collaboration amongst students and teachers in different regions and countries, thus creating a European dimension. Virtual mobility can be seen as a complement to traditional real mobility programmes but it can also represent a valuable alternative solution to physical mobility for those who miss out on a physical exchange for whatever reason but are keen on learning and acquiring the same skills as those who can enjoy physical mobility. Virtual mobility has its very own profile and legitimacy, neither being superior or inferior to other mobility schemes.
In the EPICS project the concept of virtual Erasmus is further researched. A consortium of eleven institutions and networks explored the possibilities, the experiences, the barriers and opportunities of increasing student mobility by the establishment of a virtual Erasmus scheme next to the physical Erasmus scheme. Similar to physical Erasmus, within virtual Erasmus a student enrolled in a university degree programme leaves the home university for one or two terms to study a portion of the degree at a foreign university. This university must be part of the same Erasmus network. With virtual Erasmus, universities can enhance the quality of their curricula as well as their international profile. Participating students benefit from easily accessible high quality European courses, enabling them to further individualise and specialise their learning portfolio.

3 Bringing virtual Erasmus into the mainstream

Although the term ‘virtual mobility’ is relatively new, the European Commission has actively promoted virtual mobility in the past years, mainly through the financial support of projects within the Socrates/Minerva, the eLearning Programme and the current Lifelong Learning Programme and many organisations have intensively explored virtual mobility schemes through several EC-supported projects and other initiatives.

In the EPICS project coordinators from major virtual mobility projects (such as EADTU [9], EuroPACE[10], UNED[11], etc.) are represented and are sharing substantial expertise and experiences in the field. Former initiatives and programmes set up by these networks and related to virtual mobility have shown the added value of virtual mobility next to physical mobility and have helped to overcome its obstacles and to mobilise students that are less likely or even excluded from participation in international studying. Some of the more recent projects include E-MOVE [12], CSVM [13], BEING MOBILE [14], REVE [15], VM-BASE [16], NET-Active [17], MOVINTER [18], etc.; each project targeting different aspects or different target groups of virtual mobility.

Up till now, virtual mobility however often has still been “’locked” in these isolated (pilot) projects and were therefore only available to a restricted number of universities and students. With the further development of new learning environments and new educational models, exploiting the full potential of ICT and making virtual higher education is likely to be one of the most important driving forces in the academic world in the years to come, with virtual mobility playing a core role in the European learning space. This will be a main challenge for the Erasmus programmes. The present developments are only a starting point for a wide deployment.

The ambition of EPICS is exactly to bring virtual mobility out of the pilot phase and enhancing it to the mainstream of European higher education. On the basis of the above-mentioned projects and initiatives, the EPICS project worked further towards a mainstream, institutional scheme of virtual mobility, virtual Erasmus, by offering international courses clearly as integral part of the university study programmes. In this virtual Erasmus scheme students have the opportunity and benefits of visiting other university programs and courses without the necessity of being physically mobile.

The EPICS project especially addresses issues like:
- Course entries
- Language issues
- Assessment modes
- Fee options
- Recognition of degrees / credit transfer  
- Student and staff support  

On all of these issues agreement was found within the project consortium.

In practice the virtual Erasmus model builds on following elements:  
- 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 student needed.  
- The content of the international courses is coherent with the home university programme  
- Free of charge for students  

The model was designed in close correspondence with the running mode of the well established physical Erasmus programme (with as major consequence that the core of the ECTS policy is respected, which is also the basis of the physical Erasmus scheme).  
A full procedural approach for universities to organise and be part of new mobility schemes was established and a first version of the European Portal for International Courses and Services (EPICS) was set up to support this academic cooperation model.

4 The centralised virtual Erasmus web portal EPICS

The EPICS project sees the European Portal for International Courses and Services (“EPICS”) as the backbone for virtual Erasmus. It contains a searchable database of all distance and e-learning courses available to an international audience as well as a range of useful information and supporting online tools and services for virtual Erasmus.

More in detail EPICS includes:  
- A course portal with course descriptions in templates that are compliant with the ECTS [19] course descriptors and the additional ECTS requirements for online and distance courses  
- A service portal for students, including a study guide for on line learning, contacts of every university, administrative information, library links, ECTS explained to students, language skills tests  
- A service portal for staff, including guidelines for online and distance teaching and learning, a quick reference guide, library links, information on all institutions that have submitted courses to the database, tools for (multimedia) teaching and learning support, formats for learning agreements, examples of good practice  
- An information package, containing all relevant information on the scheme, the submission of courses and the set-up of a partnership  
- A glossary, interactive forums and a wiki as well as several other services  

Universities are able to select online courses from another university via the EPICS database, which fit into one (or more) of their degree programmes and match their quality criteria. If a student acquires ECTS points in one of these pre-assessed courses it is guaranteed that those points will be recognised towards the degree at the home university.
From an institutional point of view, the university can publish its courses on the EPICS portal. Furthermore, it can view courses of other universities. Finally, it can select courses of other (partner) institutions on the EPICS portal for use by its own students (University Window). This selection is done via pre-assessment by its staff on quality and curriculum coherence. The University Windows courses are displayed to its students as courses that are accessible by them in the university’s curriculum. Students can explore the EPICS portal to select courses which are approved/pre-assessed by their university on the virtual Erasmus domain of the EPICS portal.

Apart from a mobility portal, the EPICS portal is at the same time a database of courses which is open for the general public and will facilitate the access to study opportunities at universities offering on line and distance education. The project consortium is continuously expanding the network of universities who want to be involved in EPICS as provider and/or user of virtual mobility courses. Already interest is shown to join by dozens of higher education institutions looking for new opportunities for international student and staff mobility. The database is regularly updated and will serve as a matchmaking facility for future virtual Erasmus networks. The EPICS portal will officially be launched during the EADTU Annual Conference in Zermatt, Switzerland, taking place 27-29 September 2010.

5 Conclusion

It is difficult for physical mobility to fulfil its promise of international mobility for the vast majority of students as part of their academic education, neither from a perspective of the demand for mobility, nor regarding the infrastructure and funding for it. In addition physical mobility schemes do not fit the needs of lifelong learners engaged in family and work, students that are unable to leave home for several weeks and months. Therefore virtual mobility appears to be a valuable way in which the ambitions of Bologna related to international student mobility can be realised on a larger scale. Virtual mobility serves as an ideal supplement, a more flexible and cheaper mobility scheme, fitting the needs of non-mobile students and lifelong learners.

The EPICS project started from sharing expertise and good-practices with stakeholders in the field of virtual mobility and worked towards the development of a virtual Erasmus scheme next to the physical Erasmus scheme. It is only when all stakeholders recognise the benefits of organising virtual mobility/Erasmus activities that they really will be integrated in mainstream education and become sustainable in the long term. Virtual mobility should become integral part of the Erasmus Mobility Programme of the European Commission to make mobility happen in any higher education curriculum as a truly international cooperation experience and tailored to the outcomes envisaged in the programme. In that way it will contribute to the flexibility and the scale of the programme.

Acknowledgement:

The EPICS project (1 October 2008 – 30 September 2010) is funded with support of the European Commission under the Lifelong Learning Programme, Erasmus, Multilateral Projects, Virtual Campus. Project coordinator is EADTU (NL). Project partners are:
- EuroPACE ivzw (BE)
- UNED (ES)
- Linköping University (SE)
- Open University (UK)
- Open University of the Netherlands (NL)
- Estonian Information Technology Foundation/Tallinn University (EE)
- International Telematic University UNINETTUNO (IT)
- Universidade Aberta (PT)
- Anadolu University (TR)
- Fernstudien Schweiz (CH)

References:

[14] BEING MOBILE - Disseminating Virtual Mobility for Students and Teachers project: http://www.being-mobile.net
[16] VM-BASE – Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges project: http://vm-base.europace.org
[18] MOVINTER - Enhancing Virtual Mobility to foster institutional cooperation and internationalisation of curricula project: http://www.movinter.eu

Authors:

George Ubachs
EADTU
P.O.Box 2960
6401 DL Heerlen
The Netherlands
george.ubachs@eadtu.eu
Christina Brey
EADTU
P.O.Box 2960
6401 DL Heerlen
The Netherlands
christina.brey@eadtu.eu

Ilse Op de Beeck
EuroPACE ivzw
Kapeldreef 62
B-3001 Heverlee
Belgium
ilse.opdebeeck@europace.be