

# **Bringing the student perspective to the debate on mobility, virtual exchange & blended learning**

*Joint position paper by the European Students' Union  
and the Erasmus Student Network*

## Background and Introduction

The European Students' Union and the Erasmus Student Network have joined forces to advocate for quality mobility and propose recommendations to ensure a proper implementation of virtual exchanges and blended courses for internationalisation purposes. Through this paper we are going to focus on distinguishing between these different internationalisation tools, while having physical mobility at the centre of the discussion and providing recommendations on how to successfully embed virtual exchanges and blended learning.

The use of Internet-based learning has gotten a lot of attention lately, mostly because of the Covid-19 pandemic, which challenged not only international mobility but also the traditional learning scheme. However, the discussions about Internet-based learning have been around for decades and the online setting gained prominence and legitimacy within the new Erasmus Programme (2021-2027). The new programme introduces blended formats for both long term and short-term mobility. On top of that, there are many discussions about the role of virtual learning in internationalisation. It is important to step in right now so we can have an influence on the conscious and purposeful use of the whole spectrum of formats.

Although quite popular in most policy documents, 'virtual mobility' is an ambiguous and oxymoronic term. A mobility experience is by definition physical and not virtual; if no physical movement has taken place, there is no need to call it "mobility" at all. "Virtual exchange" is, on the other hand, less confusing. One can argue that a student who exchanged part of his/her studies at home for studies in another HEI in an online setting has in fact taken part in some kind of exchange.

# The role of virtual learning activities and virtual exchanges

Virtual exchange is a form of online learning that has an integrated international and intercultural component that should have the **same requirements** all over Europe. Literature and case studies<sup>1</sup> show that digital learning environments and exchanges support students' motivation to learn, and independence in gaining knowledge in their chosen field. Nevertheless, students' expectations are met **when the digital tools create the conditions for social interaction**, and HEIs' administrative areas and teachers are ready for non-traditional learning experiences.

**Virtual learning and thus virtual exchanges cannot substitute face-to-face interaction and physical mobility that imply cultural immersion and first-hand experience of the everyday life of the host culture**, despite its great potential and capacity to stimulate social interactions and develop key competences. Moreover, while scientists agree on the presence of the intercultural component in the virtual exchange, the depth of this development, as well as its efficiency compared to physical mobility needs broader scientific exploration.

Virtual learning activities can be an excellent tool in increasing internationalisation at a distance - a type of internationalisation that has been emerging at research<sup>2</sup>, but it is imperative to not confuse them with mobility (which is mostly related with internationalisation abroad). International virtual learning activities **cannot be used as a**

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<sup>1</sup> Erdei, L. A., Káplár-Kodácsy, K. (2020). [International Student Mobility at a Glance - Promising Potential and Limiting Barriers of Non-traditional Mobility. Desk Research Report](#). P. 62-65.

<sup>2</sup> Mittelmeier, J., Rienties, B., Gunter, A., & Raghuram, P. (2021). [Conceptualizing Internationalization at a Distance: A "Third Category" of University Internationalization](#). Journal of Studies in International Education, 25(3), P. 269-270.

**discount substitute to reach mobility quotas and seen as providing a similar benefit for the participants**, as previously advocated by ESN <sup>3</sup>and ESU<sup>4</sup>. The international experience gained by mobile students can only be truly experienced in person. Virtual learning is to be seen as an add-on to physical mobility, complementing it instead of replacing it. **Therefore, when counting participants in international mobility, participants in virtual activities should not be counted as “mobile students” but as another category, and funding for these activities should not be taken from the budgets for student mobility.** Groups who are currently underrepresented should not be given virtual options as a “discount solution” to widening access - rather access to high-quality international education, including physical mobility, should be widened for all.<sup>5</sup>

Virtual exchange should boost the internationalisation and incentive further physical mobility of the whole student population, placing a special emphasis on those who were not originally eager to leave. It should also be used to encourage the exchange of students who cannot or do not want to be mobile because of their socio-cultural background and status, disabilities and chronic diseases, family and parental obligations, financial issues or language proficiency. However, virtual exchange should be an option and not an unavoidable choice. **Virtual exchange cannot be used as an artificial instrument to avoid investing in physical mobility in order to make it more inclusive for students from disadvantaged backgrounds**, as that would be at the expense of equality and versatility of learning opportunities.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example: Erasmus Student Network (2020). [The Future of the European Education Area: achieving high-quality education for future young Europeans. ESN's reaction to the European Education Area communication](#). P. 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: European Students' Union (2019). [Internalisation and Mobility Policy Paper](#). P. 5-6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

## Ensuring quality blended learning experiences

Blended learning is a deliberate combination of both physical and online learning activities, based on educational design. This can go in two directions: a predominant physical course, supported by online learning, or a predominant online course supported by physical learning (e.g. at the start or the end of a one-year online project or seminar). In blended learning, synchronous and asynchronous communication channels can be combined. Asynchronous communication through connected learning environments (e.g. independent learning tasks) and synchronous communication through live virtual or physical moments.<sup>6</sup>

The European Commission has announced through the Erasmus+ 2021-2027 Charter Guidelines that blended mobilities will be a key concept for the new programme.<sup>7</sup> Students will be able to participate in mobilities through the blended intensive programme. During these blended intensive programmes, groups of students or staff will undertake a short-term physical mobility abroad combined with a compulsory virtual component facilitating collaborative online learning exchange and teamwork.

**ESN and ESU believe that blended-intensive courses can be a positive addition to the internationalisation toolbox of Higher Education Institutions, and that they can have an important role in internationalisation strategies.** These courses should be used to include more global citizenship related topics in the curricula, making it more international and helping students to develop their competences as active citizens. However, we must not forget that the quality of online learning must be guaranteed at all times, and the learning outcomes of it must be comparable to those of physical learning.

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<sup>6</sup> Henderikx, P., Ubachs, G. (2019). [Innovative Models for Collaboration and Student Mobility in Europe: Results of EADTU's Task Force and Peer Learning Activity on Virtual Mobility](#). P. 14.

<sup>7</sup> European Commission (2020). [Erasmus Charter for Higher Education 2021-27 - Guidelines](#). P. 7.

On top of that, they can be especially interesting as a way to attract students to international student mobility in the first years of the degree, increasing their participation in long-term physical mobility later in their studies. However, they should not be seen as the only option for students who tend to participate less in mobility due to personal reasons, since it is important to develop proper strategies to incorporate those students to long-term mobility as well. Blended mobility should not be used to cover for lack of funding for mobility and should ensure that students participating in virtual learning activities are given equal opportunities for participation.

## The importance of physical mobility in the digital age

ESN and ESU believe that the opportunity to participate in a physical exchange should become a right of every European student. In physical mobility, the international learning experience is accompanied with an immersion in another university and city, contributing to personal development, language learning and intercultural competences, living in a different social and cultural context. This combination between an academic experience and an immersion makes physical mobility attractive for students and highly valued by teaching staff, although a minority of students are benefitting from it<sup>8</sup>. **Learning mobility can be defined as any activity where learners or educators physically go to another country for the purpose of learning, teaching, or research activities.** The purposes of mobility should be the improvement of education quality by increasing international outlook and circulating knowledge, as well as building intercultural understanding, independence, and transversal skills in students<sup>9</sup>. The most recent Erasmus Impact Study

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<sup>8</sup> Henderikx, P., Ubachs, G. (2019). P. 14.

<sup>9</sup> European Students' Union, (2019). P. 6.

confirms the positive influence of Erasmus+, enhancing students' quality of life and career prospects, as well as building a sense of European identity and social cohesion<sup>10</sup>. Students who go abroad reported developing a broad range of cognitive, and interpersonal skills to a significant degree including: intercultural skills, curiosity, flexibility and adaptability, confidence, self-awareness, interpersonal skills, communication, problem solving, language, tolerance for ambiguity, and course or major-related knowledge<sup>11</sup>.

The goal of most exchange programmes, including Erasmus since 1987 is to create an international academic experience that facilitates the immersion of people into another culture<sup>12</sup>. Physical mobility should remain the central priority and not be taken for granted, since the number of participants is still quite limited. The next programme cycle and cooperation cycle should thus be used to expand physical mobility opportunities, while providing new internationalisation opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought these topics to the forefront, shifting the discussion away from the most important part of the discussion around mobility: how to make sure that more students have access to it? **According to the latest, 2020 edition of Education and Training Monitor, only 13.5 percent of EU graduates have mobility experience<sup>13</sup>, but still, many barriers still exist at the national and institutional level, as identified by the SIEM research report<sup>14</sup>.** Students report that financial difficulties are the main reason that discourage them to go on mobility<sup>15</sup>, which means that the current framework of the mobility grants, at the European, national and institutional level, do not cover the living and study costs in the exchange country, let alone in the exchange city. Continuously improving that grant system should remain a central priority during this programme cycle.

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<sup>10</sup> European Commission (2019). [Erasmus+ Impact Study 2019](#). P. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. P. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Henderikx, P., Ubachs, G. (2019). P. 11-12.

<sup>13</sup> European Commission (2020). [Education & Training Monitor 2020. Chapter 2.7. Learning mobility](#).

<sup>14</sup> Allinson K., Gabriels W. (2021). [Maybe it will be different abroad: student and staff perspectives on diversity and inclusion in student exchanges. SIEM Research Report](#), siem-project.eu.

<sup>15</sup> European Students' Union (2020). [Bologna with Student Eyes 2020](#). P. 5.

# The impact of virtual and blended learning on mobility

Virtual forms of learning have become particularly important for the future of international cooperation and cross-border intercultural exchange. **Virtual learning can be a good internationalisation tool, and also a push factor for physical mobility.** This should be considered when designing virtual activities. Virtual learning is becoming more prominent in the field of internationalisation, and rightly so. **Instead of seeing it as an alternative or a substitute, more research and experimentation is needed on how to use it to create connections between students and encourage them to go abroad.** Furthermore, new competences such as digital communication skills, flexibility, teamwork and creativity are given an especially strong boost. The Stevens Initiative 2019 Report on 'Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning' highlights that participants showed positive change in their knowledge of the other country or culture from pre-program to post-program, a small positive change in learning more about unfamiliar places, languages, and cultures and in participants' retrospective assessment of their cross-cultural communication skills.<sup>16</sup>. In this particular report, Virtual exchange refers to the intention to include learners in a structured intercultural dialogue and give them the chance to participate in activities where they get to know each other prior to their mobility programme. It can also work as a tool to build alumni engagement after the physical mobility has ended. Virtual Exchange is an attractive option for higher education institutions if they are looking for sustainable models of international learning which will serve as preparation and reflection for physical mobility programmes, or as a complementary internationalisation tool. **The informal learning dimension of international mobility can only happen through real-life experiences and an immersion in a different culture and a different environment.** The

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<sup>16</sup> Stevens Initiative (2019). [Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report 2019](#). P. 10.

opportunity to live abroad, learn or improve the knowledge of a foreign language and meet new people were the top three reasons to participate in the Erasmus+ programme, as cited by the students both in 2014<sup>17</sup> and in 2019<sup>18</sup> (the years in which the biggest impact studies on the topic were made). Thus, it's crucial to safeguard and develop the quality and quantity of beneficiaries of long term physical mobilities and avoid using virtual and blended learning formats to make up for higher participation numbers.

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<sup>17</sup> European Commission (2014). [The Erasmus Impact Study: Effects of Mobility on the Skills and Employability of Students and the Internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions](#). P. 73-74.

<sup>18</sup> European Commission (2019). P. 5.

## Recommendations

As virtual exchanges and blended programmes become more prominent within Higher Education, ESU and ESN stress that it is fundamental to include the student perspective in their design, implementation and evaluation. ESN and ESU believe that there are important steps towards creating a unique higher education landscape where universities can make the most out of all formats in order to maximise their benefits without compromising the opportunities that they can provide.

ESU and ESN propose the following recommendations for the European Commission, National Authorities such as National Agencies and Ministries, and Higher Education Institutions:

1. **The European Commission, National Authorities and Higher Education institutions should continue to increase the level of support and ambition to quality physical mobility and its recognition.** The number of participants in long-term physical mobility remains too low, despite all the accredited benefits of mobility. The European Union and its Member States should set up more ambitious mobility targets with a special focus on inclusion, as well as the automatic recognition of the mobility-obtained competencies.
2. **Funding for virtual activities should not be taken from the budgets for student mobility to widen participation.** Instead, targeted grants should be offered to students from underrepresented groups. Erasmus+ grants should be adjusted to cover the study and living costs of the local area of destination. The national agencies are responsible for the implementation of this adjustment. **Grants should be topped with structural and institutional financing to ensure that no barriers are created at any point of the mobility period.**

3. **The mobility part of blended-intensive programmes within Erasmus+ should be as long as possible within the 30 days limit.** Literature suggests a mobility duration of 3 weeks necessary to achieve a breakthrough in terms of competence development<sup>19</sup>. In some cases, it could make sense to divide the mobility in two parts - for instance, 20 days at the beginning of the course and 10 at the end.
4. **Blended learning experiences should prioritise interaction and socialisation with peers in order to be meaningful and impactful.** These elements should be considered in terms of learning objectives. To make the online component more engaging, the initiative can build upon the lessons from the Erasmus+ virtual exchange initiative. These courses can offer a good opportunity to bring global citizenship education to the curricula in all kinds of degrees.
5. **The physical part of the blended learning experience should be properly planned in advance so students can take the most out of it.** The moment in which physical mobility takes place is important. The physical part can be a good time to focus on the creative components of the course, with students working together, brainstorming and interacting between themselves. Getting to know each other will help them to work better remotely and will lead to better learning outcomes. Student associations can play a role helping mobile blended learners, but they need support from institutions.
6. **Participants in blended programmes should receive specific support in aspects such as accommodation and initial integration in the host institution and local community.** Students who participate in physical mobility for a short time are likely to struggle finding accommodation and receiving all the needed information to take the most out of their mobility. We recommend measures such as reserving some accommodation solutions for participants in blended programmes and coordinating with student organisations to ensure a smooth initial integration. **Quality guidelines**

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<sup>19</sup> See various sources cited in Erdei, L. A., Káplár-Kodácsy, K. (2020). P. 39, 44.

should be developed to help Universities with the implementation of these mobilities. National Agencies can select successful projects that may inspire others.

7. In the new Erasmus+ programme, every mobility can be blended. The students need to go on mobility for at least 3 months to receive the normal Erasmus+ grant. The added flexibility can be positive, **but whenever possible, students should stay longer in their exchange destinations.** Besides the personal benefit, students who stay for longer periods of time are more likely to meaningfully engage with their hosting local communities and create personal and professional connections. Furthermore, the reports on the expenditures of the Erasmus funds need to specifically indicate who undertook a blended mobility, why they chose to turn to blended mobility instead of physical, and what impact it had on the overall funds for the mobility of staff and students. This in order to monitor who chooses to turn their physical mobility into a blended one (whether they come from disadvantaged groups who otherwise would have had insufficient resources to go on mobility), and in order to avoid that the funds for the latter determine a decrease in the funds for the former.
8. **Organisational grants for capacity-building activities** for institutions - which can be spent on building internal capacity of university staff and facilitators of blended learning initiatives to be able to offer students 'readymade' experiences. The virtual parts should have specific and intentional learning outcomes that are intentionally integrated into the design of the blended programmes.
9. **Virtual learning activities as a tool to improve the reintegration process** Post-mobility nostalgia and reintegration is a significant part of the mobility cycle and virtual exchanges can play a role in connecting students and support the transition in the home country by distance activities that promote inclusive intercultural learning and the development of soft skills.
10. **Framework on the recognition of qualifications to facilitate new approaches to validating and accrediting learning.** Virtual learning activities could be used in those cases where the online classes cover only a part of the ECTS earned during the



study period sub-unit or when they are chosen from different partner institutions. When the courses are provided by the same partner institution and cover the ECTS to be taken during the study period, then outbound mobility must be the preferred option.

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