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## OPENING STUDIES THROUGH VIRTUAL EXCHANGE – CASE DESCRIPTION

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### Introduction

Openness brings challenges for traditional universities in their practice implementation. The aim of virtual exchange is to reach academic goals, also sharing and gaining from socio-cultural experience. Teacher collaboration for joint course design and/or delivery and recognition of student and teacher virtual exchange are the main challenges European universities face in organizing virtual exchange. The aim of this paper is to present how universities may open (their practise) by collaboration of teachers in creation and use of OER, in development of study modules for virtual exchange, and by joint student activities in virtual exchange. The described case has been implemented and financed under Erasmus+ Strategic partnership project OUVM – Opening universities for virtual mobility (project No. 2014-1-LT01-KA203-000550).

### Virtual exchange characteristics and possibilities

Virtual learning activities and physical mobility of students and teachers is a common practice at European universities, however virtual exchange (or virtual mobility) is a challenge and a new practice for most of them. 2011 Eurostudent report (Olivos Rossini, Rincon, & Rutkowski, 2015, p.138) indicated five main reasons why the students would not study abroad:

*“Financial insecurities (57%); insufficient support of mobility in the home country (49%); lack of individual motivation (48%); insufficient support of mobility in the host country (24%); and lack of language competence (23%).”*

The main indicated issues such as financial insecurity, insufficient support of mobility in home or host country are overcome in virtual exchange case, as most issues regarding support are solved before the exchange, while no need to travel creates no financial insecurities. Virtual exchange also provides a possibility to develop intercultural competences while staying at home for those students who would not be able to travel due to family, work or other reasons. Vasilevska (2014) indicates the following advantages of virtual exchange regarding physical mobility:

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*“no need to change your usual lifestyle; minimal financial investments <...>; gaining of the international learning experience <...>; the availability of education at any stage of life that today is particularly topical within the framework of Lifelong learning program.”*

Virtual exchange (sometimes referred as virtual mobility) in higher education is an activity of learning, teaching, research, communication, or collaboration, characterized by the following features:

- Development of intercultural competence;
- Cooperation of higher education institutions;
- Application of appropriate technological solutions for learning and teaching;
- Aimed at achieving academic goals and recognition of the achieved learning outcomes.

Vasilevska (2014) characterises virtual exchange indicating the following criterion: individual accessibility, more personalized educational offer, increased flexibility, interactive materials used, and working in team. Researchers (Op de Beeck, Bijmens, Michielsens, & Van Petegem, 2007; Op de Beeck & Van Petegem, 2012; Caldirola, Fuente, Aquilina, Gutiérrez, & Ferreira, 2014) define the most common examples of virtual exchange activities as follows: it may be a virtual course delivered in another university, a joint course delivery of several universities for both universities' students, virtual group activities of different countries' students, virtual seminar or series of the virtual seminars, virtual practice or internship implemented at the company abroad, virtual activities to support physical mobility.

### **Virtual exchange case description**

#### ***Main issues of opening universities for virtual exchange***

Openness is a challenge for higher education, as it requires revision of their practices, training for teachers and students on OER creation, use and reuse, and synergy of these processes to market institution activities online. Virtual exchange should be seen as a regular form of study exchange and internationalization, however teachers should be able to design curriculum for virtual mobility, students should be able to participate in international online studies, and institutions should be ready to recognize international virtual exchange in study programmes.

Openness as an innovation should be integrated into an organization through all areas of its activities (Volungeviciene, Tereseviciene, & Tait, 2014):

1. Strategy and management;
2. Infrastructure;
3. Curriculum designing;
4. Teacher and academic staff training;
5. Support system;
6. Quality assurance;
7. Marketing, business and communication.

The aim of the OUVVM project is to open university studies for virtual exchange by training teachers and academic staff on how to design MA program curriculum using OER and applying correct licensing; how to establish collaborative trusted relationships in curriculum designing for multicultural exchange; and how to integrate these open education innovations in every day practices. OUVVM project training and virtual exchange implementation have directly addressed all 7 areas of university activities, by revising virtual exchange procedures at participating universities, creating platform for virtual exchange courses and their marketing, training teachers and support staff specialists on virtual exchange curriculum design process and peculiarities, and implementing peer review of virtual exchange courses for quality assurance.

The partnership of the project is conducted of 5 universities engaged in following project activities:

- Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) – coordinating project activities, organizing teacher trainings on curriculum design and study process administration for virtual exchange, creating platform for virtual mobility courses and their marketing, preparing study modules for virtual exchange, and opening study process for virtual exchange;
- Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KUL) – organizing teacher trainings on curriculum design for virtual exchange, and peer review of study modules, prepared for virtual exchange;
- Università Degli Studi di Pavia (UNIPV) – preparing study modules for virtual exchange, and opening study process for virtual exchange;
- Universidad de Oviedo (UNIOVI) – organizing teacher trainings on open educational resources and curriculum licensing; preparing study modules for virtual exchange, and opening study process for virtual exchange;
- Universidade Aberta (UAb) – organizing teacher trainings on open educational resources and curriculum licensing; preparing study modules for virtual exchange, and opening study process for virtual exchange.

### ***Teacher collaboration for virtual mobility curriculum design***

#### *Teacher collaboration for joint course design*

Teacher collaboration may be fruitful for teachers and students, however there are not many cases that include inter-institutional teacher collaboration for a course delivery and design. Tsai (2001) stresses the need for teacher collaboration using technologies in web-based instructional activities, however there is no much research focusing the need for teacher collaboration and techniques in online learning.

When opening universities for international virtual exchange of students, the team of institutions that cooperate and agree upon common procedure is crucial. However teacher openness and collaboration for virtual exchange on joint curriculum design and/or delivery is also of high importance. The main aim of this curriculum is to achieve learning outcomes of

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the course, but collaboration between different institution teachers for course design or delivery bring intercultural setting and make the courses unique.

Joint course design and delivery is a possibility for teachers to collaborate, share their common practices, and learn from different colleague background, access to resources, and cultural approach. It sometimes is a challenge for teachers who tend to work alone in their course design and/or delivery, as they do not feel well opening their course for others due to various reasons. Thus this collaboration requires openness, professional confidence, trust and tolerance from engaged teachers. Lee, Poch, Shaw and Williams (2012) stress that

*“engaging diversity in the classroom is not a natural or inevitable process, and does not result merely from the presence of diverse social identity groups or course content” (p.8).*

Thus teachers need trainings on virtual exchange course and/or activity design peculiarities, course adaptation, student engagement in international teams, and getting use of the additional value in the course which comes from intercultural student background and collaboration. Teachers also have to have skills on creation, use and re-use of open educational resources in their courses. 3 training materials for teachers on *Virtual mobility curriculum design*, *Open educational resources*, and *Creative commons licenses* have been created and used for teacher trainings during OUVVM project; the training materials are publicly available at [openstudies.eu](http://openstudies.eu) portal section *For Teachers*.

The following courses of master programmes were selected for joint course design and/or delivery in OUVVM project:

Table 1: Teacher collaboration in course design and delivery for virtual exchange

Course leading university	Master courses adapted for virtual exchange	Course collaborating universities and no of courses for collaboration	Teacher collaboration in the no of courses
Universidade Aberta (UAb)	3	UNIOVI & UNIPV – 1 VMU – 2	Course design – 3 Course delivery – 2
University of Oviedo (UNIOVI)	2	UNIVP & UAb – 1 VMU – 2	Course design – 3 Course delivery – 1
University of Pavia (UNIPV)	2	VMU – 1	Course design – 1
Vytautas Magnus University (VMU)	4	UNIOVI – 2 UAb – 1 UNIPV – 2	Course design – 4

To prepare and open some part of the course before its delivery is necessary for all courses, selected for virtual exchange. All the courses, suggested for virtual exchange in OUVM project, have their introductory parts open and available online for students at the openstudies.eu portal (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. OUVM home page with courses for master virtual exchange

It is crucial for students from different universities to have the possibility to see publicly online the course presentation, learning outcomes, topics, planned activities and assessment strategy when they are choosing the course for virtual exchange.

This publicly available introductory part of each course constitutes of short course presenting video and course description information, which includes: delivering university, course timeline and duration, prerequisites to attend the course and target group, course delivery language, teaching, learning and assessment methods, and short description of teachers.

## **Student virtual exchange**

### *Preparation for student virtual exchange*

There are several steps student need to implement before virtual exchange – choose the subject, apply for virtual exchange, be nominated for virtual exchange, sign learning agreement and send it together with the necessary documents for course hosting university. The openstudies.eu portal presents and guides students within these steps (see Figure 2).

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### For students

**STEP 1 – CHOOSE subjects that you can study in a virtual mobility mode**

**Step 1.1.** Find university bilateral agreement between **HOME\*** and **HOST\*\*** universities for studies in virtual mobility mode. Contact Erasmus coordinator at HOME university and find out whether HOME university has the inter-institutional bilateral agreement with HOST university for studies in virtual mobility mode. (*OUVM project bilateral agreements are available here*)

**Step 1.2.** **Select the course(s)** you want to study at HOST university in virtual mobility mode. Check at your HOME university if these course(s) will be recognised through the learning outcomes.

**Step 1.3.** Apply at HOME university for studies in virtual mobility mode. Contact Erasmus Office at HOME university to follow internal procedures.

**Step 1.4.** Ask a confirmation from your HOME university Erasmus coordinator that you were nominated for studies in a virtual mobility mode at HOST university.

**STEP 2 – SEND DOCUMENTS to HOST university**

**Step 2.1.** Fill in Learning agreement ([link](#)), submit it – check your email, print it, sign it and ask your HOME university Erasmus coordinator to sign it, as well. Please fill in separate learning agreements for each course.

**Step 2.2.** Provide a scanned version of your learning agreement (with your and your university Erasmus officer's signatures) and a copy of your passport or ID card. ([link](#))  
Make sure that the copy of your passport or ID is readable – the first and last name should be clear.

\*HOME university - the university you belong/ study  
\*\*HOST university - the university you want to go for exchange for studies in a virtual mobility mode

Figure 2. Openstudies.eu portal – Register for virtual mobility section for students

The openstudies.eu portal aims at presenting and marketing all the necessary information about virtual exchange courses for students before they start the learning process. The home page of the portal presents the courses that students can select for virtual exchange (see Figure 1).

Figure 3. Openstudies.eu portal – Register for virtual mobility section for students

The main document that student signs with home and host universities before virtual exchange is the learning agreement (See Figure 3).

Openstudies.eu portal provides students with the possibility to fill in this learning agreement online. It is programmed in such way that students fill in their personal data, chose sending and receiving universities and their courses and receive the pre-filled in document to their email. After printing, signing and contacting the university representative to sign, students may upload it together with necessary documents online, where the host university office for virtual exchange receives them. This online learning agreement signing process help students

easily fill it in as the constant data (such as university address, representing persons, course codes, etc.) are filled in automatically when the students choose University and the course.

#### *International student exchange during virtual course*

The additional value here comes from intercultural setting. The more different students attend the course, the more value they may bring to the course. The international group work activities in this virtual course delivery are the main intercultural resource, as the students and teachers from different cultural setting bring their own culture background and perspective to enrich the course.

Practice shows that it is always difficult to engage a number of students for virtual exchange in order it were possible to organize these joint virtual international group activities. Teachers need course adaptations in the cases where the course students are from one or two nationalities, or the number of one nationality students dominates the course. However even in the case where one nationality students participate in the course of different country, cultural background and intercultural communication developed. Curriculum content, enriched with socio-cultural activities, and different learning methods chosen by course delivering teacher plays the main role in intercultural competence development.

#### **Challenges of virtual exchange**

Organization of virtual exchange of students is a challenging and new process in higher education institutions. The common procedures of physical mobility or Erasmus mobility are used as the basics for virtual exchange organization, but they cannot be duplicated. Student is not physically coming to the traditional universities, which are used to have foreign students present, so some challenges are faced by student sending and student receiving university. Student sending university has to take more responsibilities in organizing the selection of students, providing students with the information on the virtual courses abroad, informing the receiving institution on the virtually incoming students and their contact data, organizing the signing of learning agreements process, informing the students on virtual studies peculiarities, etc. Student receiving institution also has to perform some additional activities as the student being not present at the university and cannot bring the documents to necessary departments or fill in necessary forms handed in – this has to be done online, with the online forms ready, and taking more time to reach the students and communicate with them online. Thus this virtual administration brings challenges for several departments, regardless if there is one or ten students coming for virtual exchange.

Also the receiving university has to have the online support system ready with online guidelines, manuals and/or virtual trainings for virtually incoming students on the virtual learning platform and/or other tools to be used for virtual course participation. Students need to find these support activities and contacts as soon as the study process at student home university starts, as not going abroad it is much easier to change your mind and drop the possibility due to the lack of information.

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One more challenge for students and receiving universities is different semester starting dates. Students don't go physically abroad and tend to keep up with his/her home university semester dates to finalize administrative issues and start learning. It is really challenging for course teachers to integrate the latecomers.

Teachers collaborating in the course for virtual exchange design faced some challenges due to different experience and different experience in online learning, different quality assurance requirements for studies in partner institutions, different scenarios of contact hours, different understanding of collaboration, lack of time for coherent course design, different opinions and point of view, etc.

## Conclusions

1. Opening university practices via teacher collaboration and student virtual exchange is a challenging process where technologies create possibilities and facilitate administrative processes, however coherent preparation and coordination of activities is needed. Erasmus+ funded projects create possibilities for teachers to collaborate in course design and delivery for virtual exchange, for students to study virtually abroad, and for institutions to prepare and validate necessary procedures for virtual exchange implementation and recognition.
2. Virtual exchange case implementation revealed the main challenges for teachers, students and universities:
  - Students: in selection and registration for virtual exchange at university abroad;
  - Teachers: collaboration for joint course design and different time of students, joining the course;
  - Universities: in recognition of student and teacher virtual exchange.

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