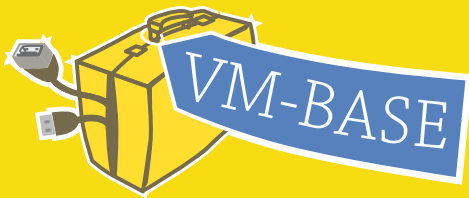


Home & Away

Coaching exchange students from a distance

A best-practice manual on e-coaching



Edited by Ilse Op de Beeck, Katrin Bijmens, Wim Van Petegem

Home & Away

Coaching exchange students from a distance

A best-practice manual on e-coaching

Edited by Ilse Op de Beeck, Katrin Bijmens, Wim Van Petegem

Home & Away. Coaching exchange students from a distance.
A best-practice manual on e-coaching.

Publisher: EuroPACE ivzw, Kapeldreef 62, B-3001 Heverlee, Belgium

This publication is protected by a Creative Commons License (Attribution-Non-commercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

The VM-BASE project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	3
Introduction	5
E-coaching	6
1. What is e-coaching?	6
2. E-Coaching of exchange students	7
3. Competences of the e-coach	8
3.1 Who can be an e-coach?	8
3.2 Competences needed as an e-coach.....	9
4. Tools for e-coaching.....	10
4.1 Learning platform.....	13
4.2 Reflective tools	15
4.2.1 E-portfolio.....	15
4.2.2 Weblog/blog	17
4.3 Non-interactive tools.....	18
4.3.1 Streaming media.....	18
4.3.2 Informational website	20
4.4 Collaborative tools.....	21
4.4.1 Wiki	21
4.4.2 Group blog.....	22
4.4.3 Discussion forum/board	23
4.5 Communication tools	24
4.5.1 E-mail	24
4.5.2 Online chat/Instant messaging.....	25
4.5.3 Audioconferencing.....	26
4.5.4 Videoconferencing.....	26
4.5.5 Webconferencing	28
4.6 Social networking tools.....	29
4.6.1 Social networking based on personal web pages.....	29
4.6.2 Shared media.....	31

4.6.3 Social bookmarking	32
5. Best practices/cases	32
5.1 Go abroad – Laurea University of Applied Sciences.....	33
5.1.1 Pilot description.....	33
5.1.2 Experiences (based on feedback from stakeholders)	38
5.1.3 Guidelines & recommendations	40
5.2 Virtual Window for Study Abroad – University of Tartu	41
5.2.1 Pilot description.....	41
5.2.2 Experiences (based on feedback from stakeholders)	42
5.2.3 Guidelines & recommendations	44
6. Some key issues related to e-coaching	44
Conclusions.....	47
References	48
Background of the handbook.....	49
The VM-BASE project	49
Partnership	50
EuroPACE ivzw (BE)	50
AVNet – Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (BE)	50
Coimbra Group (BE)	51
Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven (BE).....	51
ESU (BE).....	51
Tartu Ülikool (EE).....	52
TKK Dipoli (FI)	52
Laurea-ammattikorkeakoulu (FI)	53
BEST (FR).....	53
University of West Hungary (HU).....	54
University of Edinburgh (UK)	55

Introduction

The importance of student mobility and inter-university exchange programmes is vastly increasing and the issue currently occupies a significant place in the agendas of educational policy makers and higher education institutions.

Due to the increase of internationalisation, international teaching practices, part-time education, etc. it increasingly happens that students need to be coached from a distance. For exchange students in particular, face-to-face coaching is often hard to put into practise because of the geographical distance between teachers, students and International Relations Officers. The emergence of different tools and electronic communication media nowadays opens up the opportunity to support the coaching process from a distance or to let teachers from both home and host institution jointly guide the student through the exchange process.

This publication presents results of the activities carried out by several European higher education institutions, networks and student organisations during the lifetime of the EC-supported project VM-BASE (“Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges”). VM-BASE aimed to improve the quality of student exchanges by offering virtual support, both before, during and after physical mobility and supported teachers in coaching exchange students from a distance (e-coaching).

This manual describes some of the key issues related to e-coaching. More concretely it sheds a light on the concept and how it was perceived in the project, the competences that are required to be an e-coach, models and tools that can be used, and best practice cases related to e-coaching.

It is a part of a more elaborate best-practice manual on blended mobility, which was also published by the VM-BASE consortium. Executive summaries are available in English, Dutch, Estonian, Finnish and Hungarian. The VM-BASE manual and summaries can be downloaded for free at <http://vm-base.europace.org>.

E-coaching

1. What is e-coaching?

Coaching is a method of directing, instructing and training a person or group of people, with the aim of achieving some goal or develop specific skills (Wikipedia).

Due to the increase of internationalisation, international teaching practices, part-time education, etc. it increasingly happens that students need to be coached from a distance. For exchange students in particular, face-to-face coaching is often hard to put into practise because of the geographical distance between teachers, International Relations Officers, and students. The emergence of different tools and electronic communication media nowadays can offer support to the coaching process from a distance. Furthermore, these tools offer the possibility to teachers from both institutions (home and host institution) to collaborate and jointly guide the student through the exchange process.

When investigating online teaching and learning, one comes across many different terms describing the process, such as e-support, e-moderating, e-tutoring, e-mentoring, virtual support, tele tutoring, ... Baars G. (2005) uses the term 'e-coaching' and defines it as "coaching via the Internet (digital learning environment)". It can be done from a distance, using synchronous (chat, videoconferencing, audioconferencing...) or asynchronous communication tools (e-mail, online discussion fora...). As with face-to-face coaching, an e-coach can coach an individual or a group of people.

Also, the VM-BASE consortium uses the term 'e-coaching' and does so in a very broad interpretation. The 'e'-part of the term stands for 'electronic' and obviously refers to the fact that the coaching is done through technology. The 'coaching'-part refers to the (personal) guidance that is

needed in the whole process. Information and communication technologies should not be used in education without considering and valuing this human aspect. The use of ICT does not imply that the teacher automatically gets replaced by a tool. On the contrary, the teacher and/or tutor remains particularly relevant.

The use of ICT does bring about a fundamental shift in teaching methods: the expert/instructor becomes a moderator/coach. It is no longer about the transfer of knowledge or content but more and more about creating the context for it. G. Salmon (2004) describes these e-moderators as 'specialist tutors': they deal with participants but in rather different ways because everyone is working online. The goal for them is to enable 'meaning making' rather than content transmission.

2. E-Coaching of exchange students

E-coaching methods can be used in regular teaching. VM-BASE obviously focused on e-coaching of teachers and students participating in mobility activities.

A study carried out by the VM-BASE consortium on the state-of-the-art in virtual exchange support measures showed that in general, there is very little e-coaching available for both incoming and outgoing students. E-mail is the most common tool for communication between teachers, students and International Relations Officers. However, most institutions agreed that there is potential for e-coaching.

When preparing for an exchange, students need reliable and clear feedback on their questions. When taking a course virtually, they need feedback to be able to estimate their learning progress and to plan the next learning activities. Finally, after a virtual assessment, they need feedback to assess their learning outcomes. Examples of e-coaching methods are therefore manifold: a virtual buddy-system for preparatory support, e-portfolios or weblogs during the stay abroad, a virtual consulting hour of a teacher

using chat, a moderated discussion forum, etc. Also peer-assessment and self-assessment are possible when complemented with e-coaching. Several of these scenarios were tried out in the VM-BASE project and each of the VM-BASE pilot courses used different tools and e-coaching methods. As indicated above, the human factor stands out as being one of the most important aspects and the success of such activities often depends on whether or not the presence of a coach can be felt (even if there is only minor steering by the coach).

3. Competences of the e-coach

3.1 Who can be an e-coach?

Being an e-coach is not solely reserved for teaching staff. On the contrary, a variety of people can perform the role of e-coach: teachers, external teachers or external experts, and even other students. Furthermore, the Erasmus coordinators in the faculties, and the International Relations Officers and other staff working at the international offices can play this important role of being an e-coach for exchange students.

However, people in administration such as those in International Relations Offices have organisational skills and a lot of expertise in supporting exchange students but often have no expertise in e-learning. The same is true for teachers who have tutoring skills but are not necessarily familiar with e-learning or e-coaching techniques. E-learning experts on the other hand, usually do not have expertise in supporting exchange students.

Often, there is already a lot of ICT training available for teachers in institutions, but what is lacking is training for administrative staff in International Relations Offices – and they are mostly the people supporting the students on exchange. They should be the first target group and could use training in educational technologies to know how to start virtual support initiatives. Also the student competences should not be forgotten

in this matter and students could also benefit from some introductory courses.

3.2 Competences needed as an e-coach

E-coaching is a new competence and requires particular skills from both teachers, students, International Relations Officers and others involved in the e-coaching process of exchange students. Discussions during the VM-BASE workshops revealed that e-coaches need to be reliable, adaptive, clear, and sensitive to the cultural context. They also need to know their boundaries and have language skills, a multicultural background, problem solving skills and a peer perspective.

According to R. Mobbs (2004), the following areas of general expertise are assumed as prerequisites and provide a basis for the new competencies e-tutors/e-coaches need:

- A good all round knowledge of the subject-matter of the course;
- The background pedagogy that underpins the course;
- A good understanding of the limits and limitations of the information and communications technology;
- A closer working and sharing relationship with the learner;
- Provide learners with "positive" support and "positive" encouragement;
- A role of mentor/counselors as well as academic advisor.

Smits et. al. (2006) confirm that the e-coach takes on different roles depending on the phase of learning process. They identify five major stages in the coaching process: access and motivation, socialisation, information exchange, knowledge construction, and development.

G. Salmon (2004) stresses the importance of the presence of emotional intelligence. According to her there is evidence that people who display higher levels of emotional competence have greater success in relations with others (on and offline) and superior performance. It is therefore important to develop qualities like self-awareness, interpersonal sensitivity and the ability to influence in order to become a successful e-coach. This

refers once more to the human factor being an important aspect of e-coaching.

It is clear that an interdisciplinary approach is necessary and that an e-coach needs to master both hard and soft skills. In this context, the VM-BASE consortium highlights four important aspects of e-coaching: technological, organisational, content and social aspects.

Stakeholders need to be acquainted with technology and there must be attention for the users of the technology (usability). To serve that purpose, a helpdesk, manual, forum or another platform introduction could be integrated.

The learning process needs to be organised (organisation of group activities, making appointments with students, etc.). The ability to work from numerous locations and to organise work schedules differently can be quite empowering, but may take some getting used to and requires planning and preparation upfront. Clear communication on tasks, goals and expectations is therefore indispensable. In that sense, e-coaching becomes part of a joined-up communication strategy.

And last but not least the pedagogical aspects need to be taken into account: the teacher must be well informed both socially and content-wise. Attention has to be paid to group dynamics, introduction of the users. An e-coach must also be able to give different types of feedback to the students: both content-related (informative, reflecting, correcting ...) and not content-related (administrative, motivating...).

4. Tools for e-coaching

Tools and technologies that can be used for e-coaching are increasingly becoming larger in number and more diverse in their application. The success of an initiative is not so much dependent on the tool as such but more on the use of a tool which is carefully considered beforehand. The choice of tools and the approach depends on the aims, the situation, the participants, etc. The technology must be as transparent as possible and the

way in which a tool is fit for an activity is crucial. No technology without philosophy!

E-coaching tools and interactive communication tools in general are often categorised into two large categories:

- Synchronous tools (facilitating communication between users at the same time), e.g. chat, videoconferencing, webconferencing, audioconferencing...;
- Asynchronous tools (facilitating communication between users independent of time), e.g. e-mail, online discussion forums, e-portfolio....

Following the experiences in the VM-BASE project, the consortium created a typology of tools, reflecting their specific use for e-coaching purposes. This categorisation is not considered to be exhaustive but contains the main tools used in this context. Tools that are distinguished are: reflective tools (e-portfolio, weblog), non-interactive tools (streaming media, informational website), collaborative tools (wiki, group blog, discussion forum), communication tools (e-mail, chat, video-, audio-, and webconferencing), and social networking tools (social networking, shared media, social bookmarking).

The different categories will be explained in detail in the following sections using a more concrete and practical approach. Each tool is described including some hands-on information on how to get started using the respective tool and providing some ideas and experiences drawn from the findings of the VM-BASE project.

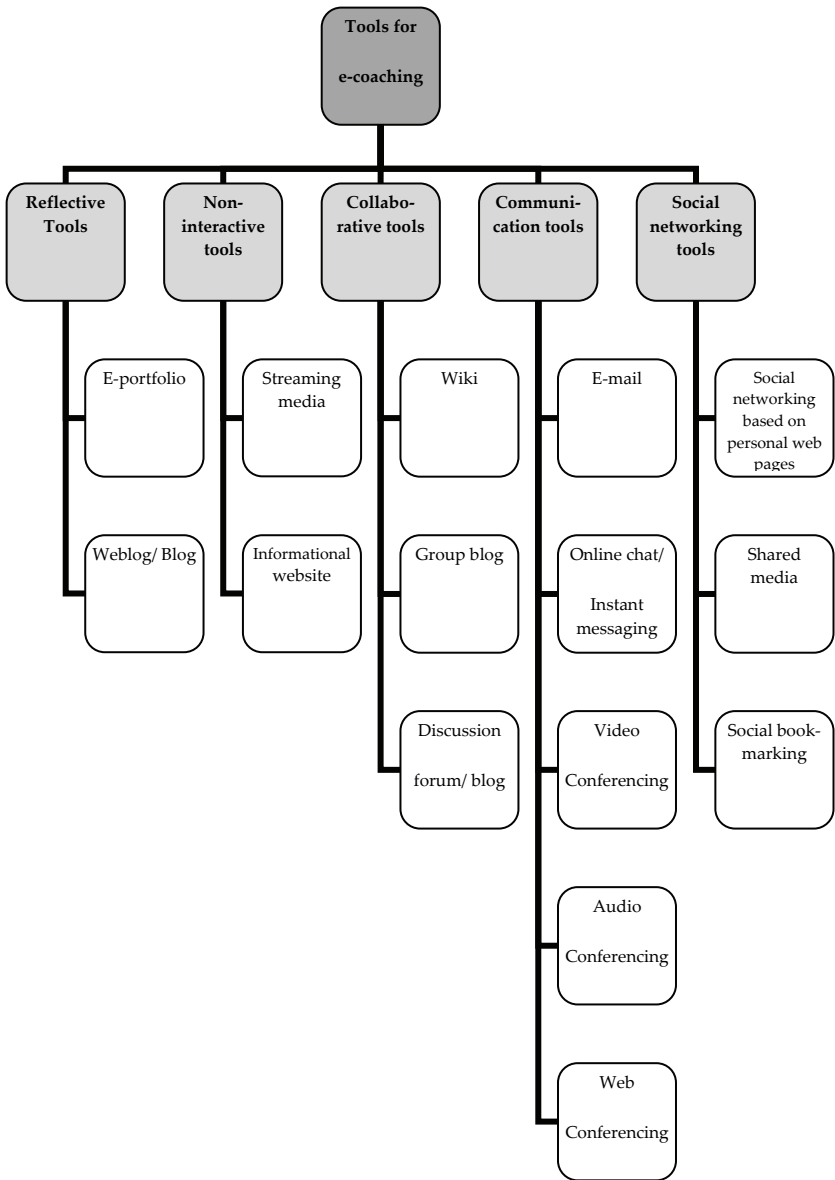


Figure 1 – Categories and examples for tools that can be used for e-coaching

4.1 Learning platform

The majority of higher education institutions make use of a virtual learning environment (VLE). Because of the fact that most of the VLE's incorporate a combination of tools, we decided to not integrate this into the diagram, but to treat it as a category on its own.

Description

A virtual learning environment or platform is a software system that enables online interaction between learner and tutor. It combines methods of online communication (such as chat room, discussion boards and e-mail) with the ability to deliver learning materials (such as documents, articles and assessments).

The learning platform is thus the place where you find your e-mail, courses, and communities online provided by the institution. Examples of learning platforms are Blackboard, WebCT and Moodle.

Although students and teachers both need to log on to the system, students access a different portal from the one the teachers use. Teachers are given wider access rights, which means they can edit the platform, whereas students only have 'viewing rights'.

There is no such thing as one manual for all learning platforms, and for details you are advised to contact the ICT-desk of your institution or visit their website. Within the learning platform several tools are available, most of them explained in the following sections. In case one of these tools is not provided by the institution, a free alternative is usually available on the Internet. Because of the privacy of all people involved in the course or project, it is recommended that you use the tools of the institution provided on the learning platform. Free tools cannot always give you these guarantees.

Figure 2 – Example of a VLE, Toledo K.U.Leuven (based on Blackboard)

Ideas & experiences

Many of the tools offered by the learning platform can be used for exchange projects. This is explained in the following sections.

One of the VM-BASE project pilots, the ‘Online education and evaluation tool of the Faculty of Kinesiology and Rehabilitation Sciences of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven’ uses a particular institutional learning platform.

Experiences from an existing international programme at the Faculty of Kinesiology and Rehabilitation Sciences showed the differences in level of statistical knowledge between bachelor students from K.U.Leuven and bachelor students from institutions abroad. For this reason, the programme officer decided to develop a tool to test and improve the statistical knowledge of foreign students, prior to their arrival at the university. To that end, two courses on statistics were converted to an online version and integrated into 'Toledo', the learning platform of K.U.Leuven (consisting of Blackboard and Questionmark Perception), resulting in an online testing- and learning tool that allows students to check and improve their level in statistics. Incoming students are given access to the the learning platform and tool after their file is approved at K.U.Leuven and when they are still at home.

Also other VM-BASE pilots used the learning platform of the own institution to store and deliver course materials, e.g. University of Tartu used WebCT for their preparatory course 'Virtual Window for Study Abroad' (see section 5.2).

4.2 Reflective tools

4.2.1 E-portfolio

Description

An electronic portfolio, also known as an e-portfolio or digital portfolio, is a collection of electronic evidence assembled and managed by a user, usually on the Web (also called Webfolio). Such electronic evidence may include inputted text, electronic files, images, multimedia, blog entries, and hyperlinks.

E-portfolios are mainly used as a platform to demonstrate the user's abilities, qualities, evidence of achievement, and development. If online, an e-portfolio can be maintained dynamically over time.

An e-portfolio can be created through a variety of tools, like weblog, wiki social networking tools (explained further in this chapter). The portfolio can also be integrated into the institutions' virtual learning platform. A wiki is one of the easiest ways to make one, because of the possibilities it offers to organise your information. You can add text, images, multimedia, hyperlinks and documents to the portfolio, making it a collage of the achievements of individuals or groups. Portfolios can be very personal, so in some cases it is better not to allow its content to be viewed from outside the institution.

Ideas & experiences

E-portfolios were not used in one of the VM-BASE pilots, but here are some ideas how it could be used as a reflection tool for the support of exchange students.

There are three types of portfolios. First there is the 'development portfolio' in which students can easily see their learning process over time. This type of portfolio also displays the mistakes and progress made by students during their learning process.

The second type is the 'assessment portfolio'. The teacher can judge the student by the available assessments on the portfolio. These first two types are useful for exchange students. The student can keep a portfolio abroad, which can be assessed afterwards at the home institution. This helps to improve the interaction between the teacher of the home institution and the outgoing student. The teacher is able to see the learning process of the student abroad. In addition, the portfolio can be used to see the assignments given by the host institution, enhancing the collaboration between both institutions. A portfolio also enhances peer-review, making it a very interactive alternative for all parties involved.

The last and third type is the demonstration portfolio. This e-portfolio resembles most the classic portfolio. It can be considered as an extensive and personal curriculum vitae and gives the opportunity to share this with possible employers, teachers, family, friends. This type can be used for students, who are looking for work or an internship (abroad). For an internship abroad the student cannot visit the company several times.

Sometimes the company cannot be visited at all. In this case, an e-portfolio can prove useful. It is a good way to give a professional and personal presentation of yourself to your new workplace. A demonstration portfolio could also be used to introduce the student to teachers of the host institution or a host family.

4.2.2 Weblog/blog

Description

A blog (short for weblog) is a user-generated website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in a reverse chronological order. Blogs provide commentary or news on a particular subject. Some function as more personal online diaries. Personal blogs could show a learning process or could just be a representation of the activities or thoughts of a person.

A blog is usually maintained by an individual, but could also be used by a group, and can contain commentaries, descriptions of events, links or other media files. Most blogs focus on texts and images, but some blogs focus on other social media.

A blog can be initiated and hosted by the institution in the learning environment or on a (free) site. The most common free services are Blogger (a Google service) and Wordpress.

A blog consists of considerable information, making it difficult to retrieve the exact text. Therefore you can add tags: words that are connected to a small part of text. Those tags appear on the sidebar of the blog connecting different messages together by clicking on those tags.

You can link your own blog to someone-else's blog. This way, you can create a network of people sharing the same interests. You can comment or respond to each others' blog, while the blogs remain separate entities. They will not occur next to one another in the same frame, but they can be seen at the blog roll, a list of recommended blogs.

Ideas & experiences

Students can use blogs to describe their exchange experiences. It is a way to stay in contact with the home institution when the student is abroad, making it easier for the home institution to understand what is happening at the host institution.

These practical experiences of exchange students can also be collected, as was done in the 'Virtual Exchange of Students Mobility Experience', a pilot that was carried out by the University of West Hungary, Department of Geoinformatics. During their exchange, the students report their experiences in online diaries or blogs. A diary or blog can contain some private or public data that is being categorised through tags. Through the combination of all the blog entries, a thematic information set was organised named Mobility Guide. Students who spend a learning period at a partner university regularly refresh information related to this institution in the Mobility Guide. Through the categorisation, future outgoing students of the university can find the right answers to their questions.

Blogs are also a useful tool for (international) traineeships: both the company and the teacher can view the diary of the student on the Internet. Both parties can respond to it, which will improve the communication between them, especially when the student is abroad. The blog could, as a last step, be easily added to an (e-)portfolio.

4.3 Non-interactive tools

4.3.1 Streaming media

Description

Streaming media is a type of media that delivers moving images and/or sound over the Internet to your computer. Streaming differs from downloading in the sense that it is continuously received by, and normally displayed to, the end-user whilst it is being delivered by the streaming provider. Streaming is quicker than downloading, because you do not need to wait until the entire document is transported to your computer before

being able to watch it. The name refers to the delivery method of the medium rather than to the medium itself.

Higher education institutions often offer an audio- or video streaming service. Sometimes it is even integrated into the learning platform of the institution.

Ideas & experiences

Streaming was used by the 'TKK multimedia presentation and virtual student interviews', a pilot tested by TKK. The pilot consisted of two parts: a TKK multimedia presentation and five student interviews and the purpose was to offer general information about TKK through visual means (multimedia presentation) and to give potential exchange students the chance to hear other students' experiences on student exchange at TKK (video interviews). The multimedia presentation is available both on DVD and on the TKK website. The student interviews are available on the student union's website.

Streaming videos can give a visual idea of the place students come from or are going to. Streaming could also be used for a video portrait in which the student can show him- or herself to the host family.

Last but not least, streaming media can be used to record lectures which could be of great benefit to those exchange students that have to follow an obligatory course at their home institution while they are away. In that case, the teacher could opt for audio- or videorecording the course and make it available online. The student in turn could easily watch the lecture at a moment suitable for him or her.

An example of this are the VENUS seminars, a series of expert seminars broadcasted through videoconferencing and through online streaming at the VENUS project website. In this type the lecture of the teacher is recorded and connected to the PowerPoint presentation or animation ('talking head method'). Entire lectures or courses can be recorded like this and be followed at a distance by the students.

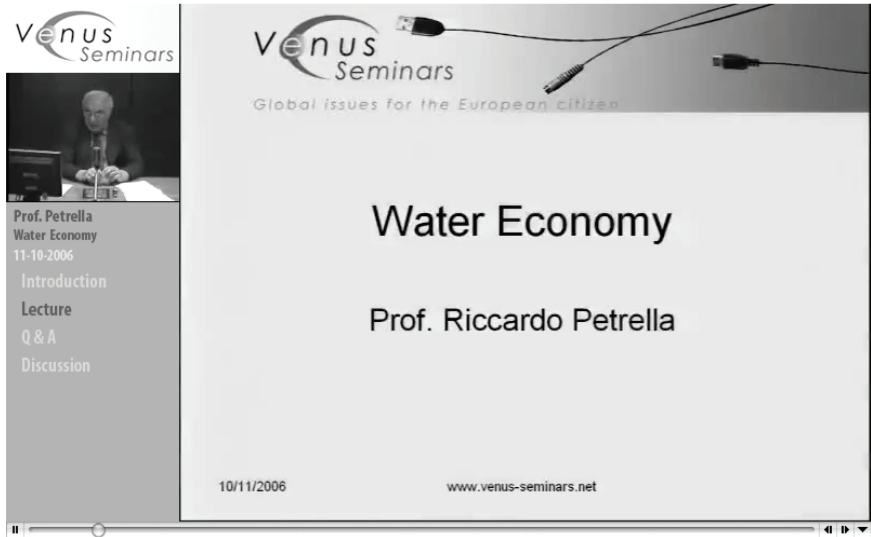


Figure 3 – Example of streaming media (VENUS seminars – <http://www.venus-seminars.net>)

4.3.2 Informational website

Description

Most higher education institutions have their own website nowadays. A website is usually created by a professional programmer and the host of the website can probably be found at the ICT-desk of the institution. For writing webpage texts however, you do not need to be a programmer.

For an informational website you should make a logical structure for the site in collaboration with the programmer, making use of menus and navigation. Pay special attention to usability, because nothing is more irritating than a bad structured website, where the requested information cannot be found at.

Ideas & experiences

Institutional websites are used by international students for searching information about their new host institution and studies. Especially for them it is important to centralise all information they need on a website that is easy to access, well structured and regularly updated.

Higher education institutions have a positive view about information being readily available on their websites, but from the student perspective often this is not the situation in reality. For higher education institutions it is important to have complete and up to date websites with relevant academic and practical data for exchange students. Keep in mind that future exchange students are probably not yet familiar with the local language and/or often do not yet have access to restricted parts of the website. A website, or at least parts of the website therefore, must be available in English and be in a non-restricted area of the website.

4.4 Collaborative tools

4.4.1 Wiki

Description

A wiki consists of a collection of related web pages that are connected to each other. You do not need to be a web designer to work with a wiki, because it is organised in a user-friendly way. These web pages can be edited simply and fast by everyone who has access to it. Images, internal and external links and other documents can be added. And everyone can also create new pages. Recent changes are registered in the history-button.

A wiki is used for sharing information among a group of people, so the information can be elaborated and improved. The best-known wiki is Wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org>), the online encyclopaedia that can be edited by everyone.

Wiki pages can be used to show personal information as in an e-portfolio, but mostly it is just used to share more general information about a topic.

Many universities nowadays are able to set-up a wiki for a course or a community. A wiki can also be created through free services.

Ideas & experiences

As mentioned before, wiki is a good tool to create an e-portfolio. But it can also be used to share 'abroad experiences'. Incoming students for example could share information about practical questions they have. A wiki can also be helpful for the students who are leaving to retrieve information about their new country. In that case, the wiki could be organised for example by country or by theme. Using a wiki for this purpose will probably be less personal than a blog. Blogs are more linked to the person who writes it, wiki pages can be edited by everyone connected to the wiki. A wiki is also a tool that can be very useful for doing collaborative work in the framework of a course. In the VM-BASE pilot, 'Multilingual Survival Kit in GIS', the University of West Hungary developed a wiki allowing participants to collaborate and develop a compilation of specific vocabulary and terms linked to the GIS topic.

4.4.2 Group blog

Description

A group blog or collaborative blog is a type of weblog in which posts are written and published by more than one author. The group blog is based around a single uniting topic or theme. All the members can respond on the blog about the topic. These kind of blogs are used to create a sense of community among the participants, improve participation or to discuss topics with fellow experts. For more information on special features of blogs, see section 3.4.2 under 'weblog/blog'.

Ideas & experiences

Ideas and experiences on how blogs can be used where already given above. Blogs can be used during the arrival of foreign students. They do not yet have a sense of community when they arrive in their new country,

as they hardly know anyone. For them, group blogs can be a warm welcome. These blogs could even start before their arrival. In that case the students can already get to know each other and discuss their experiences in preparing for the exchange. For other ideas and experiences on how blogs can be used see section 3.4.2 under 'weblog/blog'

4.4.3 Discussion forum/board

Description

Discussion forums are online bulletin boards treating a topic on which members of the group can react. Online discussion forums are also known as Internet forums or message boards. The content is directed by the moderator, the leader of the forum, who makes sure the discussion goes well and stays polite.

People participating in an Internet forum can build bonds with each other and interest groups will easily form around a topic's discussion, subjects dealt within or around sections in the forum.

Most learning platforms have an integrated discussion board. On those discussion boards only the members of the group will be able to add information. In the framework of education the moderator will be mostly lead by the teachers who can also leave messages and give feedback to the students. This could be correcting, informative or affective messages to stimulate the discussion.

Ideas & experiences

A discussion forum can be used for exchange students to discuss a particular topic. A good discussion brings students together. This could be a practical topic, but could also be a topic of a course they are going to participate in. Students could ask questions on the forum about their new home to students from the host country.

The 'Go Abroad' pilot, developed by Laurea University of Applied Sciences, included an interactive online discussion forum (see section 5.1). The forum is used by the outgoing students of Laurea who are preparing to

go on an exchange. The advantage of a discussion forum is amongst others that answers from teachers or International Relations Officers to questions from students can be read by the whole group. So the teacher needs to answer the question only once to inform everybody.

4.5 Communication tools

4.5.1 E-mail

Description

It is probably not necessary anymore to introduce e-mail in depth, as nowadays almost everybody is using it, especially when working in an international context.

E-mail is mostly used for one-to-one contact and is a good medium to give personal feedback to a student, in case you do not want the feedback to be read by a group of people. It can of course also be used for sending messages to large groups (possibly through creating a mailing list). In that way for example all incoming or outgoing students from one institution can be easily addressed at once.

Ideas & experiences

E-mail is an easy medium to build up a personal relationship, be it between students, teachers, International Relations Officers or others. In the VM-BASE pilot 'Virtual Buddy System' of the Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven, regular e-mail was used to build up relationships between the exchange student coming to Leuven and his or her (local) buddy in order to make the integration of the incoming student easier and swifter. The virtual buddy provided all necessary practical information to the incoming students, which proved to be very useful, especially in the period before arrival.

4.5.2 Online chat/Instant messaging

Description

Chat refers to any text-based kind of conversation between two or more users. The official technical name is synchronous conferencing.

You can chat in either a public or a private chat room. For educational purposes chat in a private sphere is recommended. There is a lot free software available for private chatting, like Windows Live Messenger, Yahoo! Messenger, ICQ, Skype or Google Talk. If you want to be sure the person is online, you need to make an appointment beforehand. Make sure it is clear for other people that you are 'busy'; otherwise you will be interrupted by other people in your chat room.

Ideas & experiences

Chatting is a very simple and easy to handle tool for communicating to another individual. It can be used for supporting students abroad when they have short questions that need to be answered quickly. One could think of organising 'virtual office hours'. In that case the e-coach is available at a particular time during the week for answering questions through chat.

Chatting has also been used in the 'Virtual Buddy System' of the Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven. After the two students got connected through the virtual buddy system, they could meet each other in a chat room if wanted.

Chat can be connected to online courses as manner for the teacher to answer questions about the course. This could for example be used after a lecture through streaming media, where no interaction between the teacher and student has taken place. This was done for example in the previously mentioned VENUS seminar series.

Chat is a handy tool for reaching a lot of students. Even if not all students will be actively participating in the chat room, they can also just watch the conversation. The chatting text can be saved and read again by the student if necessary.

4.5.3 Audioconferencing

Description

Audioconferencing or conference calling consists of a telephone call linking several parties. When all people are participating it is called a group call, when the called party is just listening, it is called a party line. An audioconference can be done over telephone lines or over the Internet. When it is done over the Internet, it is called Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). Most normal telephones have an option to use the three-way calling.

Audioconferencing is often combined with webconferencing, sharing documents or presentations over the Internet. This meeting over the Internet could make use of an institutional tool or tools like Microsoft NetMeeting or Skype. Make sure you have a good microphone and speakers or a headset. You need to make an appointment for the meeting, invite all the participants and make sure they are all on time. The PowerPoint presentation can be integrated in Microsoft NetMeeting, so the PowerPoint can be shown during the meeting.

Some computers are very slow in a webconference because of the video images. In such cases, an audioconference could be a good alternative.

Ideas & experiences

Audioconferencing is a very simple tool for giving presentations at a distance. A student at the host university can give a presentation for the teacher of the home university or vice versa. This can be used for testing, when a presentation form is required by the course.

4.5.4 Videoconferencing

Description

A videoconference is a conference which allows participants at two or more locations to interact via two-way video and audio transmissions simultaneously. Videoconferencing is sometimes used as a more general

term, which also includes webconferencing. Videoconferencing can take place between two locations, point to point, or between more locations, multi-point. The computers are usually especially dedicated systems, because there is a lot of good quality technical equipment required.

If you want to organise a videoconference you will have to look for videoconferencing facilities at your institution. Ask the responsible people to help you with the technical aspects, because you will need a professional to make it happen.

Start organising early as preparing a videoconference takes of a lot of time. Make the necessary appointments with all the parties involved in the videoconference. Also make agreements on the 'meeting etiquette' with all the people who are participating (for example use of microphones, how and when to respond etc.).

Ideas & experiences

Videoconferencing could offer the possibility for an exchange student to follow an obligatory course at the home institution while being abroad or follow a course at the future host institution before the exchange.

Former exchange students could for example also follow a course at their former host institution to keep in touch even after the exchange.

Another example of the use of videoconferencing for virtual mobility is the above-mentioned VENUS seminar series. In this project each of the participating universities organised a lecture on a topic with a European focus. Lectures were broadcasted via videoconferencing to the other universities.

Last but not least, videoconferencing (or webconferencing) can be used for student selection, allowing teaching staff to put a face on a candidate and to check social and language skills.

4.5.5 Webconferencing

Description

Webconferencing is used to conduct live meetings or give presentations over the Internet. In a webconference, each participant sits at his or her own computer and is connected to other participants via the Internet, interacting with each other via two-way video and audio transmissions. The difference between a videoconference and a webconference lies in the size and the technology used. Videoconferencing is most suited for meetings between larger groups and requires a high level of technological investment, whereas webconferencing is mostly used for smaller meetings and can take place using low threshold technology.

Most computers are fully equipped with the required hard- and software for webconferencing. Older computers however might need extra hardware, like a webcam or microphone, to make webconferencing possible. You need a video camera or webcam (video input), a monitor (video output), a microphone (audio input), speakers (audio output), and a quite fast Internet connection.

Webconferencing can easily be realised by Adobe Acrobat Connect or FlashMeeting, or free programmes like Microsoft Live Meeting, MSN Messenger or Skype.

Ideas & experiences

VM-BASE explored the use of webconference as a tool for oral exams in the pilot project 'Supporting oral exams at a distance for the Master of European Social Security' conducted by the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. It gave international students the opportunity to do their exams from a distance via the webconferencing tool FlashMeeting.

Webconferencing can also be used when students have arrived at their guest institution, but when they still need to finish some exams from their home institution, or the other way around.

A more basic way of webconferencing was used in the 'Virtual Buddy System' of the Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven. Before the students

physically moved, they got contact with a buddy of their guest university. The students talked and could see each other through Skype. Finally, webconferencing can easily be used to stay in touch with a student abroad, for example to help and coach him with his or her thesis, or by organising 'virtual office hours'.

4.6 Social networking tools

4.6.1 Social networking based on personal web pages

Description

A social network service focuses on building online communities of people who share interests and/or activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others. Most social network services are web based and provide a variety of ways for users to interact, such as e-mail and instant messaging services. Social networking is a way in which your own created webpage can be linked to a network of 'friends'.

There are two kinds of social networking: Internal Social Networking (ISN) and External Social Networking (ESN). An ISN is a closed/private community that consists of a group of people within a company or institution. An ESN is open/public and available to all web users to communicate.

The most known tools are MySpace, Friendster, and Facebook. These tools can be used to create your own page where you add information, photos, blog, etc. Afterwards, you can invite people to become 'friends' and your page will then be linked to other pages to form a network. Your 'friends' can leave reactions on your page and you can enter their pages and make new 'friends'.

These types of websites allow you to quickly create a network. However, the protection of privacy might become an issue. Some sites make your personal information public, but most sites nowadays have options to show yourself only to 'friends' or 'acquaintances'.

Ideas & experiences

Through social networking contact can be made between the foreign students and the local students. This could be used in a virtual buddy system or to stay in contact after the exchange. The university itself could also have a page on the Internet and link all alumni or foreign students to their page. This is already happening at for example MySpace.com.

Pages can be built for personal use, but also for a course, group or year. Such a page could work by stimulating the group. International students could support each other online in an informal way. The group page can start before the course, so the new classmates can already become friends before they meet.

In the VM-BASE pilot 'VALE (KHLeuven Erasmus Alumni Network)', the Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven opted to use Facebook to create an Erasmus alumni network. The Erasmus students of KHLeuven from the past two academic years and from the current academic year were invited via e-mail to join the online group.



Figure 4 - Example of virtual alumni networks (Advertisement at Myspace.com Nederland - <http://www.myspace.com> October 29, 2008)

4.6.2 Shared media

Description

File sharing is providing (uploading) and receiving (downloading) digital files over a network. This can be used for all kinds of media. Peer-to-peer and streaming are the most used technical solutions for media file sharing. File sharing can be done in many ways. It can be done in the private sphere of the institution or a public sphere somewhere online.

There are many types of media file sharing. First you should check whether file-sharing already exists on your own institution's learning platform and whether it meets your needs. If it does not work or if it is not to your liking, then there are alternatives.

There are types in which you can share your files together with your e-mail account like SkyDrive or GoogleDocs. These are more useful for formal documents of any kind. These tools can be shared by people you invite, or could be made public. You can even choose if the invited person will become just a reader, or if the person is also allowed to change the content.

There are also special programmes for special kinds of files, like SlideShare, YouTube, iTunes or NumSum. SlideShare is a programme for uploading presentations with or without audio. NumSum is specially made for spreadsheets. YouTube is for video fragments and iTunes for audio as well as video.

Ideas & experiences

Shared media can be used to share lectures or speeches online (e.g. on YouTube or on iTunes). Students can download and view the lectures at a time convenient for themselves. Also slides or other materials of a course can easily be shared and made available for exchange students who cannot be physically present at a lecture.

Higher education institutions can also upload short movies or slide shows and use this to present and promote their institution to future incoming students.

4.6.3 Social bookmarking

Description

Social bookmarking is a web-based service to store, organise, search and manage bookmarks on the Internet. As such they are accessible from everywhere. Those bookmarks can be references to webpages or books.

Websites for social bookmarking are not restricted, which makes it easy for people to enter.

Social bookmarking sites today use an organisational strategy known as tagging. Tagging refers to the ability to add a short description to the website and some relevant keywords (a tag) in order to classify the website. Several social bookmarking websites exist, like Del.icio.us and Furl. Specialised social bookmarking services for research are Connotea and CiteULike. These websites can help academics to share, store and organise their academic papers and bookmarks they are reading.

It is possible to search through other peoples' bookmarks or tags and to subscribe to news feeds (RSS). Relevant websites or sources can be shared among a group of teachers and students.

Ideas & experiences

Social bookmarking could be a part of an e-portfolio as a reference list.

The bookmarks can also be prepared by a teacher to use for a preparatory course/literature for incoming students. The bookmarks can be sorted by tags of the course name or the course code.

5. Best practices/cases

To investigate the challenges and opportunities of e-coaching and to draw lessons for future similar initiatives, two pilot courses have been developed focusing on offering support to outgoing students before, during and after their physical exchange.

The 'Virtual Window to Study Abroad' has been developed by the University of Tartu and is an online course combined with a forum on which experiences between former and future outgoing students can be shared.

The blended course 'Go Abroad' has been created by Laurea University of Applied Sciences and includes several tools and assignments to offer support to exchange students.

Both cases are explained in more detail below, including their background, experiences and some guidelines and recommendations.

5.1 Go abroad – Laurea University of Applied Sciences

5.1.1 Pilot description

Laurea University of Applied Sciences offers its students various opportunities to study abroad. Outgoing international student mobility consists of student exchanges and placements abroad. Studies abroad strengthen such key competences needed in working life as language skills, understanding of cultures and cooperation skills, as well as give students an opportunity to deepen their knowledge of their future profession and to complete studies that aren't offered at Laurea or elsewhere in Finland. Laurea participates in various mobility programmes, including Erasmus, and has a wide international cooperation network, with the main focus on higher education institutions in the EU.

International student mobility requires long-term commitment and careful planning from the student. Laurea organises various informative events on mobility each term. Exchanges are supported by guidelines and preparation courses offered to those who are going abroad. Preparation courses could earlier be taken in person or online. Preparation courses aim to prepare the student for successful operation in the studying and working environment of a different country. In addition to the prep-courses, students are supported by the international coordinators and faculty of Laurea and host institutions, tutors at the placements and other students during the whole mobility process; before, during and after

exchange. The roles of different actors differ depending on the phase of the mobility.

Laurea's previous prep-course for outgoing exchange students did not meet the current needs. Feedback collected from all outgoing students after their return to Finland stated that they were not fully satisfied with the preparation for exchange. Students needed more information especially on:

- Practical arrangements (e.g. application, grants, documents needed, accommodation);
- Studies that can be completed abroad, the host institution and especially the details of the course;
- Location (country, area, city) and cultural encounters (culture shock, also the return shock).

The coordinators of international activities also felt that the preparation should be developed, with emphasis on e.g. learning agreement, planning of contents of exchange and involving tutor teachers to the mobility process. International student mobility should also be better connected to student's development in globalisation competence, as it is a central part of curricula at Laurea, and encourage students to get familiar with R&D activities at host institution and find out possible project ideas.

The development project started in January 2007 by analysing two questionnaires of needs returned by former exchange students (the feedback inquiries of those students who have been in exchange, a separate inquiry N=12, and feedback inquiry of the year 2006, N=79) and a process simulation of Laurea's outgoing international student exchange, using a method that has been developed in the SimLab of the Helsinki University of Technology. Coordinators of international activities, the director and the assistant of international activities and the development manager of e-learning participated in the simulation. Preliminary process map was first introduced and then edited on the basis of discussion. Three main questions were brought out: What should the contents of preparation for exchange be? What should be developed in the process? Which methods of implementation should be used?

It became clear in the discussion that some more preparation before the exchange and much more support during the exchange were needed to meet the needs of students and respond to the feedback. The conclusion was that the “prep-course” should last from the preparation to the evaluation of the exchange. Instead of a prep-course it should be a study unit “support of international mobility”. In addition to the contact with tutor teachers also contact with other exchange students was found very important. Blended learning, a combination of e-learning and contact sessions, was found to be an optimal method of implementation, as besides virtual studies students also value individual and group meetings as methods of implementation. Virtual workspace and e-mails could facilitate contacts to Laurea teachers and fellow students at home and during the exchange. Pictures, clips, blogs, videos could be used as well. Students also emphasised their own responsibility and the value of independent learning.

Based on these ideas a new study unit for supporting international student mobility was created:

- Blended learning (some parts virtually, some parts face-to-face);
- Better integration of the exchange to studies and personal learning agreement;
- Deepening the contents of the exchange: professional development, benchmarking ideas concerning R&D, LbD (learning methods);
- Continuance throughout the whole mobility process (before, during and after exchange).

It was decided, that since one of Laurea's units was developing the preparation for mobility at that moment anyhow, the international coordinators of that unit would plan and implement a pilot for a study unit. Another Laurea unit had already developed something in the same direction, and therefore the coordinators of this unit participated in the planning of the pilot together with the director and assistant of international activities and the development manager of e-learning. Other international coordinators followed and commented on the pilot.

The “Go Abroad” pilot study unit was planned and was taken into use in May 2007 with the first group of students, continuing until the end of the autumn term exchange, i.e. January 2008. A second group of students started in the pilot study unit in autumn 2007 and continued to the end of their spring semester abroad in 2008. This allowed for experiences in peer support also. The pilot study unit was evaluated and plans for future were made in spring 2008: the course had received positive feedback and was developed further as well as disseminated inside Laurea to all other units (starting from April 2008).

The course now includes an interactive online discussion forum for students before, during and after exchange and the possibility for e-tutoring and e-support during the exchange. The course is delivered using blended learning, in the e-learning platform called Optima.

Before the exchange:	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Meeting with the other students and international coordinators: information on practical arrangements (e.g. application, grants, documents needed) (information provided online as well); ● Personal meetings with the international coordinator: information on studies abroad (host institution and study offer, accommodation, location (country, area, city), Learning agreement; ● Meeting with the other students and international coordinators: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ final information about the Go Abroad –course; ➢ cultural encounters (culture shock); ➢ orientation for the exchange/placement; ● Assignments to be completed online.
During the exchange:	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Assignments to be completed online: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Writing the Go Abroad diary regularly; ➢ Participation in discussions during different phases of the exchange/placement with the international coordinators and other students abroad ● Photography contest (voluntary)
After the exchange:	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Go Abroad assignments

- Meeting with the international coordinator
- Filling out a feedback form
- Sharing the experiences in the classroom and/or at the International information days

Figure 5 – Contents of the pilot study unit Go Abroad (support for international student mobility)

The screenshot shows a Moodle LMS interface. On the left is a navigation menu with 'Workspaces' and 'Go Abroad' sections. The main content area is titled 'During the Exchange/Placement' and displays a list of forum messages. The messages are organized into categories like 'Learning agreement', 'Göteborgista', 'Gent, Belgia', 'terveysi englannista', 'Kysymys opinnoista Anne-Maril...', and 'Moi!'. Each message entry includes the subject, author, and a timestamp. Some entries are bolded, indicating they are the most recent or most active in the thread.

Subject	Author	Timestamp
Re: apurahat	Karp	16.09.2007 19:27
Re: apurahat	Ruok	19.09.2007 21:41
Re: apurahat	Karp	27.09.2007 13:48
Learning agreement	Sier	16.09.2007 19:03
Re: Learning agreement	Karp	16.09.2007 19:31
Re: Learning agreement	Karp	12.10.2007 14:47
Göteborgista	Sier	19.09.2007 12:34
Re: Göteborgista	Karp	27.09.2007 14:02
Re: Göteborgista	Sier	28.09.2007 00:00
Re: Göteborgista	Karp	12.10.2007 13:36
Re: Göteborgista	Sier	29.11.2007 11:44
Gent, Belgia	Kym	26.09.2007 13:24
Re: Gent, Belgia	Karp	27.09.2007 13:52
Re: Gent, Belgia	Tallg	28.09.2007 15:14
Re: Gent, Belgia	Kym	01.10.2007 16:13
Re: Gent, Belgia	Neur	29.09.2007 16:44
Re: Gent, Belgia	Ruok	30.09.2007 18:11
terveysi englannista	Sah	28.09.2007 23:10
Re: terveysi englannista	Neur	29.09.2007 16:46
Kysymys opinnoista Anne-Maril...	Neur	30.09.2007 12:02
Re: Kysymys opinnoista Anne-Ma...	Karp	02.10.2007 14:43
Re: Kysymys opinnoista Anne-Ma...	Neur	03.10.2007 10:36
Re: Kysymys opinnoista Anne-Ma...	Karp	05.10.2007 12:33
Re: Kysymys opinnoista Anne-Ma...	Neur	07.10.2007 19:04
Re: Ohjeistusta LA:n muutoskaa...	Karp	08.10.2007 12:13
Re: Ohjeistusta LA:n muutoskaa...	Neur	09.10.2007 12:47
Re: Ohjeistusta LA:n muutoskaa...	Neur	11.10.2007 11:30
Moi!	Neur	08.11.2007 20:18
Milainen Suomi-kuva?	Karp	21.11.2007 12:24
Re: Milainen Suomi-kuva?	Neur	22.11.2007 12:43
Re: Milainen Suomi-kuva?	Kym	22.11.2007 14:44
Re: Milainen Suomi-kuva?	Sier	26.11.2007 14:30

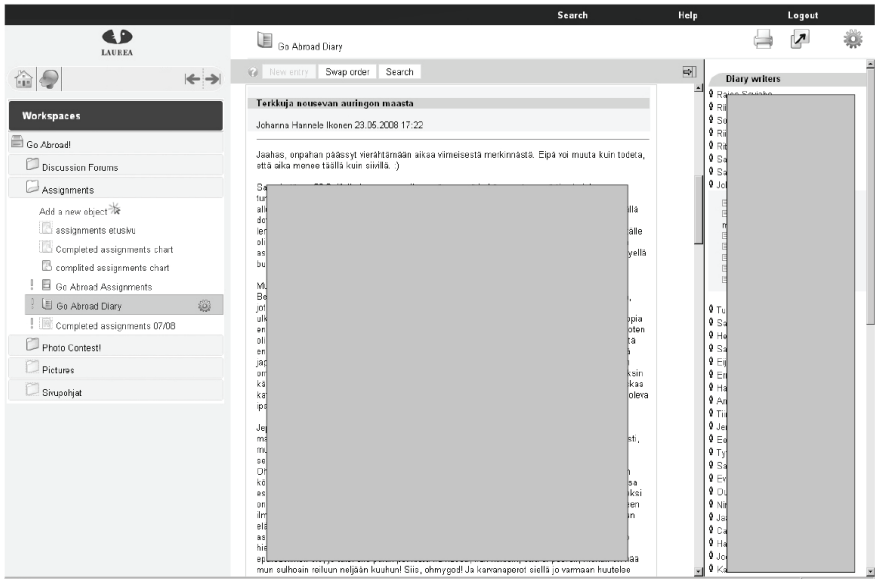


Figure 6 - Screenshots of the Go Abroad web interface

5.1.2 Experiences (based on feedback from stakeholders)

Several methods were used in the evaluation of the pilot study unit “Go Abroad”:

- Follow up of the course by the international coordinators responsible for preparation continuously during the pilot;
- Interviews with all students after return;
- Feedback questionnaire at the end of the mobility;
- Evaluation discussion with all international coordinators in spring 2008 after the pilot’s first group of students returned home.

One of the international coordinators interviewed the students after they returned to gather views on the value of the pilot. The following are comments from the students concerning the contents of the course.

"Important information" -section:

"Good that e.g. all forms and "Important information" section were in one place"

Discussion forum was found useful:

"The direct link to the coordinator and other students is great"

"I read all the questions, answers and comments, but did not feel a need to write myself as my preparations went so smoothly"

"Back in Finland" -section was not so much appreciated:

"Useless, as I corresponded per e-mail with the coordinator when back at home"

Diary:

"I did not write a diary at all, as I am not a writer type. But I see its importance now: a student who is preparing to leave for a country would like to read experiences of another student who has been to that specific country."

"I wrote the diary and the idea was good. Otherwise I would not have written anything."

Assignments form:

"The assignments were useful, especially those tasks where I had to find out about the target university and city"

"It was useful to think about the differences of cultures etc. in beforehand"

"I found the Competence-assignments difficult"

These results, together with the experiences of the coordinators who ran the "Go Abroad" pilot were discussed in a meeting of all international coordinators and the development manager of e-learning. Development areas, such as the suitability of course assignment contents and methods, were recognised. The following different steps of the mobility process could be identified:

- In the beginning of the preparation there is a need for face-to-face meetings;
- In the beginning of the exchange there is a need for discussions;
- Students were rather passive in the middle of the exchange;
- At the end the discussion started again;
- After arrival no need for the virtual workspace.

All Laurea's outgoing exchange students have to fill out an online evaluation form after returning to home. In the questionnaire there are some questions specifically about the preparation of the exchange and support during the exchange. The answers of the students who participated in the first pilot run (autumn 2007) were analysed in spring 2008 and compared to the answers of other students. The students of the pilot were clearly more satisfied with the support they got from home institution.

Based on the evaluation, the contents of "Go abroad" were modified, and it was decided that the course will be used for all outgoing students from Laurea. The persons who had run the pilot and some who were not so familiar with it yet modified the contents of the course together. A model workspace of "Go Abroad" was created in the online learning platform Optima and in future copies of the model will be easy to make for the outgoing student groups. Usability of the "Go Abroad" workspace will be evaluated once a year and the model workspace will be edited when needed.

5.1.3 Guidelines & recommendations

The main conclusion of the development project is the importance to support not just the exchange, but students' learning process as a whole. The pilot study unit "Go Abroad" has deepened the learning experience of some students remarkably. It was however clear that some students like online support better than others, and there should be a possibility to modify the course according to the needs of the students (e.g. based on earlier experiences, content of the exchange). The students also used other Internet-based forums, e.g. other virtual courses or work spaces, during their exchange. These were partly overlapping with "Go Abroad" and resulted in decreased motivation. All in all, the discussion forum and the information included were very good, but the course assignments should be developed further.

The use of the model workspace of "Go Abroad", which was created in the pilot project, will harmonise the information and support for international

student exchange and work placement in Laurea. Also the workload of international coordinators will decrease.

5.2 Virtual Window for Study Abroad – University of Tartu

5.2.1 Pilot description

Annually, approximately 300 to 400 students of the University of Tartu use the mobility support services of the central administrative office to prepare themselves for a study abroad period. Information concerning related topics and requirements was partially available on the various websites of the university, and was provided to students when they came to consult a study abroad adviser at the office.

Experiences from the previous years indicated that students complained of information being scattered across websites, as no comprehensive overview of all the topics involved with study abroad was available, and there was no possibility to learn from former outgoing students. Information days held did not allow as much flexibility as needed. This feedback suggested the need for the development of an online study abroad preparation course to assist students in finding comprehensive information and create a valuable tool for experience sharing among future outgoing students and students currently studying abroad.

The efforts were made to integrate the existing information sources and to create informative materials on the topics that did not exist in the written form, but were just discussed during information days. The students studying abroad were invited to contribute as co-advisors by sharing experience and giving some practical hints not necessarily discussed on official websites or information brochures.

The course is targeted to those selected as outgoing students either by the university or any external authority, thus the course is not aimed at assisting students to choose their study abroad destination, but to provide input for the next stage of mobility preparation. However, the course was preceded by an university-wide information day during which all study abroad opportunities were highlighted and the second part of mobility

preparation, the online support course-Virtual Window for Study Abroad, was introduced.

I Information materials on	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study abroad regulations and rules for UT (University of Tartu) students; • Organisational matters to be dealt with prior leaving: visas /residents permits; health insurance etc; • UT implementation of APEL (accreditation of prior and experiential learning) for courses taken abroad; • Promoting organisations of former outgoing students: ESN (Erasmus student network), tutors; • Cultural diversity, culture shock and cultural adjustment.
II Vocabulary	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terminology used across the materials.
III Media library	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pictures and video clips taken during study abroad period.
IV Chatting space	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online forum to discuss with fellow students about accommodation options; courses available in a host institution; entertainment; typical behaviour patterns of different cultures; • Mail box.
V Feedback	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation form with open questions.

Figure 7 - Contents of the online support course-Virtual Window for Study Abroad

The virtual learning environment used for the study abroad preparation course is WebCT, as e-learning, at the University of Tartu, mostly takes place in in this environment. A self registration option to enrol students to the course was used. The course is developed and administered by International Student Service staff - study abroad advisors, who instructed the students the course, added information to the course and consulted students parallel to the course.

5.2.2 Experiences (based on feedback from stakeholders)

The first students were given access to the course in February 2008. They were the students about to leave for a hosting institution abroad. Students

studying abroad at the time were requested to join the course and stay actively involved until the end June, the end of the second run of the course.

Although the number of students initially joining the course was modest (around 15), as most of them had already left, the initial feedback was positive. As assumed, it indicated that the most beneficial part of the course was the support discussion forum with fellow students. The amount and structure of materials displayed was generally assessed as user-friendly and easily digestible. Yet, there were some comments on materials being too extensive and partially irrelevant.

The second run of the preparation course, launched in April 2008, included around 180 future outgoing students. The ones studying abroad at the time were reminded to stay active and fully contribute to the course. The materials were reviewed, but no substantial changes adopted.

Three weeks after the students were given access to the course; students' advisors asked if there was a need to reserve time for any supplementary information workshops to cover some topics. The number of students, the question was addressed to, was ca 180, out of whom merely 15 reported back asking for additional information sessions. Most of the students replied that they might come individually to ask for some specific questions. Overall, the advisors commented that there were significantly fewer students visiting the central office for information than had previously been the case. Regrettably, there are no explicit statistical data on that.

The most challenging task for the developers of the course was to create a well integrated and linked support course which would encourage students to acquaint themselves with a series of themes to facilitate mobility preparation, but to avoid it becoming exhaustive and regulative lecturing material. The administrative staff engaged with students support at UT was very supportive. The same applies for academicians who were approached to create materials on some topics. The developers said that the course somehow boosted cooperation between them and academic staff, as the latter has regarded mobility support as mostly administrative task and has been less involved.

5.2.3 Guidelines & recommendations

- The course is optional for both future outgoing students as well as for those already abroad. To make it more effective and beneficial for both groups, participating students should be able to earn credits for attending the course. The course would comprise two stages: a mobility preparation stage, and later, during the study abroad period, a tutoring stage;
- The course must include assignments for outgoing students which would stimulate them to familiarise themselves with all the aspects related to physical mobility experience;
- Many students used the online forum to address fellow students on recognition of studies taken abroad; the forum should also involve academic personnel in charge of course transfer. To maximise their involvement, academics should be included to the course for a certain time period and that, in turn, would enforce students to compile study plans on time. To guide a group of people virtually, rather than answering individual e-mails, is definitely more effective time management;
- This virtual preparatory initiative should also serve outgoing students during their physical study abroad stay, as very little communication takes place with fellow students in other countries at that time, and especially with their study abroad advisers at the home institution.

6. Some key issues related to e-coaching

The flexibility needed to guide exchange students from a distance works in favour of e-coaching alternatives. The e-coach can stay in contact with his/her student independent of time and place. The use of online tools facilitates continuous dialogue between the coach and the student abroad and allows for an efficient organisation of the coaching process (especially if also external teachers or experts are involved).

Moreover, the implementation of e-coaching activities can stimulate students and teachers from different institutions to learn together and to promote inter-institutional knowledge transfer. Additionally, the e-coaching process is often digitally archived which implies that both student and e-coach can keep track of and evaluate the students' learning process.

Despite the great opportunities e-coaching has to offer for the guidance of exchange students abroad, some challenges appear as well. To overcome these, a lot depends on the skills and personality of the e-coach or the team of e-coaches.

Online communication channels often deal with many written texts leaving out the non-verbal aspect of communication. To avoid misunderstandings and misperceptions, good communication skills are needed. One way to assure this is to promote the use of Netetiquettes (e.g. don't write things you would not say in a normal face-to-face conversation) and emoticons.

Establishing mutual trust is also much more difficult online than offline. This applies even more to exchange students who have not yet met their e-coach on a face-to-face basis and usually come from different cultural backgrounds. Again also in this case, a lot depends on good agreements and the level of emotional intelligence of the e-coach.

E-coaching requires that the users have the necessary ICT skills. In practice however, it will often be necessary to teach them how to work with electronic communication media and which tools to use for a particular setting. Good training and support systems for e-coaches are therefore needed.

Within the framework of the VM-BASE project, two European-oriented workshops addressing the issue of e-coaching were organised. Experts in the field as well as higher education staff and policy makers participated in the workshops. The discussions taking place during these events revealed three main key issues to take into account when implementing e-coaching in an institution. Although the e-coach plays a key role in ensuring the success of the process, structural support from the institution is indispensable. This ranges from a sound knowledge exchange system, the establishment of clear agreements for all parties involved on their role and tasks, to the necessary motivation and reward coming from the top-level of

the institution. Understanding and addressing these issues can make the difference between a successful or a frustrating e-coaching experience.

Given the specific setting it is necessary for the e-coach and his/her students to establish clear agreements and guidelines on practical matters: what sort of contact will the e-coach have with his/her students, what will the frequency of the contacts be, which communication tools will be used for what purpose,... These agreements serve an undistributed information exchange between the two sides and help to avoid misunderstandings and delays.

E-coaching implies good and established initial contacts between e-learning units, support units and International Relations units. These are currently very often non-existent. Coordination, communication and knowledge exchange between all however is essential. Expertise should be brought together, resources should be pooled. E-learning units for example could be proactive in spreading awareness on multimedia etc. through workshops.

In case teachers cannot specialise in the full support of ICT in exchanges, the possibility exists to become part of a team consisting of assistants or administrative staff who have the competences and skills to do so. To grow in their competences a virtual community of coaches could be set up in order for them to share experiences. Also a supervision model could be set into place and a FAQ could be provided. Successful e-coaching depends highly on a strong institutional support structure.

Last but not least, rewarding and motivating the e-coaches for their efforts is very important. E-coaches are often assistants (content) or technical support staff and they should be rewarded on that level. It should be accepted as a specific skill and a specific type of task/job/responsibility – within a teaching function, or within a function as administrative staff (International Office for instance). Teachers on the other hand are often overloaded with work: they have to do research and write publications but are not much rewarded to be involved with innovation in education. A possible motivation for them could be to give them some time off from teaching, but also other rewarding systems should be thought of in this respect.

Conclusions

In general, there is not yet much e-coaching available for both incoming and outgoing exchange students. However, most higher education institutions would agree that there is potential for e-coaching. In the VM-BASE project, the concept of e-coaching was further explored and particular attention was paid to supporting and coaching teachers and students at a distance both before, during and after the exchange.

Getting involved in virtual support actions for exchange students, changes the classic role of teachers and imposes new tasks and responsibilities in order to function as e-coaches. Also different tools and electronic communication media have emerged in the last decades: reflective tools (e.g. e-portfolio, blog), non-interactive tools (e.g. streaming media, website), collaborative tools (e.g. wiki, discussion forum), communication tools (e.g. e-mail, videoconferencing) and social networking tools (e.g. shared media, social bookmarking). They all can be used to support the coaching process from a distance.

The practical examples have shown that indeed a variety of technologies and tools can be used to virtually support exchange students in one way or another. In most of the VM-BASE pilot cases however, these virtual activities have been combined with face-to-face experiences. It is the human factor that stands out as being one of the most important aspects and the success of activities often depends on it.

At the moment virtual mobility and blended mobility as a support to physical mobility still mainly exists on a pilot level. The VM-BASE project has tried to go one step further and has taken the concepts of blended mobility and e-coaching to mainstream level integrating them in the strategic goals of the participating institutions and networks. We hope they will be of value and give inspiration to everybody who is considering engaging in similar activities. It is only when all stakeholders recognise the benefits of organising virtual support for physical mobility programmes that they really will be integrated in mainstream education and become sustainable in the long term.

References

- Baars, G.J.A. (2005). *E-coaching: Een nadere definitie*. Presentatie op Werkconferentie e-coachen en begeleiden op afstand, Utrecht, Ruud de Moor Centrum, 15 September 2005.
- CiteULike. <http://www.citeulike.org>
- Connotea. <http://www.connotea.org>
- Delicious. Social bookmarking. <http://delicious.com>
- *E-Tutoring: overview, November 12, 2008*.
<http://www.warwick.ac.uk/ETS/Publications/Guides/Skills/skills.htm>
- Facebook. <http://www.facebook.com>
- FlashMeeting. <http://flashmeeting.open.ac.uk/home.html>
- Furl. <http://www.furl.net>
- Holmes, Bryan et al. (November 12, 2008) *European E-tutors – inductive models for online lecturing in synchronous collaborative environments*.
http://www.elearningeuropa.info/directory/index.php?page=doc&doc_id=7111&doclng=6
- Naidu S. (February 20, 2008) *Assessment, feedback, and e-moderation. E-Learning: A guidebook of principles, procedures and practices*.
http://www.cemca.org/e-learning_guidebook.pdf
- *Netetiquette guidelines memo*. <http://www.dtcc.edu/cs/rfc1855.html>
- Num Sum. <http://numsum.com/>
- Salmon, Gilly. 'Chapter 16. 80:20 For emoderators.' *The challenge of ecompetence in academic staff development*.
<http://www.ecompetence.info/index.php?id=93>
- *SimLab of the Helsinki University of Technology*.
<http://www.simlab.tkk.fi>
- *SPUTNIC project. Seminars Promoting the Use of Technologies for Networking and International Collaboration*.
<http://sputnic.europace.org>
- Toledo. http://toledo.kuleuven.be/index_en.php?fullPage=
- *VENUS seminars*. <http://www.venus-seminars.net>

Background of the handbook

The VM-BASE project

VM-BASE - Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges, was a two-year project that started 1 October 2006. The project was carried out with the support of the European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture, under the Socrates/Minerva programme.

The VM-BASE project aimed to raise the quality of student exchanges by offering virtual support, both before and after the physical mobility. Virtual support was used to prepare and follow-up the mobile student, as a complement to the existing exchange programmes. In this way, the project supported teachers in coaching exchange students at a distance (e-coaching).

The project started with a study giving an overview of the state-of-the-art in virtual exchange support measures and a needs analysis, making an inventory of student and teacher needs. The major activity of the project consisted of several pilots focusing on the orientation and selection of students, preliminary courses for students preparing for a physical exchange and examination facilities at the end or even after the exchange. Next to the pilots the need and feasibility of a Virtual Alumni Association for Erasmus students was being investigated.

More information on the project is available at <http://vm-base.europace.org>.

Partnership

VM-BASE project partners are:

EuroPACE ivzw (BE)

EuroPACE ivzw is a European non-profit association of universities and their partners in education and training, e.g. private companies, international networks and governmental institutions. The main objective of EuroPACE is to foster networked e-learning for virtual mobility, for internationalisation of higher education, for knowledge creation and sharing and for lifelong learning. Its main interests are innovation in education, new educational technologies, quality in e-learning and e-learning competences and skills. Its target groups are higher education institutions, private companies and policy making bodies. The main activities of EuroPACE are research and development through projects, networking, expert advice, events and publishing of reports, papers and presentations.

<http://www.europace.org>

AVNet - Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (BE)

The AVNet Department of the Catholic University of Leuven, K.U.Leuven, is a university interface that aims to support networked e-learning in an international context, i.e. to support local university teachers in the internationalisation of their education by using ICT. It does this by providing advise, design, development, implementation, and training services. AVNet also assesses (inter)national trends in order to encourage local university teachers to participate in (inter)national activities and to translate (inter)national initiatives to the local and/or regional setting. AVNet has participated in a number of research projects on virtual education, e-learning and technology-enhanced learning in general.

<http://www.avnet.kuleuven.be>

Coimbra Group (BE)

Founded in 1985, the Coimbra Group is an association of long-established European multidisciplinary universities of high international standard committed to creating special academic and cultural ties in order to promote, for the benefit of its members, internationalisation, academic collaboration, excellence in learning and research, and service to society. It is also the purpose of the Group to influence European educational policy and to develop best practice through the mutual exchange of experience. The Coimbra Group Office coordinates activities among Coimbra Group universities and manages cooperation with other similar organisations at European as well as international level.

<http://www.coimbra-group.eu>

Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven (BE)

The Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven consists of four departments that merged more than 10 years ago. In 2003 KHLeuven became a member of the association centred around the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, one of the top universities of Europe.

The department of Business Studies (ECHO) has 1,350 students for a professional bachelor in the disciplines Business Management and Office Management. It has a history of high-quality education, enjoys a very good reputation and has many valuable partnerships all across Europe. On the regional level ECHO aims at playing a role in the lifelong learning process and in the development of commerce and industry. Many projects are carried out in cooperation with or by order of regional enterprises, public organisations and European partner institutions. The main fields of expertise are: entrepreneurship, sustainable development, use of IT and international cooperation.

<http://www.khleuven.be>

ESU (BE)

ESU – European Students’ Union is the umbrella organisation of 49 national unions of students from 38 countries and through these members represent over 10 million students. The aim of ESU is to represent and

promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at a European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, Council of Europe and UNESCO.

<http://www.esib.org>

Tartu Ülikool (EE)

The University of Tartu is a public university committed to high level research, teaching and providing services to the society. Consisting of ten faculties (Theology, Law, Medicine, Philosophy, Science and Technology, Education, Exercise and Sport Sciences, Economics, Mathematics and Computer Science, Social Sciences), five regional colleges and eight research and development institutions, UT is the only broad-based classical university in the region.

There are six high-level research directions - the Centre of Molecular and Clinical Medicine, the Centre of Excellence of Chemistry and Materials Science, the Centre of Basic and Applied Ecology, the Centre of Excellence of Gene and Environmental Technology, the Centre of Behaviour and Health Sciences and the Institute of Physics.

UT is an active member of international associations such as the European Universities Association, the Utrecht Network, the Baltic Sea Region University Network, and the Coimbra Group of Universities – an association of long-standing and internationally recognised European research universities where Tartu is the only member from the Baltics. UT has been involved in e-learning since 1997. Estonian e-University, a consortium of universities and applied higher education institutions which was established in 2003, contributes to educating lectures of universities to compile and practice quality and efficient e-courses.

<http://www.ut.ee>

TKK Dipoli (FI)

Teknillinen korkeakoulu (TKK) (Helsinki University of Technology) is the oldest and largest university of technology in Finland. Lifelong Learning Institute Dipoli (TKK Dipoli), an adult education unit of Helsinki University of Technology, is one of the largest continuing education

providers among universities in its field in Europe. Making use of its international networks, the technological know-how of the university staff, and the business experience of industries, TKK Dipoli seeks to support business management, technological development and lifelong learning. TKK Dipoli is also a major contributor to internationally recognised learning and research programmes. By developing methods and utilising e-learning technologies, TKK Dipoli has established itself as a forerunner in the field of continuing education programmes.

<http://www.dipoli.tkk.fi>

Laurea-ammattikorkeakoulu (FI)

Laurea University of Applied Sciences is the fourth largest university of applied sciences in Finland, and operates in the Greater Helsinki Region in eight units. Laurea produces new competences in the field of service innovations and carries out professionally orientated education, regional development and R&D activities by following the Learning by Developing (LbD) operational model. Laurea is profiled particularly as a developer of regional development influence, R&D linked to cluster development, network and business competence, related operating models, the welfare sector and welfare entrepreneurship. Laurea is at the forefront of its field, having been appointed as a centre of excellence in education and regional development by the Higher Education Evaluation Council of the Academy of Finland. Laurea has developed swiftly as a university of applied sciences, coming up with innovative teaching methods that benefit students. Laurea employs approximately 500 personnel and 8000 students, of which about 1200 study in the adult education programmes.

<http://www.laurea.fi>

BEST (FR)

BEST, Board of European Students of Technology is a constantly growing non-profit and non-political organisation that provides communication, cooperation and exchange possibilities for students all over Europe, since 1989. More than 70 local BEST Groups (LBGs) in 29 countries are currently creating a growing, well-organised, powerful, young and innovative

student network. BEST strives to help European students of technology to become more internationally minded, by reaching a better understanding of European cultures and developing capacities to work on an international basis. Therefore BEST creates opportunities for the students to meet and learn from one another through our academic and non-academic courses and educational symposia.

Through its Educational Involvement, BEST participates in numerous educational programmes in order to connect students of engineering with their educational process. The Educational Involvement, consisting mainly of Events on Education, is the responsibility of the Educational Committee of the organisation. The aim of such involvement is to give regular students the opportunity to share their ideas and visions on higher education and to have their voice heard at a higher level.

<http://www.best.eu.org>

University of West Hungary (HU)

Nyugat-magyarországi Egyetem (University of West Hungary) is one of the most significant centres of higher education in the Transdanubia region. It consists of ten faculties which are spread across five cities of Hungary. The Faculty of Geoinformatics in Székesfehérvár, the partner institution in the VM-BASE project, is a leading institution in Hungary in continuing professional education on Land Surveying, Geoinformatics and Land Management. The Faculty is involved in various flexible education programmes for land management giving professional development services to engineers, technicians, and executives. The Faculty has accumulated significant experience in the UNIGIS and similar international networks of universities, which offer common courses by open and distance learning to in-service professionals in the area of Geographical Information Systems and Land Management. International cooperation of the Faculty is oriented towards the development of education. The Faculty has participated in several projects aimed at issues relating to the interactive use of GIS, development of distance learning courses, education for continuing professional development, development of knowledge in

land administration matters, and development of networking between universities.

<http://www.geo.info.hu>

University of Edinburgh (UK)

The University of Edinburgh is one of the oldest in the UK having been founded in 1583 and with a long tradition of providing high quality first and higher degrees in most subjects, including all professions. It has a very substantial level of research in all subjects with almost all staff active in research at national or international levels. This is reflected in the standing of the university in the top six in the UK in research, and top in Scotland, in both quantity and quality. The university has very strong international relationships in both teaching and research, and draws staff and students from all countries of the world. It is an active member of such international groupings as LERU, Universitas 21 and the Coimbra Group.

<http://www.ed.ac.uk>

Editors

This manual was edited by Katrin Bijmens (AVNet – Katholieke Universiteit Leuven), Ilse Op de Beeck (EuroPACE ivzw) and Wim Van Petegem (AVNet – Katholieke Universiteit Leuven & EuroPACE ivzw).

Authors

The manual is compiled from the VM-BASE partnership’s experience. The following people contributed in one way or another to the content of the manual (in alphabetical order):

Eline Bezemer (AVNet – Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, BE), Helena Bijmens (EuroPACE ivzw), Veronika Bleyerova (University of West Hungary, HU), Machteld Boussemaere (AVNet – Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, BE), Andrei Bursuc (BEST, FR), Anthony Camilleri (ESU, BE), Anneleen Cosemans (AVNet – Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, BE), Johannes De Gruyter (AVNet – Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, BE), Vasilis Georgilas (BEST, FR), Denise Haywood (University of Edinburgh, UK), Jeff Haywood (University of Edinburgh, UK), Anna-Kaarina Kairamo (TKK Dipoli, FI), Laszlo Kottyan (University of West Hungary, HU), Inge Knudsen (Coimbra Group, BE), Grégory Lucas (University of West Hungary, HU), Arja Majakulma (Laurea University of Applied Sciences (FI), Christine Michielsens (EuroPACE ivzw, BE), Catarina Moleiro (Coimbra Group, BE), Nicki Mrose (AVNet – Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, BE), Irma Mänty (Laurea University of Applied Sciences, FI), Ulla Rintala (TKK Dipoli, FI), Carina Saelen (Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven, BE), Raisa Saviaho (Laurea University of Applied Sciences (FI), Ülle Tensing (University of Tartu, EE), Klaas Vansteenhuyse (Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven, BE), Sandis Zuciks (AVNet - Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, BE)

We would like to thank all the staff and students at our universities who gave of their time with such enthusiasm to help with the pilots.

Design

The layout was done by Catarina Moleiro (Coimbra Group, BE).

The VM-BASE logo was designed by Sandy Claes (AVNet-Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, BE).

This publication presents the results of the activities carried out by several European higher education institutions, networks and student organisations during the lifetime of the EC-supported project VM-BASE (“Virtual Mobility Before and After Student Exchanges”). The VM-BASE project aimed to improve the quality of student exchanges by offering virtual support, both before, during and after physical mobility and supported teachers in coaching exchange students from a distance (e-coaching). The publication describes some of the key issues related to e-coaching. It is a part of a more elaborate best-practice manual on blended mobility which was also published by the VM-BASE consortium.



The VM-BASE project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.