

## Virtual Mobility in Higher Education. The UNED Campus Net Program

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### Abstract

We present the UNED Virtual Mobility Campus Net Program, implemented since 2012 in collaboration with European and Latin American universities. Program's objectives, participating institutions, procedures, and evaluation are exposed. Virtual mobility is understood as a meaningful strategy for intercultural learning by studying an undergraduate or postgraduate degree program at the local, national or international level, in relation to the student's own studies, utilizing virtual or distance methodology; virtual mobility is also the possibility of studying specific topics or a determinate number of credits or courses. The equality of opportunity is a priority objective for UNED. The diversity of students' personal situations necessitates formulas that, along with traditional in-person mobility (e.g., Erasmus Program), utilize virtual resources to guarantee for all the students the intercultural experience of living in an academic environment different than one's own. We hope that the UNED Campus Net Program is of interest to readers and that we can incorporate new partners into the project over the next few years.

The article deals with three main dimensions of the UNED Campus Net: objectives, implementation process and participants' evaluation. We aspire to discuss and improve this experience in cooperation with other institutions interested in implementing virtual mobility in higher education.

**Keywords:** blended learning; distance learning; higher education; international students; intercultural learning; virtual mobility

### Virtual Mobility. What and Why?

In the context of Higher Education, mobility can be defined as a meaningful strategy for intercultural learning by "the movement of educators, students, or administrators as well as that of training courses, programs and research across national and geographical barriers using the following formulas: in-person, distance, virtual or a combination of these." Virtual mobility is understood as the possibility of studying an undergraduate or postgraduate degree program at the local, national or international level, in relation to the student's own studies, utilizing virtual or distance methodology; virtual mobility is also the possibility of studying specific topics or a determinate number of credits or courses (European Students' Union, 2010; Weber & Hemming, 2012).

This vision of mobility places the focus of our actions on four basic dimensions:

- The physical or virtual relocation of students, professors, administration and services staff, and researchers to institutions in other countries.
- The availability of joint study programs.
- Joint and collaborative research.
- Institutional Alliances: project-based cooperation, coordination of institutional networks.

As regards UNED, ensuring the equality of opportunity is one of the university's stated objectives. UNED has made access to higher education feasible for people who otherwise would have been unable to access it, be that due to income, place of residence or any another personal situation. Many of UNED's students divide their time between work and university training. Its programs

become the second opportunity for many citizens who, at one stage and for a variety of reasons, did not gain admittance to conventional higher education.

Since the nineties, multimedia systems have been incorporated into the traditional modalities of radio and television, both in the development and distribution of materials. Digital systems and the Internet have made it such that, at present, the “distance” between UNED and its students has disappeared: every student has the entire university at his or her study table, only a “click” away on the computer’s keyboard. UNED’s current motto is “Wherever You Are.” This refers as much to a student’s geographical location as to his or her life and professional circumstances (Aguado, Malik, Monge, Pra & Díaz, 2010). Today, UNED is a major institution: with its more than 260,000 students, it is the largest university in Spain; it has an educational offering comprising 26 undergraduate degrees, 43 master’s degrees, more than 600 Continuing Education programs, the teaching of 12 languages, more than one hundred summer courses and nearly 400 University Extension activities.

In this context, UNED continues to make the equality of opportunity its *raison d’être* and remains committed to offering its students all the educational experiences characteristic of the university. These include, among others, the opportunity to undertake studies in other international universities, carrying out the mobility utilizing the blended learning model. Like any other university, UNED participates in the Erasmus Program and other in-person mobility programs. However, conscious of the diversity of students’ personal situations, we are committed to virtual mobility as an indispensable formula to guarantee for all students the international and intercultural experience of sharing and living in an academic environment different than one’s own and to do so in an international environment (Aguado & Monge, 2013). Our hope is that the European Commission Program, Erasmus for All/Erasmus + (2014–2020), includes virtual mobility amongst its offerings and takes into account the experience of programs such as the one herein presented (Monge & Donado, 2012).

This has been the principal motivation for devising and setting into motion the [UNED Campus Net](#) virtual mobility program herein presented. This document discusses the background of said program, the creation and setting into motion thereof and the proposals for improvement based on the undertaken evaluation.

## **Uned Campus Net: The Program in Action**

The program begins with the preparation by UNED of a first international virtual mobility project, which is submitted for funding to the Spanish Ministry of Education (Campus of International Excellence Program in 2010).

### **Objectives**

The UNED CAMPUS NET program aims to meet the teaching and learning needs of students within the institutions of the European Higher Education Area and the Ibero-American Knowledge Space (EIC) in terms of intercultural learning and international mobility, providing formulas that overcome the barriers of geography and time, and thereby expanding the possibilities to ensure the equality of opportunity for the students of all participating institutions.

More specifically, its objectives are to:

- Encourage debate and the exchange of experiences and knowledge on procedures aimed at improving virtual mobility between CAMPUS institutions.
- Establish a virtual mobility program at the level of undergraduate studies among said institutions.
- Consider the basis of a program of master’s and doctorate joint degrees and/or dual degrees.

The experience was initiated in 2011 from UNED's Office of the Vice President for Internationalization and Cooperation (Aguado, 2012), the body which, as has been pointed out previously, had been working for years on the formulation of a virtual mobility model (García-Aretio, Alvarez & Ruiz, 2008; Ruiz Corbella, Álvarez & Collado, 2011). In the last two academic years (2011–2013) about one hundred students have participated in the program.

### ***Participating Institutions and Coordination***

Although, as noted in the previous section, the invitation to participate in the project initially included more institutions, it was quickly considered more opportune, from the functional and organizational standpoint, to begin working with a group of four institutions in a pilot program. This would allow for the development of the basic tools to subsequently include other participating partners.

From here the pilot working-group formed by the following institutions was established:

1. National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM)
2. Fern Universität of Germany
3. Open Universiteit of the Netherlands
4. Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED)

Some criteria are common to all of them. First, they offer programs based on on-line education. Second, they must have sufficient capacity to incorporate undergraduate students through the modality of virtual mobility. Finally, they are able to enter into and develop an institutional commitment that responds to the needs of the program. The Campus is governed by agreements signed between the institutions. New universities can be added to the agreement after its signing and can be included in one or more academic networks. The institutions have an exchange policy based on reciprocity.

UNED is the institution through which networked action is carried out. The Campus is organized around two types of coordination: a) *Institutional Coordination*, each institution establishing and maintaining relations with other institutions in the network; b) *Academic Coordination*, serves as a liaison between the faculty, students and the central coordination of the program.

### ***Requirements for Students and Academic Offerings***

The only requirement is that students be enrolled at the university of origin during the current academic year. Here, we must stress that institutions are free to set their own eligibility criteria; however, these cannot go against the basic principles of the program. Students may enroll for a minimum of one course and a maximum of two, which can be taken in the same or in a different institution. In the last two Calls (UNED, 2012a; 2012b), the four institutions offered more than 60 subjects within the framework of the three academic networks of Education, Psychology and Law.

The teaching delivery language is the original of each institution, although course offerings in English are promoted at all the universities. The student will need to demonstrate a sufficient knowledge level of the language. In the first call for UNED CAMPUS NET, courses have been offered in four languages: Spanish, German, Dutch and English; the latter being the language in which UNED and Fern Universität offered several courses.

### ***Registration and Fees Policy***

Registration must be performed at both institutions, such that students manage the registration in the course that will be recognized at their home university, paying the fees if such case is applicable. At the same time, and through the institutional coordination of the course, registration is performed at the host institution. The program is governed by the principle of exemption from

payment of fees for students registered in the virtual mobility program. Students shall pay the fees corresponding to the courses for which they will register at their home university. Their registration at the host university will always be free of charge. This principle is essential to prevent inequalities created by the different pricing policies that exist between countries, which might distort the principle of equality of opportunities among students.

### **Recognition of Studies**

Virtual mobility within the framework of CAMPUS NET ensures recognition by the home institution of the credits undertaken at the other institution. Nevertheless, it must be noted that this recognition is done on an individual basis and in accordance with the criteria of each institution. That is to say, CAMPUS NET makes a series of recommendations, but institutions act in accordance with their own rules. As an example, we note that UNED draws inspiration from the physical mobility agreements of the ERASMUS program, instruments known by the different actors involved in the mobility process, and therefore, easy to assume.

### **Evaluation and Suggestions for Improvement**

The experience accumulated during these two years of implementing the program allows us to assess what has been achieved and to establish improvement proposals for the future. The evaluation is derived from: a) the views of the one hundred participating students and the twenty professors involved; b) the identification of problems arising from the management of the program itself.

### **What students have told us about their experience**

The students participating in the UNED calls for virtual mobility for the 2012/2013 academic year have sent us their feedback about their experience by answering a questionnaire including these six questions: who they are, why they chose to participate, how they describe the experience itself, what they have learned, what were the difficulties and what are the benefits they consider to have been obtained (Del Olmo, Valero, Sarabia & Díaz, 2012).

The reasons that have led students to take an interest in the virtual mobility program are mainly curiosity and an interest in learning about other ways of addressing certain issues and subjects as well as other ways of teaching the subject matter. There is also an interest in interacting with professors and students from another country or continent that speaks a different language and has another view of the issues being studied. At the same time, interest in a particular course is decisive, either because it is not present in the curricula of one's own country or because it provides an original, different and interesting approach.

*"For as long as I can remember, I've wanted to study abroad either in Germany or Switzerland. Due to personal circumstances however this seemed almost impossible. The fact that I got married and had children only seemed to distance me more from my dream. However, I was happy that it was possible for me to study Dutch law through the Open Universiteit. During the last summer I heard that the Open Universiteit would collaborate with the Fernuni and UNED to provide an exchange program for students: Campus Net.*

*Campus Net, you've given me a possibility to study at the German Fernuniversität Hagen in Germany, without being away from my family for over six months. Instead of logging in to Heerlen (NL) where the OU is based, I login to Hagen from my own home. Since all the material and the contacts with the FernUni are in German it really feels like an exchange semester even though I can still speak Dutch in my daily routine"*

(a student of OU, the Netherlands at the German Fern Uni)

*“...what about exchanging such knowledge and experiences with personnel on the other side of the pond? That is the first thing I asked myself when, to my surprise, I was awarded the SCHOLARSHIP... Initially you are lost. The computing platform that greeted me was completely different from my well-worn ALF... Would I be able to navigate within this new environment? What would the course be like? How would the activities be carried out?... My ability to adapt to a new situation was put to the test.”*

(a UNED student at UNAM Mexico)

The doubts at the beginning had to do with this question: Will I be able to navigate in this computing environment that is new for me? One soon realizes that the virtual environment is quickly learned and becomes familiar. One grows aware that the novelty is that of approaches, ways of relating, readings and language.

They all emphasized the different teaching methodology encountered vis-à-vis that which they knew. In some cases, due to the focus on the selection and analysis of articles and texts (UNAM); in others, due to the more active use of virtual media (UNED); and also due to the special attention given to student reception and accompaniment (Fern Uni).

*“Professors wanted me to be successful in my studies... professors are there for me.”*

(a student of OU, the Netherlands at the Fern Uni)

Among the learning mentioned is that of adopting other viewpoints and seeing experiences, laws, proposals and specific issues in a different light; and understanding another's point of view, heeding the codes from which the ideas, laws and facts derive meaning. That is the most significant learning, which always involves recognizing the differences in language, prior knowledge, schedules and expectations as stimuli to enable us to live and navigate in an international environment.

*“As far as my professional point of view is concerned, I think this exchange semester is a valuable addition to my studies. I will have some basic knowledge of legal German and the German law and I know where I have to go to get answers to my questions, find out more about certain topics or where to find the required jurisdiction. This knowledge and these skills are definitely an addition to my resume and my value for the job market in the future. After all, Germany is the number one business partner of the Netherlands. Speaking the language, knowing German and basic legal German law gives me a tremendous advantage when I am ready to take the legal field by storm”*

(a law student from OU, the Netherlands at the Fern Uni of Germany)

*“The training I acquired has facilitated the preparation of a practical paper on the preliminary study of a Mexican law (the Waste Act) in legal-economic key, which will allow me to expand, at a professional level, other projects in the areas of cooperation and bilateral relations”*

(UNED law student at UNAM, Mexico)

### **What we, the professors, have learned**

We are confident, from our own experiences as educators and from the impressions that we have received from our colleagues, that many of the comments listed in the student survey would be seconded by the professors. Yet, there are aspects greatly enriching our own experience that are not confined to the privilege of having students from different native languages and countries; it is the manner in which our curricula, programs and the contents themselves are put to the test in such diverse contexts. Those concepts, processes, and perspectives that we believe to be essential are tested and proven to be less universal or transcendental than we thought; other aspects take on an essential relevance and students' own contributions introduce dimensions that we could not have imagined.

Collaboration with teachers and administrators of other institutions also opens areas of collaboration, both to expand and combine educational offerings, which are geared towards the creation of joint degrees, as well as to develop international research programs. In this environment it is easier to think up and carry out novel proposals and, in fact, the very collaboration channels used by students are suitable for designing virtual collaborative research methodologies.

Finally, and without an eye to being exhaustive, there is an element of great value: it helps us to break down the barriers and mistrust with regard to the world outside the University and to collaborate in a more fluid manner with the societies of which we are part.

### ***Difficulties in the management of the program and suggestions for improvement***

As with any new initiative, UNED Campus Net presents many challenges for the institutions participating in the program. Attempting to integrate a new concept such as virtual mobility involves changes in the routines of the organizations, more so if these changes give rise to relations with institutions in other countries or in other languages. Needless to say, the first challenge is that involving high-level institutional commitment, without which the implementation of the program would not be possible. In this case, activation of these commitments was carried out from the departments related to internationalization. Once past this first step, the most important challenges can be divided into two main types:

- a) First, the challenges concerning the academic administration of the program:
  - It is essential to have the direct involvement of those individuals in the Faculties who are in charge and that these individuals undertake the work of accompanying and monitoring the virtual mobility students, which may require more attention.
  - Likewise, monitoring by the course teaching staff is crucial, particularly in the early stages of the course, as students must quickly become accustomed to: a different teaching system, an educational platform with other resources and an interaction with new pedagogical and cultural elements. For this reason, this second 2013–2014 Call is designed by UNED to include the mentor figure as support for virtual mobility students.
  - Another fundamental challenge of the program is the assessment policy of each institution and the flexibility of said institutions and their teaching staff to adapt to this model in which the student is sometimes unable to travel.
  - Finally, the recognition of the studies undertaken presents certain difficulties, especially in cases in which the studies are carried out in universities outside the European Higher Education Area and that do not follow the ECTS credit transfer system. This simply requires a more detailed analysis of the course programs and their workload hours.
- b) Secondly, difficulties of a technical-administrative nature:
  - Harmonization of the calendars of the different universities participating in the program, especially when it comes to registration and the carrying out of assessment testing.
  - Development of minimum common program management procedures among all the partners. Although CAMPUS NET has advanced greatly in this regard, the interaction between all the consortium partners should be further improved by means of common documents and simple exchange and communication formulas.

### **Final Reflections**

One of the most striking paradoxes that arise when comparing conventional or in-person mobility with its virtual counterpart is the manner in which students enrich their experience. In in-person mobility, it is the journey, the change of place which provides them with a richer learning experience,

while in virtual mobility what travels is the knowledge (Weber & Hemming, 2012). Through the students, this knowledge is put to the test in very different social and cultural contexts. That which is taken for a given in one place is not in another; and the students are fully aware of this.

The learning community generated by virtual mobility fosters knowledge that is more collaborative and nuanced than that which comes directly from a professor and master classes. Students access differently designed platforms as well as programs and materials which were not offered to them by their home universities. The form of being a student and professor is different in each institution and/or field; what is expected of us is different from what we usually do. It needs to be understood and explained to us, which helps us to implement new or lesser-used capabilities.

However, more important in our view, is that virtual mobility links communities of students, as well professors themselves, in learning processes on an international scale, processes that are open to the world and to very different historical, social, political and economic contexts. By definition, this type of learning tears down institutional barriers, contributing inalienably to the “WHEREVER YOU ARE” of UNED as a university for all.

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