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## **DISTANCE EDUCATION AS A FACTOR OF DEVELOPMENT OF VIRTUAL ACADEMIC MOBILITY**

### **Abstract**

Nowadays, academic mobility is the subject of the extensive scientific discussion. International mobility of students and lecturers today is already world standard. In recent decades, academic mobility both in Europe and in the world is recognized as one of the most effective tools for improving the quality of education. The modernization of the higher education in Latvia can be considered as an element of some global international project wherein the academic mobility arises as the priority of synchronization of higher education in Latvia, Europe and in the world.

### **Introduction**

Globalization processes in the world economy has led to the fact that in the educational world appears the tendency for internationalization. Today the process of internationalization of the higher education includes student and lecturer mobility, reform of programs of curriculum, cooperation in the scientific and research field, open and distance learning, regional and foreign cooperation of universities, the international division of labor and other types of activities. In the present period the single world educational space is expressed, first of all, in the development of the common educational standards, approaches, curricula, specialties across the world.

### **Mobility**

“Mobility is one of the primary objectives of policy of education and staff training of the European Union, stipulated in the articles 149 and 150 of an agreement. This is not only aid development of the European citizenship and European identity by increasing the understanding of the cultural and linguistic diversity, but also favor an idea of creating the European space of education and professional training in accordance with the strategic goal of the European Council in Lisbon in March 2000” (COM, 2005).

According to this principle, the European Union has been working for more than three decades in the cooperation of mobility of students within the frameworks of different programs, such as Erasmus, the level of the basic education and Erasmus-Mundus, at the level of postgraduate education. Both programs have a positive effect on the development of mobility for the personal development of individual, using different programs for education and aid development of cooperation between the universities of Europe.

The European universities have a successful experience in implementing programs of academic mobility, especially at the postgraduate education. But even at this level become apparent the issues that require special attention for the purpose of improving the management of the integration process between universities. For example, solution to a problem of difference in credit points, maximum satisfaction

achievement in needs of students in the process of mobility, as well as, solution to the problems of the language and cultural differences (Aguado & Álvarez, 2003).

The international mobility is increasing from year to year. By 2025 the total number of students in the world will increase from today's 97 million of people to 260 million of people. But the number of the foreign students will increase over this period up to 7 million (BFUG, 2009).

Only the direct economic effect from study of one foreign student (tuition fee and living expenses) for the host country is estimated within the range from 5 to 50 thousand dollars. According to the expert's estimates of UNESCO the provision of the educational services to the foreign citizens is becoming one of the most profitable types of export (NAFSA, 2012).

The main goal of mobility is to give the student an opportunity to get a versatile "European" education on the chosen direction of training, to provide him with the access in popularly accepted knowledge centers, where traditionally have formed the leading scientific schools, to expand knowledge of the student in all areas of the European culture, to instill him a sense of citizen of Europe. Prague communique of Education Ministers (2001) points out that mobility will allow its participants to take advantage of the wealth of the European Higher Education Area, including democratic values, diversity of cultures and languages, diversity of systems of higher education (Ministers Communiqué, Prague, 2001).

Held in 2008, a forum of experts of the European countries on problems of mobility, dealt with the analysis of situation and the development of recommendations on the extension of mobility of students and youth from the states, included in the European Union. The experts have concluded that the European Union confronts with the task to prepare a new generation of Europeans, ready for the new global challenges, who have a deep sense of European identity, openness and cooperation. As the long-term goal was offered to make an academic mobility in the EU as a rule, but not an exception, as it is today. As strategic goals: in 2015 the possibilities of the international mobility should use at least 30% of the representatives of the young generation, in 2020 – at least 50% (Report of Expert Forum on Mobility, 2008).

It will mean the extension of the existing programs of mobility, wherein at the moment involves up to the 300 thousand of people per year. In 2015 this figure should comprise 1.8 million of people, but in should grow to 2.9 million of people (Report of Higher Education, 2012). The physical international mobility in all the areas must be supplemented by the virtual mobility – getting in contacts with and the creation of networks between schools, institutions and groups.

Mobility in the field of education is an obligatory experience of European as "mobility has a positive impact on the quality of higher education and higher educational institutions as well as the society as a whole" (Report of Higher Education, 2012).

As for the types of academic mobility, it should be noted that the international academic mobility prevails over the mobility within the country. The development of academic mobility within Latvia related to the necessity of development by the universities the joint educational programs which has been currently hindered by the high level of the market competition of the educational services, as in Latvia by the beginning of 2013 were registered 61 higher educational institutions (IZM, 2013).

Mobility in Latvia is characterized primarily by the fact that the graduates of the previous levels enter another university to study in the full course of the program of the next level.

Despite the fact that the academic mobility of students and lecturers is becoming an important component of the educational and research activity of the Latvian universities, there are many obstacles for the development of the academic mobility. These include:

- 1) The lack of the government program of academic mobility;
- 2) Uncertainty of the development goals of mobility both at the level of the country as a whole and at the level of the individual university (the statute, development strategy, mission);
- 3) The lack of the sufficient financing, both the trips themselves and investments in the infrastructure, training and retraining of lecturers, advertising and information companies.

One of the main tools of development of academic mobility is the recognition of qualifications and education certificates. In this regard, there is a definite legislative framework which helps to confirm both at the national and international level the comparison of diplomas of various universities.

Academic mobility can be implemented in three main areas:

- The inter-city mobility which provides an opportunity for choosing different education courses at different universities within the frameworks of one city;
- The interstate mobility;
- The International mobility.

Currently, Latvia is taking practical steps to implement the effective academic mobility in all three directions. Guided by the experience of foreign countries, taking into the consideration the specificity of the Latvian education the joint education programs and projects are developing, having as its ultimate goal the training of highly qualified specialists in various fields.

### **Virtual academic mobility**

Currently, students use mobility as an opportunity for studies at another university or at another university in another country. Students can study there during the different periods of time (time, course or subject is expressed in the form of credit hours). Until now, this mobility is always understood as the physical. However, with the introduction and development of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the field of education for the equality of all citizens occurs a virtual mobility. Universities offer the different network models of the virtual higher education all over the world so that everyone can choose for himself/herself a suitable model because of being not able to join the program of physical mobility in family situation, professional or personal reasons. Pays special attention to the exchange and shared use of mobility programs, based on the already – existing cooperation of universities and provision of the virtual opportunities for the tools of necessity of mobility (recognition of the credit hours, quality assurance processes and etc.). Nevertheless, the virtual mobility and physical mobility are two different forms in one scheme of mobility, they are both designed as the different educational concepts and they both have their own future. However, none of them is less important than the other. Each of them has its own peculiarity. Besides that, they are

both in different ways supplement and strengthen each other. Nevertheless, the virtual mobility very often is the easiest and sometimes the only way to achieve the international mobility and it can be used as the tool for the promotion of the European higher education in the third countries.

In the given context, the distance learning is one of the key factors of development of virtual academic mobility both of students and lecturers. Virtual academic mobility has a number of advantages in comparison with the mobility (stay in the country of study). The main advantages: no need to change your usual lifestyle; minimal financial investments (registration and access to the Internet); gaining of the international learning experience (for lecturers, respectively – teaching, using different styles and methods, development of education courses in accordance with the requirements of the partner university and etc.); the availability of education at any stage of life that today is particularly topical within the framework of Lifelong learning program. The distance learning essentially modifies the learning process as the information technologies are presented in every area of the human life and therefore, it is necessary to become familiar with these technologies, gaining additional skills which considerably increase the general education and technical level of person.

If the student mobility is understood as a possibility to perform the part of your own education to some extent, during the term or academic year at another university of your country or abroad, it can be done virtually, getting the necessary material remotely, by the means of ICT.

This opportunity adds the value to the virtual mobility as it is characterized by the following criterion:

- *Individual accessibility*, regardless of the geographical location, financial status, personal circumstances and, etc;
- More *personalized educational offers*, depending on the possibilities of each particular individual;
- Increased *flexibility*, concerning an access to the training;
- Study, during which are used an *interactive* materials;
- Training in the virtual environment which is conducive to the development of skills *to work in a team*.

Logically, that the goal pursued by the virtual mobility the same as in the physical mobility – the development of knowledge sharing and intercultural understanding by the means of access to the programs and courses of other universities.

In order to choose an optimal model of getting education on the program of academic mobility, each student should consider all pros and cons of each model. Some universities also offer the mixed models of mobility. A student can physically attend lectures in his/her university and virtually attends courses or modules of foreign university and vice versa. The main condition is the existence of an agreement between two universities and technical capabilities.

In spite of the fact that the virtual mobility is more flexible and adaptable to all kinds of circumstances, it is possible to find out the advantages and disadvantages of this model. Some of these advantages are:

- The offer of mobility to students, which are not able to attend because of work, family reasons, reasons of disability and etc;

- Lack of the additional financial expanses, (for example, procurement of visas, insurances, residence permit and etc.);
- The absence of the time limits;
- Acquisition of educational, intercultural and technical skills that are in demand in the modern society;
- The possibility of using the virtual mobility for training, supplement or completing the full-time education at another university;
- Virtual mobility as a preparatory stage for the physical mobility;
- Virtual mobility to maintain the status of active student during the stay at the university of another country;
- The possibility of access to the education at any stage of life;
- Provides an access to a large number of students simultaneously in – demand course.

Virtual education has its disadvantages or limitations:

- Virtual mobility is not as popular as physical mobility and therefore, is not always admitted by employers and universities, using only traditional methods of education;
- The limitation of information about the possibilities of distance education;
- The incomplete knowledge of students of foreign language;
- A limited cross-cultural experience;
- The high rate of incomplete education that is connected to the lack of motivation among students and poor control on the part of university professors.

It is impossible to say which model is better than another one because each of them contributes significantly to the education of each student. Nevertheless, there are no doubts that the virtual mobility offer opportunities that are not available until now, to a large number of students. It also improves the adaptation to the public needs of the XXI century.

### **Distance learning and academic mobility of lecturers**

Virtual mobility of pedagogue of university on the one hand represents the set of qualities and abilities of pedagogue, but on the other hand acts as the means of development of pedagogue of university.

The analysis of processes of development of academic mobility of lecturers in Latvia shows that the use of distance educational technologies could be useful for solving the following problems:

- The problems of training of lecturers to the programs of mobility (the lecturer, who takes part in the programs of academic exchange, using the distance learning courses can offer at the first stage to the host university the experimental distance course, to test his/her skills and in advance get acquainted with the academic environment of the host university);
- The problems of “brain drain” during the European mobility of lecturers;
- The correspondence problems of education programs of the base and host university;

- The problems of comparability of educational processes of the base and host university;
- Organizational challenges of becoming of academic mobility in the universities of Latvia;
- The problems of creation of joint education program.

Higher educational institution, attracting remote lecturers will be able to solve the following objectives:

- To begin through the exchange programs, the implementation of its “expansion” in the regions of interest;
- To design and develop the joint education programs with the other universities;
- Optimally solve the problems of the lacking courses, disciplines, for its education programs;
- To attract the most qualified lecturers and researchers for the formation of education programs of high quality (Major – Specific Disciplines of the top scientists and abroad);
- To expand the range of educational services for their students and listeners, to expand the range of facultative and elective disciplines;
- To increase the flexibility and adaptability of the educational process of their university;
- To expand the range of programs of the supplementary education, including the lecturer’s professional development.

## Conclusion

Under the conditions of development of the united European educational space, the goal of which is the establishment of the partnership relations between the universities of Europe and the accumulation of the advanced experience of the partner countries, arises the question of increasing of mobility of students and professors of universities. To the question of development of physical form of academic mobility which means the time- constrained period of study, teaching or research in the another country is paid much attention, as opposed to the virtual form of mobility which means the opportunity to study, teach or be engaged in scientific research at another university by the means of the distance and telecommunications technologies.

Despite the fact that the modern ITC with their rapidly growing potential and rapidly decreasing costs open broad options for expansion of the virtual form of academic mobility, currently, the potential of distance education or e-learning is not used to the full extent. This is due to the number of problems and the main problem of willingness and abilities of the lecturer of university to the implementation of the virtual form of mobility that is associated with the low level of competences needed for its implementation. But the development of this complex of competences is hindered because there are the lack of developed for this purpose methods and forms of education in the process of skills improvement of lecturer.

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