PREPAREDNESS OF EUROPEAN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS FOR VIRTUAL MOBILITY IMPLEMENTATION

Estela Daukšienė, Nemira Mačianskienė, Airina Volungevičienė

ABSTRACT
Youth mobility and academic mobility are one of the main priorities fostered by the European Commission in order to construct genuine European area of knowledge and to contribute to the competitiveness of the European economy. Virtual mobility has been introduced and is fostered aiming at supporting and enriching physical mobility as well as using possibilities provided by Information Communication Technologies (further ICT) for multi-connections of participants for joint intercultural and knowledge based activities. Due to the rapid development of ICT an opportunity emerges to benefit from various mobility activities without travelling. However, it is a challenge for educational institutions to constantly re-adapt to the changes and increased competitiveness.

The research addresses the readiness of education institutions to implement virtual mobility, first, by discussing different virtual mobility definitions, then identifying virtual mobility benefits for education institution participants, and by clarifying institutional practices and needs for virtual mobility implementation.

KEYWORDS:
virtual mobility, virtual mobility benefits, education institutions, preparedness for virtual mobility
INTRODUCTION

Mobility of students, teachers and other academic staff is one of the core elements of the Bologna process and lifelong learning. Virtual mobility initiatives were indicated as one of the cost effective ways to increase the access to educational mobility by Maastricht message in 2009 (ICDE Executive Committee, EADTU Executive Committee, 2009). Thus the object of the research is preparedness of educational institutions for virtual mobility. The aim of the research is to identify the readiness and preparedness of education institutions to implement virtual mobility. To achieve the goal of the research the following objectives were raised:

• To discuss the concept of virtual mobility;
• To identify virtual mobility benefits for students, teachers and educational institutions;
• To clarify institutional practices and needs for virtual mobility implementation.

Methodology. The empirical quantitative research was implemented in May-October of 2011. It was enhanced by the virtual mobility activities implemented in TeaCamp (Teacher Virtual Campus: Research, Practise, Apply) project, where teacher virtual mobility was in the scope of the research. The online survey was prepared and distributed to the TeaCamp project partners and their recommended education providing institutions in Europe. Representatives from 39 education institutions filled in the survey. The results are discussed in the paper.

1. VIRTUAL MOBILITY CONCEPT FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Virtual mobility could be defined from various perspectives, depending on the research area. As the term virtual refers to the information communication technologies (hereinafter ICT), the concept of virtual mobility could also be analyzed referring to the technological possibilities of virtualization or types of activities realized, as well as emphasis on mobility or curricula internationalization.

The features of virtual mobility, presented and addressed in various papers and project reports, refer to different areas. The research and virtual mobility concept analysis here refers to the educational perspective.

Virtual mobility in Bunt-Kokhuis (1996, 2001) research papers is defined as “the collaborative communication between a faculty member and his/her counterpart(s) mediated by a computer. More often, these meetings will be interactive and take place across national borders and across time zones” (2001:1). The definition suggests the ideas that virtual mobility here focuses on communication which becomes more interactive and also on possibilities to eliminate distance and time constraints for communication to occur.

The training material “Virtual Erasmus student” (Spot+ project team, 2001), which was produced as a Spot+ project outcome, also asserts that “virtual mobility includes all forms that are communication intensive and run at international level”. As the training material is dedicated to Erasmus program students (that covers higher education sector), it refers to virtual mobility as a situation within university which implies a “possibility to attend classes, seminars and other events held in a place located anywhere in the world; the possibility to access reference materials and contents at a distance, by using ICT-based solutions; the possibility to communicate with other people located anywhere” (2001: 10). On the basis of the training material it also can be assumed that virtual mobility is a “hybrid model introducing a distance learning module into normal curricula” (2001: 12), i.e. the elimination of distance aspect is one of the main features of virtual mobility.

Schreurs, Verjans, Van Petegem (2006) view virtual mobility as a virtual student exchange with different forms of activity organization: “Virtual student exchange allows for collaboration with foreign students and teachers that are no longer location dependent. The
exchange might range from a single course to a full academic year. Through virtual mobility a university can also offer international experience for students and staff through an international discussion group, an international seminar, an international learning community with regard to a theme of a course or a cluster of courses" (2006: 4). It is obvious that despite the benefit of location independent education, virtual mobility offers a range of activity organization forms and international experience enabled by the use of ICT.

A more full-scale interpretation which includes the intercultural aspect of virtual mobility in order to "highlight the richness of the experience and the similarities with the Erasmus exchange programme" (Eds. Op de Beeck, Bijnens, Van Petegem, 2008) is provided in the Being Mobile project manual on blended mobility: "Virtual mobility is a form of learning which consists of virtual components through an ICT supported learning environment that includes cross-border collaboration with people from different backgrounds and cultures working and studying together, having, as its main purpose, the enhancement of intercultural understanding and the exchange of knowledge" (2008: 18). In addition to the above mentioned key features of virtual mobility expressed by different authors, this definition adds another aspect to the list of benefits of virtual mobility and that is a possibility for intercultural competence development.

Some authors define the concept of virtual mobility in terms of its relationship to traditional mobility. When traditional mobility is at the scope, virtual mobility can be defined as an alternative or a complement (pre- or follow up) of the traditional mobility. Such as Valjus (2002) describes virtual mobility "as something that exists next to or as a result of traditional mobility" (2002: 6). Silvio (2003) looks at virtual mobility from mobility perspective and defines it as a representation of physical mobility in virtual reality. He specifies it with M. Dertouzo's 'pillars', where all computer mediated processes could be transferred to digital numbers, and sums up that "virtual mobility is mobility of 'bits' instead of 'atoms'" (2003: 4).

Such additional characteristics of virtual mobility as the importance of cooperation agreements and academic recognition are presented in the Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-2013 glossary, where virtual mobility is characterized as "A complement; or as a substitute to physical mobility (Erasmus or similar) in addition to a type of independent mobility which builds on the specific potentials of on-line learning and network communication. It may prepare and extend physical mobility, and/or offer new opportunities for students/academic staff who are unwilling or unable to take advantage of physical mobility. <...>

Full academic recognition is given to the students for studies and courses based on agreements for the evaluation, validation and recognition of the acquired competences via virtual mobility. In this context, cooperation agreements are key to ensuring sustainable mobility schemes" (EC Glossary on the LLP 2007-2013, 2010).

Summarising the analysed virtual mobility definitions, Teresevičienė et al. (eds.) (2011), define virtual mobility as an activity or a form of learning, research and communication and collaboration, based on the following characteristics:

- cooperation of at least 2 higher education institutions;
- virtual components through an ICT supported learning environment;
- collaboration of people from different backgrounds and cultures working and studying together, creating a virtual community;
- having a clear goal and clearly defined learning outcomes;
- having, as its main purpose, the exchange of knowledge and improvement of intercultural competences;
- as a result of which the participants may obtain ECTS credits and/or its academic recognition will be assumed by the home university;
- providing visibility of university in higher education area, capitalization of educational
process;
  • leading to the integration of ICT into their mainstream academic and business process-
  es."(2011: 19)

To sum up, virtual mobility concept could be analyzed from various perspectives, and
its different characteristics can be noted from the discussed research papers and project
initiatives. As the possibilities of technological solutions for communication in virtual reality
have developed rather rapidly in the last 20 years, the concept, possibilities and expectations
with regard to virtual mobility have also changed. At the end of 1990s virtual mobility was
viewed more as possibility to communicate with the help of ICT, its possibilities widened
gradually and in 2012 it is seen as an activity or a form of learning, research, communication
and collaboration that contributes to the modernization of study curricular and competitiv-
eness of educational institutions.

2. BENEFITS OF VIRTUAL MOBILITY FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS AND EDUCATION
  INSTITUTIONS

Virtual mobility implementation contributes to and has impact upon different areas
of educational institutions. The research analyzes the possibilities created by virtual mobility
implementation in educational institutions and identifies benefits for education institution
participants - students and teachers, and the education institutions themselves.

2.1 BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS

Virtual mobility provides students with opportunities that are not always possible to
provide at the traditional learning environment. Thus it can be assumed that virtual mobility
activities (virtual learning courses, seminars or practices, pre- or follow up of physical mobil-
ity activities) create opportunities for students to benefit:
  • linguistically, culturally and educationally from the experience of other European coun-
  tries and their (academic) fields of study (Bijnens, Op de Beeck, 2006);
  • from international experience offered by the virtual students exchange (Schreurs,
  Verjans, Van Petegem, 2006) or practice;
  • from the broadened areas of expertise offered by joint course delivery by two or more
  institutions (EuroPACE 2010);
  • from intercultural experiences of students through the organisation of trans-border
discussion groups, international seminars or the set-up of an international learning commu-
  nity whereby staff and students acquire interpersonal and intercultural skills and get a chance to
  broaden their cultural, social and political boundaries (EuroPACE 2010);
  • from the supplementary courses provided to further individualize and specialize their
  portfolios (Brey et al, 2007);
  • improve their "virtual mobility competences that can be divided to ICT, English language,
  intercultural communication, personal and social competences, learning outcomes related com-
  petence and some additional skills such as time management, learning to work cooperatively
  in virtual environment, and better understanding of virtual mobility as a form of learning" (Eds.
  Teresevičienė, Volungevičienė, Daukšienė, 2011: 101), additional transferrable skills and knowl-
  edge areas.
2.2. BENEFITS FOR TEACHERS

Virtual mobility also widens the opportunities for teachers in a number of ways:

- Teachers benefit linguistically, culturally and educationally from the experience of other European countries and their (academic) fields of study (Bijnens, Op de Beeck, 2006);
- Course preparation in international groups, virtual and/or face to face discussions, professional networking and exchange of good practices offer teachers remarkable experience in preparation and delivery of virtual mobility courses. Joint cooperation in international virtual environment, didactical, administrative and technological support received from various institutions participants cooperating in virtual mobility also increases teacher career opportunities.
- Virtual mobility encourages institutions to adapt and further develop their pedagogical models: change of content delivery and the change of learning tools require changes in pedagogy and didactical models (Bijnens, Op de Beeck, 2006). So virtual mobility helps teachers to review and revive their present course delivery models and techniques. Content sharing and co-operation in joint course delivery widen teachers’ field of expertise.
- After virtual mobility course or module teachers improve their ‘virtual mobility competences that can be divided into ICT, English language, intercultural communication, personal and social competences, learning outcomes related competence and some additional skills, such as time management, learning to work cooperatively in virtual environment, and better understanding of virtual mobility as a form of learning’ (Eds. Teresevičienė, Volungevičienė, Daukšienė, 2011: 101).

2.3. BENEFITS FOR INSTITUTIONS

The impact of virtual mobility upon education providing institutions can also be addressed stressing different challenges that they meet, such as rapidly changing requirements of the global world and learning communities, intercultural learning background, demand for different skills and competences required by the labour market, etc. So virtual mobility impact upon institutions can be noticed in the following areas:

- It enhances the quality of courses and curricula and contributes to the quality of the academic education (Brey et al, 2007), as well as transparency of educational processes.
- Virtual mobility contributes to the internationalisation of higher education (EuroPACE, 2010) and creates a new potential for the organization to offer international experience for students (Brey et al, 2007), teachers and other academic and non-academic staff; in addition, it creates equal possibilities for all to participate in exchange programmes, including those who are unable to travel due to financial, social, or personal reasons.
- Virtual mobility enhances modernization of study programmes as well as modernization and internationalization of the teaching/learning curricula.
- Virtual mobility studies create a new international background for researchers to implement research in virtual environment using virtual tools, collaborating with scholars from other countries and addressing more diverse respondents.
- At the institutional level, virtual mobility initiatives enhance sound competition between institutions and thus contribute to the competitiveness and attractiveness of the educational offer in general (Bijnens, Op de Beeck, 2006). It also stimulates institutions’ co-operation and cost-sharing, and increases the need for multilateral agreements.
- VM is a tool to increase pressure to foster the use of e-learning and the development of virtual universities in Europe (Pursuea, Warsta, Laaksonen, 2005). It stimulates the creation of joint virtual campus or cooperation and access to different education institutions’ virtual campuses.
• The possibilities of virtual practices enhance strategic partnerships of education institutions and enterprises.
• Summarising the identified benefits of virtual mobility for educational institution participants, the importance of virtual mobility in facilitating wider and greater institutional goals can be stressed:
  • In some part virtual mobility ensures social inclusion as it "reduces the socio-economic barriers" (Bijnens, Op de Beeck, 2006).
  • The use of virtual mobility facilitates not only the usage of ICT, but also the openness to information technology and the creating of digitally literate academic staff.
  • It contributes to the Bologna process and LLL for all students (Brey et al., 2007).
  • In the context of international economic crisis, virtual mobility might be the key factor in facilitating educational mobility of teachers or students.

3. INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES AND NEEDS FOR VIRTUAL MOBILITY IMPLEMENTATION

The survey was implemented in the framework of Erasmus multilateral project “TEACAMP – Teacher Virtual Campus: Research, Practice, Apply” (project ID 502102-LLP-1-2009-1-LT-ERASMUS-EVC, project website http://www.teacamp.eu) with the aim to identify the existing initiatives and practices in virtual mobility and to search for possible synthesis with these initiatives among higher education, adult education, vocational educational and training institutions, and enterprises. The survey was implemented online on project website, and the online survey link was distributed to all partnership institutions and experts working in virtual mobility area in Europe.

As seen in Figure 1, 31 higher education institution, 3 enterprises, 2 adult education institutions and 2 associations participated in the survey (see Fig. 1).

![Fig. 1. Institutions participating in the survey](image-url)
The survey allowed the respondents to remain anonymous, but also provided a possibility to receive the responses on the survey by indicating their affiliation and the data about the respondent's position in the institution. Only 9 respondents disclosed their institutions at the end of the survey (1 from Portugal, 5 from Spain, and 3 from Lithuania).

It was very important to identify who the respondents of the survey were and their positions and responsibilities in the organization. Though the survey addressed teachers and administration representatives, enterprise representatives, trainers and consultants, the following positions and responsibilities were also represented in the survey (see Fig. 2):

- **Teacher/trainer**: 44%
- **Consultant**: 8%
- **Administration representative**: 41%
- **Researcher**: 5%
- **Other**: 2%

![Fig. 2. Positions of respondents of the survey](image)

The fact that 41% of the respondents represented administration of institutions, and 44% were teachers and trainers – directly increases the probability that the respondents were or should have been aware of the existing virtual mobility schemes and procedural documents within the institution.

The following questions were related with the virtual mobility practices and procedures, as well as the needs within the institutions of the respondents.

3 respondents indicated that they had a separate administrative model for virtual mobility organization. 36 respondents admitted not having such a model; however, 15 chose the response that they would like to have such a model. There is a high probability that the 3 respondents who indicated that they had such a model could be the respondents from among the partners in TeaCamp project, but this has not been identified in the survey.

Only 9 institutions out of all 39 indicated that they had a separate campus for virtual mobility implementation and indicated the online address of these campuses. 3 institutions indicated the TeaCamp virtual campus address. 1 campus was distributed out of the 9 mentioned, while 8 were indicated as centralized campuses.

11 types of tools were suggested for respondents, and those respondents who indicated that they practiced virtual mobility and academic exchange were asked to identify...
which of these tools they used for academic exchange and virtual mobility. The most popular tool was video conferencing (selected by 8 respondents), and then virtual learning environment (closed option) chosen by 7 respondents. 5 respondents indicated class management tools and social networking tools. Other tools were indicated more rarely.

Fig. 3. Tools used for virtual mobility

Though institutions have very limited practice in virtual mobility organization among teachers and students, as can be seen from the answers above, the respondents of the study were asked to identify the impact of virtual mobility upon modernization. The answers revealed the impact upon modernization of study curriculum, better carrier opportunities, enhancing employability, teacher and student upgraded skills, quality improvement in student services, quality improvement in research, in teaching and learning, and the impact upon high level institutional management.

Fig. 4. Indicators of virtual mobility impact
The respondents' answers show that the greatest and direct impact of virtual mobility is upon teacher and student upgraded skills (7 respondents gave the first priority for this criterion). 6 respondents agreed that virtual mobility had a direct impact upon modernization of the study curriculum, better career opportunities, enhanced employability, quality improvement of student services and teaching and learning (see Fig. 4).

The least expressed criteria were quality improvement in research and impact on high level institutional management, where the respondents indicated that they had no opinion by choosing the answer "some impact" and even "no impact can be identified yet".

There was another very relevant question in the survey addressing only the teachers who filled in the survey and indicated that they had some experience in virtual mobility. However, it turned out that there was only 1 teacher who corresponded to these characteristics and, therefore, the outcomes would not be valid in terms of quantity.

All the respondents were asked to name academic activities that can be organized in virtual mobility. Not all the respondents chose to answer this question, but those who indicated provided a picture of their professional choices. Their responses are as indicated in Figure 5:

Again it can be noticed that the respondents do not have a clear idea on how research can most often be implemented via virtual mobility. Communication, socio-cultural activities, video lecturing and teaching online, according to the respondents, could be implemented “quite often”. However, some respondents indicated that all the activities listed cannot be implemented via virtual mobility and chose the answer “not at all”.

The survey was aimed to identify the needs for virtual mobility and the attitude of the teachers and administration representative upon the usability of virtual mobility. Several options to identify the use of virtual mobility were suggested for the respondents. They were asked to indicate the degree of usefulness of each of the option.

The greatest number of the respondents chose the variable “very important” which results in the use of virtual mobility for the disadvantaged groups and as a support for home student groups and lifelong learners. A high number of respondents indicated that virtual mobility is “very important” in introducing new learning methods and developing additional
The respondents agreed that virtual mobility introduces transparency of teaching and upgrades skills in general, improves curriculum quality standards, and enhances employability. All the criteria were acknowledged respectfully and can provide the outcomes of the research (see Fig. 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 not important at all</th>
<th>2 less important</th>
<th>3 no idea</th>
<th>4 important</th>
<th>5 very important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VM is perfect tool for the mobility among the disadvantaged</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VM introduces transparency of teaching and learning</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VM introduces new learning methods</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VM develops additional skills via networking and socio-cultural exchange</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VM improves curriculum quality standards</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VM provides support for home student and LLL groups</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VM enhances employability</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VM upgrades skills</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Fig. 6. Benefits of virtual mobility**

Furthermore, the question regarding virtual mobility implementation barriers identified the problems and obstacles that institutions face aiming at virtual mobility implementation. The most important problem area is the definition of the concept of virtual mobility at national and institutional levels (see Fig. 7). Also, the scenario definitions for virtual mobility, examples or existing templates for virtual mobility contracts are another obstacle recognized by the majority of the respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 strongly disagree</th>
<th>2 disagree</th>
<th>3 neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>4 agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>there is no evidence how virtual mobility is useful for a company/university/individuals</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>there are no examples for virtual mobility contracts among institutions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>there are no scenarios for virtual mobility implementation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nobody knows how teacher virtual mobility is recognised and accredited</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nobody knows how virtual mobility studies are recognised</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>there is no concept of virtual mobility on the national and institutional level</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fig. 7. Barriers for virtual mobility implementation**
The lack of knowledge on how virtual mobility can be recognized among teachers and students is the third problem area. These obstacles should be overcome first in order to successfully apply virtual mobility initiatives at educational institutions.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Virtual mobility is rather a new and rapidly developing phenomenon. It has been analyzed and viewed from different perspectives; however, a virtual mobility concept and its definition have not been agreed upon yet, but it is supposed to foster and enrich physical mobility, or with the help of ICT to implement such virtual learning, research or communication and collaboration activities that are not possible and/or not targeted during physical mobility.

2. Virtual mobility implementation creates possibilities and opens up opportunities for students, teachers and education institutions. Students and teachers benefit linguistically, culturally, and educationally from the widened possibilities to choose and work collaboratively in intercultural communities, while institutions face more transparency in their educational processes, and more challenges to handle them.

3. Very few institutions (only 3 out of 39) have specific regulations for virtual mobility implementation for teachers and students; however, the rest do not have such regulations but would like to have. Various tools and campus solutions are applied for the initiation of virtual mobility in education institutions, as well as positive impact upon study modernization is proved by the survey respondents; however, such problem areas as the lack of the definition of the concept of virtual mobility at national and institutional levels, the lack of cases and examples of scenarios for virtual mobility, examples or existing templates for virtual mobility contracts, lack of knowledge on how virtual mobility can be recognized among teachers and students are the barriers and obstacles to successfully apply virtual mobility initiatives at educational institutions.

REFERENCES


SANTRAUKA


Straišnyje nagrinėjamas švietimo institucijų pasirengimas įgyvendinti virtualųjį judumą, aptaria virtualiojo judumo sąvoka, apibrėžia virtualiojo judumo nauda studentams, dėstytojams ir švietimo institucijoms, pristatoma virtualiojo judumą įgyvendinančių institucijų praktika ir poreikiai.

Virtualusis judumas yra palyginti naujas reiškinys ir jo galimybės yra labai veikiamos nuolatinio IKT vystymosi ir plėtros. Mokslo literatūros šaltiniuose ir projektų apžvalgose virtualiojo judumo sąvoka apibrėžiama skirtingai, išryškinant skirtingus požymius ir funkcijas. Kol kas dar nėra bendros virtualiojo judumo apibrėžtis, bet dauguma šaltinių pabrėžia, kad virtualusis judumas turėtų ne pakeisti, bet skatinti ir praturtinti fizinį judumą arba sudaryti galimybes naudodantįs IKT realizuoti tokias virtualiojo mokymosi, tyrimų, bendradarbiavimo veiklas, kurios nėra įmanomos arba siekiamos fizinio judumo metu.

Virtualiojo judumo įgyvendinimas sukuria daug galimybių studentams, dėstytojams ir švietimo institucijoms. Platesnės pasirinkimo galimybės, darbas, bendradarbiai ir bendradarbiavimas tarpautiškėje, tarpkultūriškėje aplinkoje suteikia galimybę naudoti ir globalioja visuomenėje. Švietimo institucijos skatinamos modernizuotis ir įvokti iššūkius, kurias kelia švietimo proceso skaidrumo ir padidejusio švietimo institucijų konkurencingumo reikalavimai.
PAGRINDINĖS SĄVOKOS:

virtualus mobilumas, virtualaus mobilumo pliusai, švietimo įstaigos, pasirengimas virtualiam mobilumui

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