

Chapter XIII

From Virtual Mobility to Virtual Erasmus: Offering Students Courses and Services without Boundaries

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ABSTRACT

In higher education, international student mobility has become increasingly important for learners as well as for institutions. But today's mobility schemes are first and foremost aimed at physical mobility. This approach covers the majority of students, but does, however, not take into account the needs of the lifelong learners who are not mobile due to family or work commitments, or who are constrained by disability, or do not have the financial means for traveling abroad during their academic education. The need to offer all students in higher education the possibility of an international experience and the European strategy of boosting student mobility requires new and alternative mobility concepts in addition to physical mobility. The European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) initiated an operational analysis of virtual mobility under the e-move project. Different models of virtual mobility have been developed, analysed and put into practice. This chapter will explore how a particular virtual mobility scheme can be put into practice and what is required from an organisation to implement this model and incorporate it into its own curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

In the political and societal discourse of the developments in higher education, students' (and teachers') mobility has become increasingly important. But talking about student mobility usually means talking about physical mobility. You will immediately think about students in the beginning of their twenties packing up a suitcase and spending several months abroad. It means living and learning in a foreign country and sending postcards back home. But what about the growing number of students older, engaged in family and work life, the handicapped, less well off who cannot get a room in L'Auberge espagnole? What about the lifelong learner everyone is talking about?

For most people their (academic) education is not a solid or limited phase in their life after graduating from high school and before entering a career on the same job until retirement, anymore. What Florida has described for the labour market:

The most notable feature of the new labour market [...] is that people don't stay tied to companies anymore. Instead of moving up through the ranks of one organization, they move laterally from company to company in search of what they want. The playing field is horizontal and people are always on the roll. (Florida, 2002, p. 104)

- is also valid for the path people take in their academic education. It has become a dynamic strategy for professional and personal development throughout their whole life (e.g., Stehr, 1994, p. 408).

This societal and individual development towards mobility as part of people's educational and professional reality is accompanied by political efforts to enhance student mobility. Since 1987, the Erasmus programme has been running. Also other initiatives on the international and national level have a long tradition in facilitating and funding

international student mobility. They accompany the efforts on the European level to motivate and enable more students for spending time at a foreign university during their academic education. But the current focus lies, almost exclusively on physical mobility. This does not fit to the reality of today's education system nor does it reflect the needs of today's students. A supplement to the current forms of international student mobility is needed, especially considering the needs in lifelong learning.

The objective of this chapter is to introduce virtual mobility as this supplement to the present types of international student mobility in higher education, providing its very own profile and legitimacy, neither being superior or inferior to physical mobility, but sometimes complementing and reinforcing it. As the main thrust of this chapter, the e-move project, as well as the International Course Exchange are described as best practices of in virtual mobility. The reader will gain valuable insights into the set-up of virtual mobility schemes in general and the International Course Exchange¹ in particular. Thus they will get useful information and advice on how to realise the International Course Exchange or related model at their own institution.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section describe current developments and selected initiatives on student mobility, the second section introduces the key characteristics relating to the concept of virtual mobility as promoted in the e-move project and the International Course Exchange, highlighting best practices, and the third section highlights future developments in student mobility in general, and current initiatives aimed at turning virtual mobility into Virtual Erasmus, a mainstream application next to the physical Erasmus scheme. This chapter is based on the work and the activities of the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) and its members, providing their expertise and input into e-move and various other projects relating to virtual mobility.

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