VIRTUAL MOBILITY IN INTERNATIONAL WORK PLACEMENTS

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Context and definitions

Virtual mobility can be an alternative or an addition to physical mobility when it comes to realizing the goals of internationalizing European higher education. Virtual mobility is a term that has a broad scope. At AVNet, an educational support unit of the K.U.Leuven (BE), we define the concept of virtual mobility as „a set of ICT-supported activities that realise or facilitate international, collaborative experiences in a context of teaching and /or learning". There are different levels at which virtual mobility can be implemented in higher education: the level of the assignment, the course, the curriculum, etc. In this paper we will focus on the enhancement of international work placements through the use of new technologies.

Work placements are an important way of exposing college students to complex work problems that require analytical, technical and soft skills. They play an essential role in helping graduates obtain the competencies and skills that are necessary in a dynamic knowledge economy[1]. In a context of increasing global economic connectivity and interdependence, gaining practical work experience in an international environment is also becoming more and more important. However, traditional international work placements, where the learner travels to the company abroad, require a high degree of flexibility and there are regularly financial, geographical, social and other barriers to such physical mobility.

For those physical placements abroad that do happen, there are also a number of difficulties to overcome, e.g. students receive insufficient and discontinuous feedback from their home institution, communication between the enterprise and the higher education institution is often lacking, feedback about a placement at an enterprise to the higher education institution and vice-versa is barely formalised, etc.

In this paper we will present the preliminary results of the EU-VIP project[2]. EU-VIP stands for Enterprise-University Virtual Placements. In answer to the issues raised above, this project looks into the possibilities virtual mobility can offer in the area of international work placements.

The integration of virtual mobility activities in international work placements can vary on a scale from very limited to a fully virtual work placement, in which the trainee never has physical contact with company staff.

The EU-VIP project

EU-VIP is funded by the European Commission within the Lifelong Learning Programme. The project brings together 16 partners from 8 different countries. To ensure the success of the project all stakeholder groups are represented: the consortium is composed of higher education institutions and European not-for profit associations of universities, businesses and students:

Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (BE), coordinator
University of Bologna (IT)
Aalto University (FI)
West Pomerian Business School (PL)
FernUniversität Hagen (DE)
Laurea University of Applied Sciences (FI)
EAL, TietgenSkolen (DK)
Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven (BE)

University of Padova (IT)
University of Groningen (NL)
EADTU (NL)
Coimbra Group (BE)
EuroPACE ivzw (BE)
EFMD (BE)
BEST (FR)
University of Turku (FI)

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[1] Bastedo (2009)
[2] For the latest information on the project: www.euvip.eu

The main aim of EUVIP is to develop online and printed guidelines on how international work placements can be supported and/or facilitated through virtual mobility. The project runs from October 2009 until September 2011.

The project partnership started by putting together a framework[3] for organizing virtual(ly supported) work placements. This general framework was used to design and implement 18 pilot projects[4]. These pilots all vary on the scale from a very limited to a very far reaching integration of Virtual Mobility activities. Before executing the pilots, all participants (students, teaching staff, administrative staff, company mentors...) receive local training adapted to their specific needs. After pilot execution, all participants contribute to the evaluation of the pilot, via surveys and/or interviews. The feedback from the pilot participants is used to further expand and fine-tune the guidelines. The added value of this approach is the fact that the guidelines will be linked to concrete experiences of all stakeholder groups and focus on answering their real needs.

The integration of Virtual Mobility activities in the different phases of a work placement[5]

Looked at from a time perspective, we can distinguish 3 different phases in a work placement: before, during and after the placement. The preparatory phase in which the conditions for organizing virtual(ly) supported placements are created (e.g. accreditation issues, curriculum development, installing technologies and developing services), is not dealt with in this paper. In each of the addressed phases one or more different actors (students, higher education staff and/or business representatives) are involved and virtual mobility activities can help to enable an optimal interaction between the different stakeholders. Every phase has its own attention points and issues. Below we will give a short description of the different phases and illustrate the integration of Virtual Mobility activities with concrete examples from the EUVIP pilot projects and other good practices.

Before the work placement

In this phase preparations need to be made to ensure a successful placement. This means in first instance the design of the concrete placement in line with solid pedagogical foundations. The EUVIP partnership supports the ideas underpinning work-based learning. Concretely this means that a successful work placement should enable: learning through experience and reflection, learning in an authentic context and learning as a social process.
Figure 1 is a visual representation of the main issues and tasks at hand for the different stakeholders in this phase.
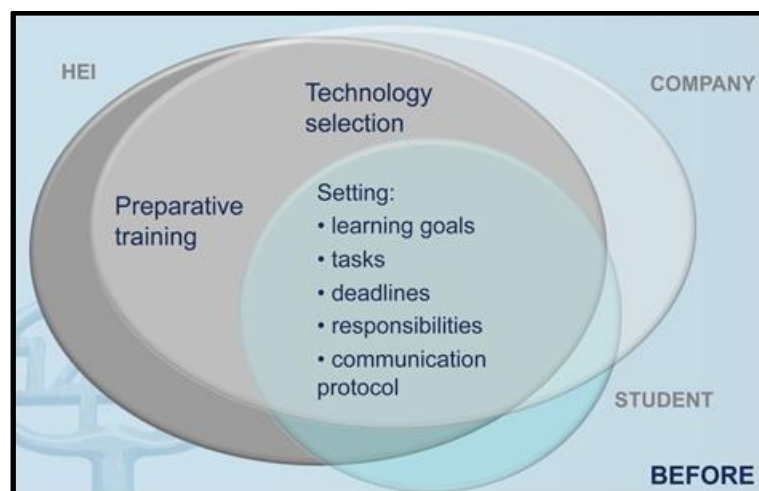

Figure 1 – a visual representation of the phase proceeding the work placement

In this phase it is essential to plan the placement thoroughly in all its aspects. Ideally all of these agreements, responsibilities and procedures are in the end part of a written agreement between all actors.

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[3] Schräder, C. en Rintalla, U. (2010)
[4] Overview of the EUVIP pilot projects via: www.euvip.eu/results
[5] Based on: Schräder, C. en Rintalla, U. (2010)

Examples of Virtual Mobility Activities in the before phase

- In the pilot project organized by the University of Turku (FI) an offer for an international placement was made by TURKU-Southwest Finland European Office located in Brussels (BE). To select the right student (in political sciences) for the job the organization organized skype interviews with the candidates. After the student selection, skype was also used to make the first arrangements regarding the placement. This same method of student selection via skype was also used in the pilot project of K.U.Leuven (BE) where a student in Cultural Studies is performing a fully virtual placement for CID (International Dance Council of UNESCO, FR).
- The University of Padua (IT) uses video CV's in which students can present themselves to foreign companies. The video CV has proven to be an effective way for students to introduce themselves to companies abroad, with a focus on demonstrating their communicative and linguistic skills. The video CV's are offered via an online platform which also provides a chat function through which remote interviews between the students and the interested companies take place.
- As stated above, a thorough planning of the work placement in the before phase is of great importance to the future success of the placement. To make this joint planning between all stakeholders possible in a cross-border context, the University of Padua (IT) used video conferencing technology in their pilot. This technology proved to be very effective because of its close resemblance to a face-to-face meeting.
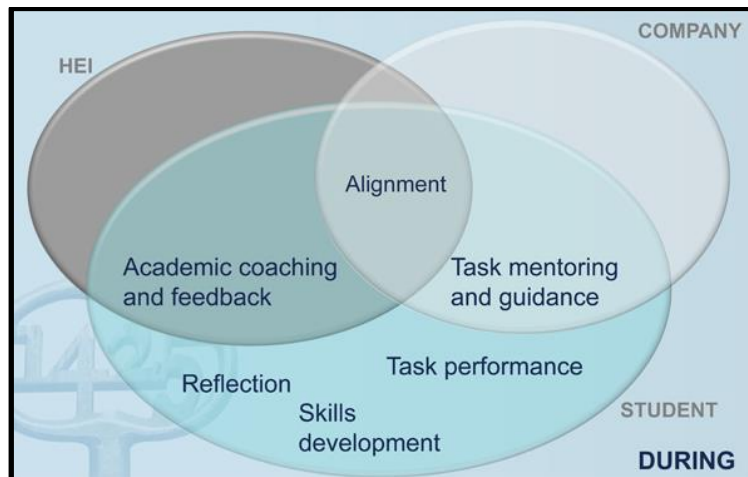
During the work placement

Figure 2 – a visual representation of the activities during the work placement

During the placement the focus will of course be on the development of knowledge and skills through practical and authentic tasks. Next to discipline specific competencies the student will ideally also have the opportunity to work on generic skills like international, teamwork, social and communication skills. To stimulate this learning process coaching and feedback from academic and company mentor are essential. All coaching activities also have to be in line with each other.

Examples of Virtual Mobility Activities in the during phase

- In a number of pilot projects[6] the work placement took place at a distance, with the student staying at home (for different reasons, e.g. the family situation) while performing authentic tasks for a company abroad. To ensure a good communication and collaboration with the company staff, detailed agreements ('communication protocols') where put into place. Technologies as Skype, Adobe Connect and Video Conferencing (enabling face-to-face communication) resulted in a more personal contact and a feeling of mutual responsibility between the actors involved.

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[6] Pilots of the University of Turku (FI), KHLeuven (BE), K.U.Leuven (BE), Laurea University (FI), WPBS (PL), TietgenSkolen (DK), University of Padua (IT)

- As stated above: reflection and self-assessment are essential to the learning process of a student during a placement. Technology solutions prove to be very effective in stimulating and facilitating this – even when the student is undertaking a placement abroad. The project from Aalto University (FI) will therefore look at the integration of e-portfolio technologies through which the student and his academic mentor can keep track of and reflect upon the progress regarding the student's skills development. The pilots from K.U.Leuven (BE) focus on the use of (video) blogging to stimulate student reflection and to improve student follow-up by the academic responsible. In the University of Groningen (NL) the choice was made to use Skype on a regular basis to improve intermediary communication with the academic mentor.
- The KHLeuven (BE) organized a pilot in which students in business studies, undertaking a work placement abroad, participated in a weekly seminar at their home institution through video conferencing. These seminars took place together with their peers at home and were aimed at exchanging experiences regarding local and international work placements. This way the students at home had the opportunity to share the international experience. The students abroad were able to reflect better on the differences in business culture. Next to this the students also used an e-portfolio and an online self-assessment tool to monitor their own learning process.
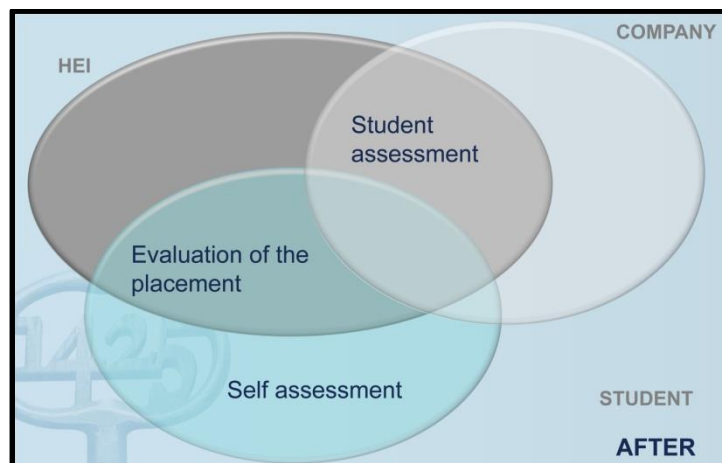
After the work placement

Figure 3 – a visual representation of the activities after the work placement

In this phase evaluation is the central theme. Firstly there is the evaluation of the student according to the formulated criteria. Ideally the end evaluation or accreditation will be based on a joint decision of the company and the academic mentor; although the academic mentor will normally hold the end responsibility. Mostly, the student will also be asked to write a final report on the work placement, including a reflective self-assessment. The cooperation between higher education institution and the company/organisation should also be assessed. Strong points and future opportunities need to be identified. Problems or difficulties should be examined so they can be avoided in the future. If the cooperation was really problematic, the possibility to find other hosting companies needs to be looked at.

Examples of Virtual Mobility Activities in the during phase

- FernUni in Hagen (DE) developed a moodle platform to support students undertaking a work placement in all phases. During the placement the students keep track of their progress through the e-portfolio function. They also have the opportunity to communicate with peers through the discussion forum. This results in a detailed log of the work placement, accessible to all actors during and after the placement. The student uses this log to perform a self-assessment and the mentors can take it into account when deciding on the end evaluation and accreditation of the placement.
- The University of Groningen (NL) uses a comparable platform in blackboard. The aim of this platform is also to support students throughout their placement abroad. After their placements students also have the opportunity to report on their experiences with a certain employer. This feedback is available via the platform for all future trainees.

- In the fully virtual placement organized by the K.U.Leuven (BE) the blog the student use to report on his progress, will be used to replace the 'normal' (in case of a real placement) paper report. The end evaluation will be based on this report in combination with a Skype meeting between academic and company mentor.

Critical Success Factors

Student characteristics

Different pilots indicate that students undertaking a work placement at-a-distance through virtual mobility activities need to have good meta-cognitive skills, i.e. they need to be able to take control of and plan their own learning process.

Next to this, intrinsic student motivation to bring the placement to a successful end has been identified as an essential condition for success. Of course this initial motivation needs to be stimulated and fed throughout the placement. The pilots have shown that motivation can be influenced positively by clear agreements, by making sure the technology is an aid and not a barrier and by integrating human presence in the experience (see below). Coaching and feedback are also important ways to enhance student motivation.

Student motivation is also likely to increase if the tasks are authentic and in line with the student's competencies. This authentic task should of real value to the company/organization. In terms of difficulty, a good task is feasible and challenging at the same time.

The before phase

The importance of the before phase cannot be emphasized enough. Virtual(ly supported) work placements need to be designed and planned carefully in all their aspects: communication, goals, roles, tasks or responsibilities, feedback procedures etc. Even though this aspect is without any doubt also very important in case of "traditional" work placements, the pilot projects show that this need is even stronger when virtual mobility activities are involved.

Communication protocol

In the before phase it is advised to draw up a communication protocol, certainly when communication will solely or mostly be taking place virtually. Such a protocol can state when the different actors are available for synchronous communication, how much time can pass before an email needs to be answered, which technologies will be used for which ends, when reporting is required, how the coaching process will be organized etc. In the light of building a personal relationship between the student and his/her 'virtual' co-workers, it is also advisable to define space for not-task-related communication.

The human factor

Research has shown that face-to-face contact at some point or on some level is beneficial to the success of the activities, because it builds a mutual feeling of trust and responsibility. The results of the pilot projects confirm the importance of the human factor. When it is not possible to meet face-to-face, the choice of technology seems to have an impact on the degree of involvement. A tool like video conferencing creates a much more personal interaction than for instance an asynchronous tool like email. As stated above (see 'communication protocol) it is advisable to consciously create space for 'virtual' social talk.

Organizational socialization

The overall design of the placement plays an important role in realizing "organizational socialization", i.e. exposing the student to an organization's social and cultural aspects and making him/her feel part of the organization / company. Organizational socialization is what makes the difference between conducting an isolated student project and undertaking a work placement. Concrete strategies for stimulating this in a virtual setting are for instance: creating an online environment through which the trainee is informed of the

responsibilities of all his/her co-workers and through which he/she can contact them; letting the trainee participate in staff meetings via video conferencing; making sure the virtual intern is clearly introduced to all the co-workers in the same way as a 'physical' one.

The authenticity of the task and its real value for the employer are also determining factors in making the student feel part of the organization / company.

As stated above, work placements should enable learning as a social process (in interaction with others). In this light a choice for technologies that are aimed at facilitating collaboration processes is advised.

Intercultural skills development

International work placements are organized as a way of internationalizing curricula. The main aim of internationalization in higher education is to make sure the future work force develops the necessary intercultural competencies to function in a globalized economy. They need to be able to tolerate diversity and to embrace differences without feeling threatened in their own cultural identity.

It goes without saying that the intercultural experience through physical mobility differs from this experience through virtual mobility. The pilot projects show nevertheless that the development of intercultural competencies through virtual mobility is possible. Conditions for success are here:

- The academic mentor explicates from the beginning (before phase) what 'intercultural competencies' are and lets students reflect on the development of these competencies on a regular base. Peer feedback can also be very helpful to stimulate this reflection process.
- The focus needs to be more on written communication, differences in business culture and negotiation styles.
- Students preferably have previous experiences with virtual communication.

Technology support

The goal of technology use to support or organize work placements, is to enhance the quality and possibilities. The pilot projects however indicate that tools can easily turn into a barrier when the participants lack in e-literacy or when the technology is not user-friendly and reliable. The availability of technology support before and during the placement therefore seems to be a critical success factor.

To conclude

The framework, pilot projects and conclusions presented in this paper will be discussed elaborately in the guidelines on integrating virtual mobility in work placements. The EU-VIP partners will present these definite guidelines by fall 2011.

References

1. Bastedo, M; et al. (2009). *Educational Policies for Integrating College Competencies and Workforce Needs* In Institute for Higher Education Policy (p. 21)

2. Schräder, C.; Rintalla, U. (2010). *Scenarios for virtual and virtually supported placements* Available via: www.euvip.eu/results

3. Overview of the EUVIP pilot projects via: www.euvip.eu/results