

The EU-VIP project: Virtual Mobility to Enhance International Work Placements

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Abstract

Work placements can play an important role in the knowledge transfer between higher education institutions and the business community. In a global economy it is also becoming more and more important to introduce students to an international working environment during their education. When students go physically abroad for a work placement, preparation, coaching and follow-up of students is not always optimal. Furthermore, there are also students who, for financial, geographical or social reasons, do not have the possibility to go abroad. The EU-VIP project wants to offer solutions to these problems by enhancing international work placements with virtual mobility through the use of new technologies.

Key words: virtual mobility, work placement, internationalisation, educational technologies

1 Introduction

Internationalisation has become one of the key issues in present day European Higher Education. The European Commission aims to enhance physical student mobility via the Erasmus exchange programme substantially by 2012. For a large number of students though it is not possible to go abroad for social, financial or other reasons. On the other hand, the growing success of Erasmus and other exchange programmes has revealed a new need for students to get more and better guidance and support. Virtual Mobility can offer solutions in both cases.

Virtual Mobility is a term that has a broad scope. The EU-VIP project focuses on one type of Virtual Mobility: the enhancement of international work placements through the use of new technologies. The end goal of the project is to develop guidelines for:

- virtual mobility activities to support international placements (or „blended“ placements),
- fully virtual placements.

2 About the project

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

The project runs from October 2009 until September 2011. The guidelines for integrating virtual mobility in work placements are developed through a process of testing and implementing scenarios in 18 pilot projects. These pilot projects are evaluated by the pilot

participants. The feedback from these stakeholders is used to improve and optimize the developed scenarios.

3 General framework for virtual and blended placements

In first instance the EU-VIP partners developed a general framework that will be tested and fine-tuned through the pilot project. This framework identifies: the pedagogical foundations to start from when designing a virtual or blended placement; the different actors involved in a work placement and the four phases of a work placement.

3.1 Pedagogical foundations

The pedagogical basis is found in the ideas underpinning work-based learning. The most important among these ideas are:

- *Learning through experience and reflection*
This view on learning stresses the importance of direct learning. It includes both theoretical and practical elements in the learning process.
- *Learning in an authentic context*
This approach emphasizes the importance of informal learning to develop skills and expertise in an authentic context.
- *Learning as a social process*
This view has its basis in a socio-constructivist approach where learners build upon their previous experiences in interaction with peers and tutors to construct new knowledge and skills.

Work placements need to be designed according to these views on what the learning process should entail in order to be successful. When organising virtual or blended placements the technology needs to be chosen and used in such way that the necessary learning processes are stimulated.

3.2 The different actors

- Within the higher education institution:
 - supportive administrative staff
 - the academic mentor
- mentor within the company / organisation
- the student

3.3 The four phases in an internship

The preparatory phase

In this phase the conditions for organizing a successful virtual or blended work placement are created. Issues and attention points:

- developing necessary organisational procedures,
- making sure technology is in place,
- integration of the placement in the curriculum,
- networking between businesses/organisations and higher education institutions,
- promotion of and information about the possibilities,
- development of quality procedures to ensure the educational possibilities of the placement,
- etc.

Before the work placement

In this phase the student has been assigned to a company or organisation and preparations need to be made to ensure a successful placement. This means in first instance the design of the concrete placement in line with the pedagogical foundations (see 3.1). Issues that need to be considered here are:

Setting clear learning goals and clarifying expectations of all actors,

- Making an agreement about the tasks at hand and deadlines to be respected,
- Defining the roles and responsibilities of the various actors during the work placement.
- Formulating a communication and feedback protocol,
- Selection of evaluation criteria and defining evaluation process,
- Preparative training sessions and material for participants,
- Selection of supportive technology
- etc.

Ideally most of these agreements, responsibilities and procedures will be part of a written agreement between all actors.

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. To stimulate this learning process coaching and feedback from academic and company mentor are essential. Crucial to the learning process during a placement is also self-assessment and reflection by the student. Educational technologies can ensure a close contact between mentors and student and can help stimulating reflection.

After the work placement

In this phase evaluation is the central theme:

- evaluation of the student according to the formulated criteria,
- assessing the cooperation between higher education institution and the company/organisation.

4 Preliminary conclusions and reflections after the first pilots

The EU-VIP partners will conduct in total 18 pilot projects. Most of these pilots will start in the months October and November 2010. Mainly for organisational reasons, four pilots have been conducted already. Based on the outcomes of these pilots the following preliminary conclusions can be made:

- The pilot projects confirm the need for a careful design and planning of the virtual and blended work placement.
- 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.
- A task needs to be clear and doable within the given time. In case of work placements the tasks assigned to students are authentic, student motivation is likely to increase if this authentic task is of real value to the company/organisation. In terms of difficulty, a good task is feasible and challenging at the same time.
- The results of the first 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.
- Student motivation is as an essential condition for success. In this light, it is important that students have a chance to acquire the necessary knowledge and generic skills before starting the work placement. Here a thought-through integration of the work placement in the curriculum and provision of additional preparative training are of paramount importance.

- Especially in a fully virtual environment the student needs to have the required meta-cognitive skills, i.e. he/she needs to be able to take control of his/her own learning process.
- The framework states that coaching and feedback are also important ways to enhance student motivation. The results of the pilots emphasise this thesis. The pilots also show that strong involvement of all parties (academic and company mentor) is advisable.
- In some pilots students did feel they were exposed to the organisation's social and cultural aspects, in other pilots this was not so much the case. Based on our earlier conclusions we can suggest that the choice of technology and the overall design of the placement play an important role in realising this "organisational socialisation".

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