



MOBILISING LIFELONG LEARNING STUDENTS BY CREATING A VIRTUAL ERASMUS PROGRAMME (EPICS)

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Introduction

The Lifelong Learning Programme in which the Erasmus programme is now embedded includes amongst its 'specific objectives' the requirement to 'contribute to increased participation in lifelong learning by people of all ages, including those with special needs and disadvantaged groups, regardless of their socioeconomic background (Objective f). Against this target, and against the larger ambition to create a European experience for the students of the member countries, there remains a long road ahead of us.

A study has been made, for instance, of the participation in the scheme by UK students. The Sussex Centre for Migration Research found in 2004 that only 15 % of students going abroad reported below average income. Most of them came from the elite pre-1992 universities. The study concluded that, 'it is young people especially those with good educational backgrounds, who travel the most'. Erasmus was not exposing the untraveled to the pleasures of travel. Rather it was attracting those already confident in their ability to move around Europe. The study found that 'Many are likely to have been abroad with their parents on school trips, or as part of 'gap year' experiences between school and university'.

That this should be so is no criticism of the Erasmus programme as such. It can only work with those who apply to it, and it is no surprise that the most experienced are up for this kind of adventure, and that the least prefer to avoid the risk of disrupting their studies. Equally, despite the effective system of excusing fees, there are costs to the individual and their family, and it is no surprise that the less prosperous are less likely to find the money. Neither is it a criticism of the impact of the programme. The programme undoubtedly has a major impact on the perspectives of those who take part in it.

But the statistics and the research do emphasise the limits of what can be achieved through the current mechanism. For all the gains in cheap air travel and all the attraction of free study, physical mobility costs, it costs both the student and the EU. The three million target for 2012 is cumulative over what by then will be nearly a quarter of a century. The actual annual figure last year was 150,000, about one per cent of the European student population. These figures relate, of course, only to those who are already students. It is a condition of entry to Erasmus that you must already have entered a University. They do not cover those who are the concern of the institutions represented in EADTU, the informal learners, the would-be learners who currently can find no way into the European higher education system.

For the missing 99% of the current student body, for the missing 100% of learners not yet in the university system, for the disadvantaged groups, for those with special needs, the only way in which the ambitions of Bologna and the Lifelong Learning Programme can be realised is through some form of Virtual Erasmus.

From pilot phase to mainstream

Within the EADTU and other European networks, several initiatives and programmes on virtual mobility are already running resp. have been finalized. To highlight a few: In the project *e-move: an operational analysis of virtual mobility* (2006-2007) several virtual mobility courses were developed and implemented. In addition recommendations and procedures for wide scale applications have been published. With REVE (2005-2006) a manual on virtual mobility was published, giving support to teaching staff in implementing virtual mobility. In VM-base (2006-2008) a full-fledged 'blended' Erasmus action was set-up and supported in order to enhance the success of the Erasmus programme. The Net-Active project (2006-2008) initiated a European network of Master courses by intercontinental virtual mobility with Latin America. And finally CSVN (2006-2008) helped to bring distance students into online working via virtual internships and thus stimulate their employability (2).

These activities have shown the profit of virtual mobility next to physical mobility. They help to overcome its obstacles and to mobilise lifelong learning students that are less likely or even excluded from participation in international studying. To make the best use of the knowledge and experiences gathered in the different projects and guarantee their sustainability in the course of the next two years EPICS will be developed. Its main features and key objectives, partnership and project set-up as well as target groups, impact and sustainability will be introduced in the following paragraph.

EPICS - The European Portal of International Courses and Services

Main features and key objectives

The EPICS project's *main objective* is to increase the number of student mobility throughout Europe and support the realisation of a European Higher Education Area by organising a Virtual Erasmus scheme. The idea is to have a centralized web portal showing all distance/e-learning courses available to international students. Those looking for international courses can find a selection of them on their own university's website, provided from a central platform which is administered by the course providers. Universities will be given the possibility to offer a selection of courses made available for virtual mobility via a customized "window" to their students on EPICS. But only those international courses fitting and supplementing the offerings of that particular university will then be made accessible for their students. The student can take the available courses with the guaranteed recognition of credit points based on bi-lateral agreements amongst participating universities. As an additional option, students and universities will also be enabled to visit the full EPICS portal directly and view and select from all courses available. Thus EPICS provides a link between universities, students and courses all over Europe. Universities have the opportunity to share university courses and broaden the offerings to their students by international cooperation.

In addition to the database, the portal will also include on-line services for offering high quality guided independent learning and support in organizing mainstream offering of virtual mobility in a Virtual Erasmus scheme. The focus in creating the portal is convergence not standardization or uniformity. It will be built on the fundamental principles of autonomy and diversity and embodies the value of coordinated reforms, compatible systems and common action.

Next to setting up the EPICS portal several expert groups will be formed sharing their expertise and experience on relevant issues concerning virtual mobility. Their objective will be to institutionalize procedures and provide solid recommendations to common problems. These combined activities will support European universities in making their offerings internationally available and to solve administrative issues, currently preventing them from making their courses available to international students.

Target Groups

The EPICS-project aims at several different target groups at the university and political/societal level:

The short term target groups are all universities/institutions directly or indirectly involved in the partnership. These are traditional and distance teaching universities already involved or interested in virtual mobility. They benefit from sharing expertise and experience, the extension and sustainability of their virtual mobility-projects as well as the new dynamics of broadening cooperation in this field. The participating educational institutions will have the opportunity to experiment with including international courses in their mainstream offer, by using the EPICS Portal. Next to the project consortium several stakeholders will be involved like the European Commission, the European University Association, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the European Student Union and other important organizations invited experts.

The long term target groups of EPICS are the European higher education institutions in general. The development of a mainstream provision of virtual mobility courses with a portal on European Courses and Services contributes to internationalization of European universities and widening participation. Universities benefit from increased numbers of students enrolling from other countries by improved accessibility and attractiveness. The universities further benefit from EPICS by supplementing their existing offerings with selected courses from other universities to enrich their own programmes. University staff will benefit from on-line support and services as part of the EPICS portal.

On-campus as well as off-campus students benefit from easy accessible high quality European courses, enabling them to further individualize and specialize their learning portfolio. Further they can benefit from services on-line as well as inter-institutional agreements on enhancing accessibility and credit recognition to support their guided independent learning.

Major activities and foreseen outcomes

Epics will support the shift from project based virtual mobility to the mainstream provision of international courses. In addition universities will be supported in their efforts to organize Virtual Mobility as an integral part of their study offerings. For the technical support of the internationalisation of courses a European Portal for International Courses and Services (EPICS) will be developed.

The three major fields of activity and the related outcomes are:

A. Share expertise and experiences of virtual mobility-coordinators

For European universities it will not always be easy to make their offerings available to international students, mainly because of administrative issues. Core topics like - barriers and opportunities of the development of Virtual Erasmus; - course availability as well as services on-line within the consortium; - aspects of accessibility and its restricting factors like student admission, fee structures, credit transfer, assessment modes etc will be further discussed and existing expertise will be shared. One of the main goals of this project is to integrate the available expertise and experience with VM to set the basis for a European Virtual Erasmus programme. The core-group will therefore present good practices of organizing virtual mobility and possibilities to overcome common obstacles like assessment on-line, enrolment, recognition of credits etc. address VM specific issues and present possible solutions. This will be partly shared material from earlier projects and partly new produced material by combined efforts. From this activity several contributions to the portal on generic information concerning virtual mobility and specific contributions in

relation to online staff and student support will derive, e.g. introduction programmes for virtual mobility staff and students, an introduction to the portal, supporting multi-media tools and inter-institutional agreement forms.

B. Combine and extend networks of VM and offerings of courses

Experiences so far show that - like in the physical Erasmus-scheme - the dynamics to initiate virtual mobility usually comes from university staff operating in international networks. Therefore the EPICS-project aims at broadening and extending existing networks active in virtual mobility. The objective is to not only increase the number of networks but also the number of subjects covered with virtual mobility courses.

So far already 12 networks are represented in EPICS covering several subjects like social and cultural sciences, marketing and sustainable development.

These networks and their courses will be the starting input for EPICS. The networks will be stimulated to further broaden their partnership and increase their number of available courses for EPICS. Currently these networks already represent more than 50 courses and more than 80 partners. This serves as a basis for an immediate institutionalisation of a European virtual mobility community. This community already represents numerous participating universities involved in stimulating student mobility. The interchange of the involved networks and establishment of new networks will generate more international courses available to students. By including these courses in the university's mainstream study programmes the visibility and accessibility of international courses to students will increase and consequently their participation.

C. Develop the supporting technical infrastructure EPICS

With the EPICS portal the necessary infrastructural support will be provided for the international course offerings and student and staff services. The portal will start with 40 courses from 11 countries and is envisaged to grow above at least a hundred courses from 15 different European countries. All course templates will be presented in the original language as well as in English. The portal will have a build-in search engine for finding European courses on aspects like – subject, - BA/MA level; - admission: - language; - course start; - on-line/blended; - tutoring facilities; - assessment modus; - credit points (ECTS).

In the development the focus is convergence not standardisation or uniformity. Like so many of the educational ambitions of the European Union it is built on the fundamental principles of autonomy and diversity. It embodies the value of co-ordinated reforms, compatible systems and common action.

The portal will be available as a direct central entry point as well as local entry points at the various universities' websites. EPICS will be integrated in as many universities as possible. The consortium and other EADTU members will therefore integrate locally a webpage on international course offerings at each university's website directly linked to the EPICS database. Universities are able to show only a selection of all the courses available on EPICS and use the portal as a tool to complement their own programmes and offerings.

IMPACT

By combining the available knowledge and experience as well as the existing networks in virtual mobility, the project will have a strong basis for an immediate institutionalisation of a European virtual mobility community. This community already represents numerous participating universities involved in stimulating student mobility. The interchange of the involved networks and dynamic to establish new networks will generate more international courses available to students. By including these courses in the university's mainstream study programmes the visibility and accessibility of international courses to students will be increased and consequently their participation. The EPICS

portal will offer the necessary technical infrastructure to support staff and students in organising and participating in virtual mobility schemes and establishes the basis for a Virtual Erasmus programme.

Furture prospects

Physical student mobility has become more and more important over the last decades. An increasing number of students are spending part of their tertiary education in a foreign country or even doing a whole degree abroad. But student mobility is also increasingly losing its exclusivity in enhancing international competencies (Bracht et al., 2006). It is likely that trans-national and border-crossing mobility of study programmes as well as internationalization at home will increase in the future at a more rapid pace rather than physical mobility of students.

“Student mobility [physical] is likely to grow in the future, but in the wake of growing internationalisation of higher education in various respects, it is bound to loose some of its glamour.” (Rivza & Teichler, 2007, p. 474).

While this diagnosis is valid for physical mobility, virtual mobility in higher education is only at a very early stage. Different pilots have been tested among students, elaborated and put into practice.

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 next ten years, with virtual mobility playing a core role in the European learning space. The present developments are only a starting point for a wide deployment that will change the nature of national and international higher education. The technological means will further enhance and offer new ways of communicating and collaborating in a virtual space (e.g., Olsen, 2004; Van De Ven & Van Der Wende 2004). EPICS will be one of the key initiatives in bringing virtual mobility out of the pilot phase and enhancing it to mainstream level is the European Portal of International Courses and Services.

Partnership and Project Set-up

EPICS is a two-year project which has been approved under the European Commission’s Lifelong Learning Programme/Erasmus/Virtual Campuses. It will start in November 2008. The EPICS partnership consists of 11 partners from 10 European countries:

Table 1: Partnership of the EPICS-project

European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) – Co-ordinator	The Netherlands
EuroPACE	Belgium
Swedish Agency for Networks and Cooperation in Higher Education (NSHU)	Sweden
Open Universiteit Nederland (OUNL)	The Netherlands
Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED)	Spain
Open University of the United Kingdom	United Kingdom
Estonian Information Technology Foundation (EITF) /	Estonia

Tallinn University	
Università Telematica Internazionale UNINETTUNO (IUTU)	Italy
Universidade Aberta (UAb)	Portugal
Anadolu University (AU)	Turkey
Fernstudien Schweiz (FS-CH)	Switzerland

The partnership represents a consortium of coordinators from major Virtual Mobility projects sharing substantial expertise and experiences in this field. EPICS will benefit from this via over 40 virtual mobility courses that have been made available through the related projects, various guides and research papers, networks of experts that have been established etc..

At the ICDE-EADTU conference the concept will be explained as well as a progress report will be given including choices made in further working out a Virtual Erasmus programme. Universities can indicate their interest in joining the network of Virtual Mobility programmes and join the Virtual Erasmus scheme.

Endnotes

- (1) Reliable numbers on overall student mobility are hard to give, mainly because of the different forms of mobility and because a lot of students being mobile are not formally enrolled. Rough estimates show that one out of 40 European students decides to study an entire degree abroad. One out of ten European students spends a shorter period of time abroad, a number that has increased significantly over the last two decades. Less than one out of 30 students in Europe is coming from outside of Europe (all data taken from Rivza & Treichler, 2007, p. 462).
- (2) For further information on these and other project please visit:
e-move (<http://www.eadtu.nl/virtualmobility/>); REVE (<http://reve.europace.org/partners/index.php>); Venus (<http://www.venus-project.net/>); VM-base (<http://vm-base.europace.org>); Sputnik (<http://sputnic.europace.org>); Net-Active (<http://www.net-active.info/>); CSVN (<http://www.eadtu.nl/csvn/>); Moril (<http://www.eadtu.nl/conference-2007/files/K5.pdf>)

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