

2 Mainstreaming virtual mobility – helping teachers to get onboard

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Abstract

Despite many innovative initiatives, virtual mobility is still a relatively unexploited aspect of internationalisation at European universities. An internal project at Linnaeus University, Global Classroom, aimed to create a framework and organisation to establish international networking and online collaboration as key elements of all degree programmes. The project aimed to promote the concept of virtual mobility and inspire faculty to adopt it in their degree programmes. A self-evaluation tool was developed for use in workshops, allowing faculty to highlight potential development areas. Each programme team could then implement an action plan in order to achieve these objectives, in consultation with the project team. The project also developed a toolbox for digital collaboration and worked with other institutions to offer an online collaborative course for teachers in the art of online collaboration. Another important issue was to create incentives for teachers to work with virtual mobility, including the use of digital badges. This paper describes these initiatives and discusses how virtual mobility can be mainstreamed, and what types of incentives are needed as a catalyst for development.

Keywords: mobility, internationalisation, collaboration, evaluation, project.

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How to cite this chapter: Creelman, A., & Löwe, C. (2019). Mainstreaming virtual mobility – helping teachers to get onboard. In A. Turula, M. Kurek & T. Lewis (Eds), *Telecollaboration and virtual exchange across disciplines: in service of social inclusion and global citizenship* (pp. 15-22). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2019.35.935>

1. Introduction

An internal project at Linnaeus university in Sweden, Global Classroom (2014-2017), aimed at creating a framework to make internationalisation an integrated part of all degree programmes through increased use of virtual mobility³. The concept of virtual mobility can be defined as

“a form of learning which consists of virtual components through an [information and communications technology] supported learning environment that includes cross-border collaboration with people from different backgrounds and cultures working and studying together, having, as its main purpose, the enhancement of intercultural understanding and the exchange of knowledge” (Bijnens et al., 2006, p. 26).

Related to but not synonymous with virtual mobility is the more familiar concept of internationalisation at home: “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight, 2004, p. 11). We saw virtual mobility as the digital expression of internationalisation at home and that the two concepts complemented one another as well as complementing traditional physical mobility. The main benefit is to offer both students and faculty the opportunity to work in an international environment, even if they were unable to take part in physical mobility programmes, in line with the concept of the internationalised curriculum (Beelen & Jones, 2015). The project aimed to:

- integrate internationalisation into everyday activities,
- disseminate good practice within the university,
- strengthen awareness of inclusion and cultural diversity,
- enhance collaboration with partner universities, and
- strengthen the university’s profile as a modern, international university.

3. <https://lnu.se/en/meet-linnaeus-university/collaborate-with-us/projects-and-networks/global-classroom/>

Awareness of virtual mobility was extremely low at the university when the project started, and we decided to work in three key areas: awakening **interest** in mobility using digital media, developing an **infrastructure** for virtual mobility, and developing **incentives** for staff involvement. In terms of awakening interest, we arranged regular workshops, presented the project at many departmental meetings, launched a website, and worked closely with faculty developing virtual mobility initiatives. Infrastructure development focussed on providing a toolkit for teachers with digital tools for collaborative learning, a self-assessment guide for internationalisation as well as offering guides on how to find suitable partner universities for collaboration activities. In terms of incentives, we introduced the concept of open badges as a method for rewarding students who got involved in mobility activities as well as a potential reward for teachers who organise or are involved in internationalisation activities.

2. Implementation

2.1. Internationalisation self-evaluation

The path towards virtual mobility is long and is best negotiated in small steps. It starts with informal and relatively ad hoc contacts and limited activities with teachers and students at other institutions, and can be developed up to the level of establishing online joint or double degrees with partner universities. The project wanted to encourage small-step development using a wide range of methods, platforms, and tools, and stressed that responsibility for the development lies with the teachers and their faculties.

A self-evaluation grid was developed in order to make teachers and in particular programme coordinators more aware of the level of internationalisation in their degree programmes. The grid consists of internationalisation criteria (both virtual mobility and physical mobility) on five levels from *initial* to *enhanced* and from four different perspectives: university, faculty, staff, student. In our workshops, the teachers noted all the criteria that were already met in their programmes and then identified the criteria they would like to meet within the next year or

two. They could then discuss with colleagues from other programmes about how they had met their criteria and learn from each other. Then the programme team drew up an action plan on how to meet the identified criteria within a reasonable deadline. The project team could then provide support for this process, but support could also come from other departments or with the help of, for example, educational technologists or internationalisation specialists.

2.2. Toolkit for digital collaboration

For many teachers, the challenge of introducing virtual mobility into their courses lies in the pedagogical use of digital platforms and tools. The university's learning management system is designed primarily for registered students, and is not the most flexible environment for online collaboration between students or teachers from different institutions. There is a bewildering range of net-based digital platforms and tools, mostly free or at a very low cost, and this diversity is a major barrier for teachers who find it impossible to choose the right tool for their course activities.

To assist teachers in this, the project developed an online toolkit: *tools for virtual mobility*. The main feature of this was a guide to online tools for collaboration, *smarter collaboration*, with a carefully selected range of tools categorised under functions such as collaborative writing, shared workspace, curation, news gathering, screencasting, networking, e-meetings, and mind-mapping. In addition, we provided guides to finding suitable partner universities for mobility activities, how to develop potential international projects, and a guide to various forms of open education.

2.3. Teacher development

Virtual mobility can also be extended to teacher development, even in internal training courses. A good example of providing an international perspective to internal staff development is the open online course Open Networked Learning (ONL) that Linnaeus University has helped to develop in partnership with two other Swedish universities, Karolinska Institutet and Lund University

(<https://opennetworkedlearning.wordpress.com>). The course was developed in 2014 and was largely based on an earlier model, *flexible, distance, and online learning* (Nerantzi & Gossman, 2015; Nerantzi & Uhlin, 2012), that has inspired several other spin-off courses. The course, aimed at teachers and educational technologists, offers the chance to investigate open online learning by working in small learning groups. The guiding principle of the course is learning by doing, and participants work in international online groups on collaborative problem-solving activities. In addition to the main partner universities, each course has several other partner institutions from Sweden, Finland, and South Africa. The participants from each institution receive internal recognition for completing the course, but benefit from working in mixed groups from different countries. The course is also available to a limited number of open learners, and has participants from all over the world, for example from Poland, Australia, Pakistan, and Sudan, thus raising the international profile of the course.

ONL gives first-hand experience of virtual mobility, using digital platforms and tools to solve problems in both synchronous online meetings as well as asynchronous spaces. One important factor in the success of the course is the attention given to creating a sense of community and mutual support from the very start, following the five step model of Salmon (2013). Once this community spirit is established, the problem-based learning groups work extremely tightly and the participants develop their professional networks. By letting teachers experiment with online collaboration in a course like this, we hope that they will then transfer these skills and apply them to their own courses, encouraging increased international networking and collaborative activities for their students.

2.4. Student virtual mobility

Although the project itself did not have the resources or time to directly work with student virtual mobility, there was support available to faculty who wished to do this. One example of testing virtual mobility for students was by integrating a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) into a regular campus course in the language department for students learning how to write academic papers in

German. Foreign language teaching in the Swedish university context must meet the challenges of providing a solid education against the background of declining student numbers and thus reduced financial resources and only a few lecturers. Integrating MOOCs is one way of saving resources in the classroom. It also makes it easy for students to broaden the circle of teachers by listening to lectures with other native speakers, thus practising their listening skills. In the course module ‘Academic writing’, regular lectures were replaced by online lectures, and working material from the MOOC ‘*Wissenschaftliches Denken, Arbeiten und Schreiben*’ from University of Applied Sciences, Münster, provided by the platform IVERSITY. The students worked with the MOOC material mainly at home. Seminars and the liberated lecture time was used to answer questions and for individually mentoring the writing process. The students responded positively to this method. A positive side effect was that students engaged more in taking responsibility for their learning results and worked in teams, discussing their thesis projects and peer-reviewing the work in progress. Cooperative learning activities tend “to result in higher achievement, greater long-term retention of what is learned, more frequent use of higher-level reasoning and meta-cognitive thought, more accurate and creative problem solving, more willingness to take on difficult tasks and persist in working toward goal accomplishment” (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2007, p. 19). In our case, this could be verified by the teacher as well as by the good student results. The satisfaction with the pilot led to a new edition the following year.

3. Discussion – from project to mainstream

The project ended in 2017 and the question immediately arose; how do we move from project to mainstream? At the time of writing (July 2018) there is no new official virtual mobility initiative at Linnaeus University, and this raises concerns about the sustainability of initiatives like this. The project succeeded in raising awareness of virtual mobility, and has helped many teachers to start planning virtual mobility activities into their courses. We have guides, toolboxes, and self-assessment available for teachers who want to get started, and we have a network of colleagues who can assist. However, what

is most needed is full top management support and the integration of virtual mobility into the university's internationalisation strategy. Furthermore there is still a degree of scepticism regarding online education among faculty and management and that, together with established traditional practice, creates considerable barriers to innovative practice.

The challenges of mainstreaming virtual mobility can be divided under three key factors: incentives, strategy, and culture.

3.1. Incentives

Teachers already have extremely busy schedules with more and more expected of them each year, often within shrinking budgets. The benefits of innovations like virtual mobility must be presented very clearly and reinforced by a range of incentives. These include recognition of initiative and innovative practice in the form of certificates (including badges), awards (internationalisation initiative of the year), career development, and financial incentives. If internationalisation is added as a mandatory element of annual appraisal interviews and competence development is available, this can support the process.

3.2. Strategy

The danger of bottoms-up grassroots projects is that they can only have limited effect if not met by top management commitment. To succeed with virtual mobility or any similar concept, it must be explicit in institutional strategy and clear overall responsibility must be assigned to a member of top management.

3.3. Culture

A culture of innovation must be clearly established where innovative practice is both encouraged and rewarded, something which is much easier said than done in today's increasingly result-oriented higher education. Teachers need time and support to be able to test new ideas such as virtual mobility. Universities need to promote teamwork as the dominant model for all course design, where

teachers work in close consultation with educational technologists, librarians, and internationalisation experts.

4. Conclusion

Virtual mobility offers a more inclusive approach to internationalisation for both students and faculty, allowing opportunities for professional networking and knowledge-sharing, collaborative projects, common courses and joint/double degrees. Projects like the one described in this article can raise awareness, stimulate development, and share experience, but the real key to mainstream adoption is the integration of the concept into top management policy and full support from faculty management. Making that connection with mainstream practice is the real challenge ahead for internationalisation in higher education.

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Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
Voillans, France, info@research-publishing.net

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Telecollaboration and virtual exchange across disciplines: in service of social inclusion and global citizenship
Edited by Anna Turula, Malgorzata Kurek, and Tim Lewis

Publication date: 2019/07/02

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Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover illustration by © Julien Eichinger - Adobe Stock.com
Cover design by © Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-42-9 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-43-6 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-41-2 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, UK: British Library.
Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: juillet 2019.
