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INTRODUCTION

In answer to the challenges brought about by globalisation, Internationalisation has become one of the key issues in present day European Higher Education. The term refers to the integration of an international dimension into the research, teaching and services function of higher education and has as one of its main objectives the development of intercultural competences or sensitivity.

Virtual mobility has great potential to contribute to the internationalisation of higher education, enabling learning and/or teaching in an international context through the use of information and communication technologies.

This publication starts with defining the concept of virtual mobility and presenting the different types that can be distinguished. This is followed by an introduction of the EU-funded project VMCOLAB and a presentation of the main support materials and services this project has developed for higher education institutions, teachers and students that want to engage in virtual mobility experiences. The three VMCOLAB pilot courses demonstrate the potential of virtual mobility for different target groups. Finally, some recommendations propose how to better integrate virtual mobility into educational experiences across Europe.
VIRTUAL MOBILITY

What is virtual mobility?

Virtual mobility is a relatively new term and can be defined as "a set of ICT-supported activities, organised at institutional level, that realise or facilitate international, collaborative experiences in a context of teaching and/or learning."

- The broad term activities was chosen as virtual mobility can refer to learning, teaching and research. The term can also refer to organisational, logistical or administrative issues related to international education and cooperation.
- Virtual mobility can be fully or partly supported by ICT. In the first case the environment where all activities take place is entirely at a distance and digital, while in the latter case ICT is used to support or facilitate a physical activity (blended mobility).
- International collaboration is a key aspect of virtual mobility and one of the main goals is to develop or improve intercultural and/or international competencies.
- Technologies used to implement virtual mobility, are particularly (but not exclusively) focused on communication and collaboration. They can support both synchronous and asynchronous interaction. Popular tools include video and web conferencing, chat, discussion fora, blogs, wiki’s, e-portfolios, social networking tools etc.

Types of virtual mobility

Virtual mobility can be used at different levels in higher education:

- Virtual mobility as a scenario to internationalise a course
- Virtual mobility to realise or facilitate international internships
- Virtual mobility to realise or facilitate student/staff exchanges

Virtual Mobility as a scenario to internationalise a course

Virtual mobility can be used as a scenario to internationalise a (part of a) course (exercise, task, project), programme, workshop, seminar,... This means that it brings international components in the course through the use of ICT. Examples include: lectures from a distance by foreign guest lecturers, group work with internationally mixed student groups, design of an international course with foreign colleagues, etc.
Virtual Mobility to realise or facilitate international internships

In the context of international internships, virtual mobility can also be used to facilitate physical international internships (blended) as well as to realise international internships (virtual).

International internships require great flexibility from the student. Sometimes there are also financial, social or other barriers that prevent students to stay for a longer time abroad. Because of the geographical distance, students often receive little or no feedback from the academic internship coordinator in the home country and there is a lack of contact with the internship mentor abroad.

Virtual mobility can provide a solution to these problems, facilitating the interaction between the three parties involved (the higher education institution, the student and the receiving company or organisation): between the higher education institution and the company, between the student and the higher education institution, between the student and the company. All these lines of interaction can consist of a combination of face-to-face and ICT-supported communication, of strictly face-to-face communication or of strictly ICT-supported communication. When the interaction between student and company is mainly ICT-supported, we talk about a virtual internship.

Virtual mobility to realise or facilitate a student/staff exchanges

Related to international student or staff exchanges virtual mobility can be used to facilitate a physical international exchange (blended). When the student goes physically abroad, ICT can be a support during the various phases of the exchange: before (for example during the selection process or when participating in preparatory courses through online platforms), during (staying in contact with students, teachers and mentors at the home university) or after (evaluation and follow-up process). In this way, virtual mobility can make the experience of the mobile student more effective and valuable.

But virtual mobility can also be used to realise an international exchange (virtual). In this case the student follows a complete (or substantial parts of a) programme entirely at a distance, supported via ICT. Participation is open to students from higher education institutions of different countries (provided there are agreements between them and the teaching and learning activities are recognised by the institutions taking part in the project).

Virtual mobility: for whom

The usual goal of virtual mobility is to get students to develop intercultural and international skills through online collaboration (student virtual mobility).

However, the teachers and support staff that are organising these international courses can develop the exact same skills and competences as they go along. This form of virtual mobility (teacher virtual mobility) often tends to be forgotten. One might say however, that teacher virtual mobility could make teachers ‘practice what they preach’. When teachers from different institutions are co-developing and organising an online international learning
opportunity for their students, it gives them a better view on the possibilities of different tools and technologies to organise a course, as well as on the expectations that students might have.

Last but not least, virtual mobility is also possible for administrative staff. Though at present they are only seldom involved in virtual exchanges, international collaboration and sharing of practices can be very beneficial for them as well (as shown in one of examples further in this publication).

THE VMCOLAB PROJECT

The project

The VMCOLAB project (2012-2015) aimed to contribute to the innovation and internationalisation of European higher education institutions by exploiting the full potential of virtual mobility and broadening the access to international learning experiences for all students.

The project therefore has been working to develop a quality assurance approach for virtual mobility; to increase both institutional and students' awareness of the potential and opportunities of virtual mobility; to develop and test a set of support services for higher education institutions willing to pilot virtual mobility programmes; and to integrate virtual mobility in institutional academic contexts.

In the course of the project the VMCOLAB partners have developed following support materials and services for those higher education institutions, teachers or students that want to engage in virtual mobility experiences:

- Virtual Mobility Integration Kit
- Quality Assurance Handbook for Virtual Mobility
- Students Guide to Virtual Mobility
- Virtual4Me website
- VMCOLAB Co-Laboratory

All the outcomes presented in the next section are downloadable from the project website.

http://vmcolab.eu/

The outcomes

Virtual Mobility Integration Kit

The Integration Kit for Virtual Mobility: a Guide for Institutional Awareness is a compilation of good practices, projects and tools that can be helpful for institutions that want to embrace virtual mobility. The document is organised around several topics that were identified by the project partnership as being crucial areas for the
modernisation of Higher Education: (1) the use of ICT to foster quality of education and training; (2) the internationalisation of curricula; (3) the collaboration in curricula; (4) the excellence building through networking; (5) the complement to Erasmus programs mobility; (6) the assessment of learning outcomes; and (6) accreditation and recognition.

The Integration Kit is a tool to be used to promote awareness of virtual mobility inside partner institutions and other Higher Education Institutions among students, staff and academics. It is intended to have application of virtual mobility in normal degree programs and in continuing professional programs covering the challenges of lifelong learning.

VMCOLAB builds on the experience of several other projects that explored the concept of virtual mobility and presents case studies obtained from those projects or other already existing initiatives. But of course the experiences of the VMCOLAB pilot courses delivered during the project implementation and the case studies of the VMCOLAB awareness seminars organised within the framework of the project, give valuable feedback on several of the crucial issues related to virtual mobility. Together they represent a large spectrum of levels of education and training and this set of applications of virtual mobility allows each higher education institution to choose the type of case study that better suits the needs.

http://vmcolab.eu/publications/awareness-kit/

Quality Assurance Handbook for Virtual Mobility

The Quality Assurance Handbook for Virtual Mobility aims to facilitate higher education institutions, teachers and institutional departments to get involved in virtual mobility planning and implementation. The handbook introduces the virtual mobility process through its five main phases: Decision making, Curriculum development, Virtual mobility organisation, Assessment and feedback, and Certification and recognition; and provides guidelines for virtual mobility preparation and implementation.

The handbook describes quality criteria and indicators, as well as virtual mobility elements for each of the five phases introduced. Along with the quality criteria for each implementation phase, the handbook allows higher education institutions to identify which virtual mobility features are mandatory or optional for different virtual mobility types.

Scenarios for different virtual mobility modes were identified during numerous project experiences among the consortium, but the most complex scenario is curriculum designing for virtual mobility involving multilateral teacher and student virtual mobility. These scenarios allowed the authors of the handbook to suggest necessary procedural steps and sequences for quality criteria attribution to virtual mobility phases and virtual mobility features.

The VMCOLAB Quality assurance Handbook for Virtual Mobility has already been transferred as a reference and practical guide to European projects working on virtual mobility mainstreaming and exploitation. The handbook is expected to be useful for training of administrative representatives, international officers, as well as teachers designing curriculum for virtual mobility and making decisions on virtual mobility type and mode.

Students Guide to Virtual Mobility

The Students Guide to Virtual Mobility is addressed to students who do not have any experience in virtual mobility and who are interested in learning more about it. It aims to inform students about what virtual mobility is, how it can be beneficial to them in their academic and career planning, how it can be integrated in study programmes or courses and how to find virtual mobility opportunities.

The first section of the students guide introduces the definition, the different types of virtual mobility, and the technologies that can be used to support the virtual mobility process. The guide contains also a motivational section that highlights the benefits of taking part in a virtual mobility experience. These benefits are illustrated with short testimonials of virtual mobility alumni. The full testimonials are shared on the Virtual4me webpage. The third section is the most practical one and explains how it is possible to apply for such a virtual mobility experience. In particular it aims to explain the role of the student in the quality assurance process and the certification and recognition process, and it suggests whom to contact to get further information and administrative support. Finally, the guide also includes a checklist with the main characteristics a student should have to be ready for a virtual mobility experience.

http://vmcolab.eu/publications/students-guide-to-virtual-mobility/

Virtual4Me website

The Virtual4me website is a meeting place for higher education students who experienced or want to experience virtual mobility and want to express their satisfaction or concerns, tell their story of participation, report learning results and any other aspects of their experience. On the website, a collection of tools are provided to help students get information about and improve their virtual mobility experiences.

The website hosts (1) written and recorded virtual mobility alumni testimonials to read and hear about the experiences of students who have been virtually mobile and to find inspiration in their stories; (2) a FAQ section to learn about the basics of virtual mobility, and to find out how virtual mobility experiences work in practice; (3) an “Hear it from the experts” section with video interviews of virtual mobility experts. Finally, the Students Guide to Virtual Mobility is downloadable from the Virtual4me website.

http://virtual4me.vmcolab.eu/

VMCOLAB Co-Laboratory

The VMCOLAB Co-Laboratory is a thematic hub where higher education institutions and key actors concerned with higher education and virtual mobility can meet, exchange knowledge, share experiences and get involved in virtual mobility planning and implementation.

The Co-Laboratory collects information and tools to help stakeholders within higher education institutions that are interested in setting up or improving virtual mobility activities. The website includes (1) an introduction to the virtual mobility process through its five main phases (as elaborated in the Quality Assurance Handbook for Virtual Mobility) and guidelines for the preparation and implementation of virtual mobility; (2) virtual mobility implementation
practices from both the VMCOLAB and other virtual mobility projects; (3) a section with video interviews of Virtual mobility experts and teachers.

Teachers, teaching assistants, support and other staff interested in getting involved in virtual mobility are invited to join the “Virtual Mobility Co-Laboratory” LinkedIn group.

http://co-laboratory.innovate4future.eu/

The pilot courses

The VMCOLAB project has also been active in demonstrating the potential of virtual mobility experiments by setting up three virtual mobility pilot courses with at least three participating higher education institutions:

- Pilot course on Open Educational Resources, organised by Vytautas Magnus University
- Pilot course on Career Services Staff Training, organised by University of Padova
- Pilot course on Water Management, organised by KU Leuven

Through these pilots, VMCOLAB aimed to demonstrate the potential of virtual mobility on different levels, that of the students, the teachers, the administrative staff and the institution.

Open Educational Resources

The Open Educational Resources (OER) pilot ran November-December 2013, and was a three ECTS course delivered by ten teachers and trainers from six European countries. Eighteen students (nine e-learning centre staff members and nine (Bachelor, Master, PhD regular and Erasmus) students) from seven universities participated in the pilot. Vytautas Magnus University coordinated the virtual mobility course design and implementation.

Learning outcomes of the course were (1) to define OER, list their categories and compare types and models of OER; (2) to characterise the quality and explain the purpose of use of selected OER; (3) to analyse the issues of OER development and use in education; and (4) to design use or reuse of OER and construct next steps in OER development.

The OER course lasted for 5 weeks. There were 5 synchronous virtual meetings organised during the pilot. Each synchronous meeting was supposed to be composed of two parts: a theoretical presentation and an assignment for an international learner group. International learner groups had to implement 3 assignments and present them online in consequent synchronous video meetings. All learners worked in international groups to ensure multi-cultural and multi-institutional online collaboration settings which are important characteristics of virtual mobility. At least three different countries were represented in each group, in order to set equal challenges for each group.
Career Development

The Career Service Staff Training pilot was a short course of five (videoconference) sessions which ran from March until November 2014. The pilot was based on sharing experiences and designed as a virtual exchange of Career Services staff members from several European higher education institutions. The participants in the pilot were University of Padova, University of Granada, University of Iasi, University of Porto and University of Aarhus. Out of these five participants, four higher education institutions delivered the course and provided learners, one only provided learners. The University of Padova coordinated the virtual mobility course design and implementation, with the collaboration of the other institutions, which have proposed themes to be discussed.

The pilot addressed higher education institution Career Service staff. The exchange of information and of best practices at an international level is very important to develop common strategies and to cooperate for the internationalisation of internship and work placement opportunities. University internationalisation strategies often tend to focus on students and academic staff, yet it is fundamental to address the needs of technical and administrative staff as well and virtual exchanges are an effective means for engaging such staff in knowledge exchange. In this regard, the exchange combined linguistic training with the possibility for people (who work and for whom it is hard to meet physically) to talk about common issues related to their professional activity.

Various topical issues which are relevant to the staff involved have been addressed such as the internationalisation of universities, 21st century skills required for careers, as well as the socio-economic situation and the debt crisis in Europe. Participants discussed how the career service staff could support students and graduates in facing the new challenges of the global labour market and shared perspectives on students and graduates employability in Europe.

Water Management

The Tools and Techniques for Water Resources Management (Water Management) pilot was a three ECTS Master level course delivered by four teachers from three countries. Nine students from three universities (KU Leuven, University of Granada and University of Porto) participated in the pilot. KU Leuven coordinated the online preparatory phase, the virtual mobility course design and the virtual mobility implementation.

The Water Management pilot lasted for one year, but had two phases. During the preparatory phase, from January 2014 until September 2014, the focus of the pilot was on Teacher Virtual Mobility. During this fully online phase, the professors learned about virtual mobility by applying it. Since none of the professors had any prior experience with online teaching or virtual mobility they received intensive individual support from the three involved local partners of the VMCOLAB consortium during this phase of the pilot.

The Student Virtual Mobility part of the pilot (the actual virtual mobility course) took eight weeks, and ran from October until December 2014. Since not all students were able to attend the live sessions in Adobe Connect, the sessions were recorded and posted onto a Moodle platform. In general each live session was composed of several parts: topic presentation, Q&A, the international student group assignment presentation and feedback from the professor. In between sessions students were stimulated to use their own tools, such as Skype and Facebook.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the development of the pilot courses and deliverables presented in the previous sections, as well as through the organisation of awareness raising events, the VMCOLAB project has put much effort into moving virtual mobility from a project level into the mainstream strategic goals of the participating institutions and networks. Measures on how to better integrate virtual mobility into educational experiences across Europe, need to be looked at on different levels now and in future initiatives.

The following recommendations for the main target groups of virtual mobility are the result of lessons learnt from the pilots and discussions during our workshops and events, involving different stakeholders in the field of higher education innovation and internationalisation. There are recommendations:

- on how to engage students who would like to embark in virtual mobility activities;
- for teachers who would like to set up virtual mobility activities;
- for institutions motivated to organise virtual mobility activities;
- for the European Commission concerning issues to be addressed and regulated at a higher policy level.

Students

- Understand that virtual mobility is a valuable experience for the personal development of each student.
- Check if the virtual mobility experience is acknowledged / recognised by the home institution.
- Consider virtual mobility as a possible “jumping board” to physical mobility.

Teachers

- Do not fear to start and get engaged in virtual mobility.
- Be well prepared in advance, plan beforehand.
- Find and describe the added value: define the aims.
- Start small.
- Get familiar with the different existing tools.
- Create a team of colleagues with whom you can cooperate and discuss your virtual mobility proposal.
- Ensure you have administrative, technical and pedagogical support and identify the units or departments within your institution that can help you launching your virtual mobility activity.
- Search for good examples that can inspire you.
• Discuss with people with whom you could organise virtual mobility with.

• Get involved to make virtual mobility academic activities part of the curricula facilitating the recognition process.

Higher education institutions

• Include virtual mobility in a broad sense as an integral part of the institution's strategic planning and internationalisation policy.

• Inform, train and support students, teachers and non-academic staff in virtual mobility.

• Give more recognition to virtual mobility and grant equal importance to it as to physical mobility.

European Commission

• Include virtual mobility in the regular Erasmus exchange programme.

• Create a community (critical mass) of practice at European level and connect people and institutions familiar with and experienced in virtual mobility

• Prepare the European Higher Education Area for the future. Virtual mobility is part of that future.