Virtual Mobility: the value of inter-cultural exchange

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Virtual Mobility makes European and worldwide available to those who are not able to benefit from existing, physical, international exchange programmes, and therefore benefits a wider community. In this paper, we reformulate the concept of Virtual Mobility and introduce the Movinter Modelling Framework, which supports HEIs in designing and implementing an integrated use of Virtual Mobility to enhance the internationalisation of study experiences.

The paper closes with recommendations on how to extract the potential of Virtual Mobility in the next decade. We must continue to question why Virtual Mobility is important, and pay attention to the unexploited potential of this idea, in order to: (1) democratise access to an international, transdisciplinary and multicultural study experience, now available only to a relatively small minority of students, thereby contributing to social cohesion; (2) produce stable collaboration among teaching and research teams, and their institutions, building on recognised complementarities and specialisations through networking activities; (3) make the practice of joint titles, at various academic levels (undergraduate, master and doctoral programs) and with diverse modalities (master classes, single subjects, seminars and workshops) a reality, even before a full institutional recognition of academic titles from other countries are in place; and (4) link European universities/HEIs to each other and to universities/HEIs in other parts of the world.

1. Introduction

According to the "Trends in Global Higher Education: Tracking an Academic Revolution" report – prepared for the 2009 UNESCO World Conference of Higher Education – major trends in higher education are: massification in higher education; globalization and internationalization; distance education and new applications for information and communication technologies (ICTs); the privatization of higher education; the global flow of talent (globalization has exacerbated the worldwide movement of highly educated people); the academic profession at a crossroads for the student experience; research universities and the "world-class" phenomenon; financing higher education; quality assurance and university-industry linkages. To cope with these major trends and to strengthen and enhance international cooperation – by encouraging diversity, pursuing equity, relevance and quality – HEIs can rely on VIRTUAL mobility (VM), one of the most valuable and, at the same time, underestimated tool.

Mobility is a key issue in our society. The benefits of the Erasmus Programme is widely known and the attractiveness of European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to HEIs of other parts of the world is mainly build by long term commitment to institutional cooperation in research and teaching, that also minimises the concerns about the *brain drain* impact of mobility of individual students. Virtual and physical mobility provide an enrichment to the

regular educational environment of higher education institutions. Teachers and students benefit linguistically, culturally and educationally from the experience of other European countries and their (academic) fields of study. Although physical, or traditional, mobility is considered the preferred approach by Latin American students to study internationally, VM is the most significant alternative to it as it allows to overcome serious economic and social constraints to study abroad.

Technology is related with knowledge sharing and networking in the new space of global communication in a form of social-computing (Arroyo, 2008). We can benefit of technology-aware places (WIFI, 3G connectivity, fibre channel, Bluetooth) under richer and richer devices (mobile phones, laptops, GPS navigators, etc.). Technology allows us to create new models of communication and collaboration, that also require new models of learning (Bessenyei, 2007) and tools for adapting traditional methods to new scenarios based on digital citizens. The use of information and communications technologies (ICT) should be explored to internationalise curricula and learning experiences by means of VM. Because of the importance of VM, several educational initiatives have been conducted in different countries in recent years (Op de Beeck, 2006), largely independent of one another, emerging virtual higher education initiatives at regional and national level which tend to "reinvent the wheel" over and over again.

Building on the above background the Movinter Project (Erasmus Mundus Programme – Action 4) (Gea, 2010) aims to contribute to increase cooperation and structural link among HEIs of Europe and Latin America through an in-depth exploration of the potential of ICT – and particularly VM – to internationalise curricula in a balanced and *mutual benefit* approach, aware of the significance of local cultures and of the need to value existing excellence of research and education in all parts of the world.

Section 2 focuses on VM as a key issue in formal training. Section 3 introduces the Modelling Framework, aimed to support HEIs in designing and implementing an integrated use of VM to enhance internationalisation of study experiences, curricula and academic titles. Section 4 deals with the Stakeholders community of leading practitioners, policy and decision makers, and researchers interested in the implementation and integration of VM; it also introduces the VM services the Movinter Consortium is presently working at. Finally, Section 5 highlights main pending issues and trends.

2. The right term for Virtual Mobility

Virtual Mobility has pedagogical advantages and enriches the more traditional learning activities. The learning process can be improved through interactive and collaborative learning. It integrates students in a collaborative learning environment while keeping the benefits of a structured presence in a university campus. Furthermore, VM creates exchange opportunities for those students unable to participate in traditional Erasmus exchanges. It is almost affordable to the whole student community in Europe, Africa, Asia and America, rather than to a small minority of students who are presently able to benefit from a mobility grant.

In the framework of the Movinter Project (Gea, 2010) we proposed to further explore and reformulate the concept of VM in a systematic way. We started by reviewing the state of the art of the use of ICT to internationalise curricula and learning experiences (Boonen, 2009; Vetturini, 2010), and clearly differentiating the concept of VM from distance eLearning and physical mobility (Fisher, 2009).

Compared to traditional lecture-based teaching, VM shares a number of common potential benefits (Dondi, 1998) with *classical* distance education:

- it may provide quick access to recent knowledge for a large number of learners;
- it encourages learners'autonomy and gives them a broader choice on what, how and when to learn;
- it gives a relevant meaning to the use of technology in teaching and learning by increasing the use of existing technological infrastructure;
- it increases access to high level learning opportunities to people who would not otherwise benefit from them for physical, economic or organisational reasons.

Other benefits of VM relate more closely to physical mobility and are not proper of classical distance education:

- it helps to develop the habit of inter-cultural communication for learning and non-learning purposes, so raising tolerance for difference and inter-cultural awareness;
- it integrates the students in a collaborative learning environment while keeping the benefits of a structured presence in a university campus.

VM helps avoiding the possible learners' feeling of social isolation typical of Distance Education, because a virtual trans-national group is intrinsically interacting. If compared to physical mobility (Fisher, 2009; Gea, 2009), VM adds the benefits of producing intense familiarisation with communication technology and being affordable for practically all the students' community.

The two terms, VIRTUAL and MOBILITY, are often misconceived: MOBILITY leads one to think to separation rather than to connectivity, access and community But, presumably, what makes VM really weak is the term *virtual*. In some respects *virtual* – if compared to *physical* – recalls a sense of intangibility and volatility, running the risk of conveying such flimsiness to the MOBILITY contents themselves. People are not mobilised in this case, what is mobilised, and therefore transferred, is knowledge, that is what lies at the basis of the Knowledge Society. VIRTUAL mobility does not simply represent the use of tools and new approaches allowing the transfer of knowledge, we would then simply talk about e-Learning and Distance Learning. These are teaching/learning approaches, while VM just makes use of ICT, and has an inborn political undertone.

Virtual Mobility is mainly aimed at the internationalisation of higher education in a mutual benefit approach, in respect of local cultures to ultimately valorise existing excellence of education and research in all parts of the world. At first glance (elearing europa, 2011) VM is defined as *the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to obtain the same benefits as one would have with physical mobility but without the need to travel*. But it's really much more than this, virtual courses may be used as a preparatory activity to physical exchange, enabling a better preparation and follow-up of students participating in physical exchange programs.

2.1 The proposed concept of Virtual Mobility

Within the modernisation process of HEIs specific areas/activities can be identified: the use of VM "to complement physical mobility of students and researchers", VM as a mean to enhance "Research collaboration", to enforce "capacity building", to provide further "opportunities for postgraduate students and researchers", to deliver "joint titles", to "jointly develop curriculum" and to further exploit "ICT potential". Ultimately, VM is a facilitator and aggregating element providing overall coherence to HEIs fundamental activities. VIRTUAL MOBILITY can be then visualised as a 'meeting point' of these areas/activities that also represent different paths towards the discovery of VM potential (Figure 1).

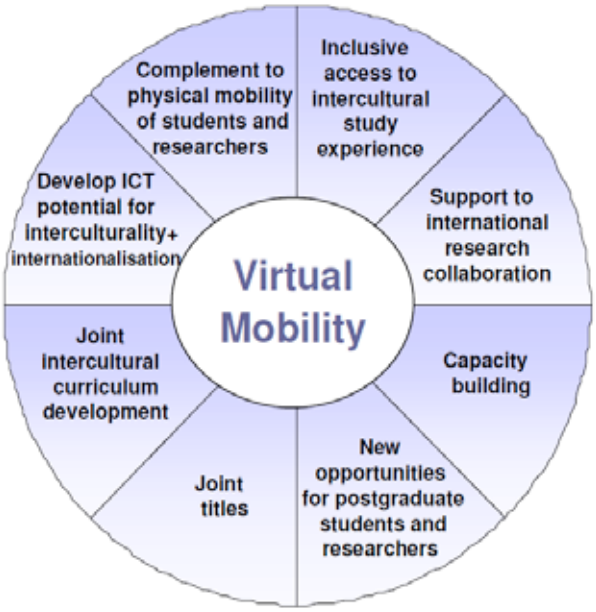

Figure 1: Path towards Virtual Mobility

Therefore, VM can be reached from different angles and, most importantly, represents an aggregation point, in the neighbourhood of which revolve – at a different pace, depending of HEIs strategy – a number of elements structuring peculiar HEIs activities, being the comparative analysis dimension the cross-driver of HEIs main activities and *collaboration*, *cooperation*, *joint* the main keywords.

VM is a concept that still needs consolidation and has been used to describe experiences with different characteristics, inspired by different educational models, conducted in different academic and non-academic contexts. In order to understand what VM is, the Movinter Team identified ten descriptive elements, the so-called VM components:

1. International student groups - students from different countries who mainly study in their local (chosen) university with their fellow students and without going abroad to study for long periods of time; for those students, VM is a way to internationalise.
2. Interactivity & Communication between students of different countries through ICT – interaction an communication among groups of students/teachers based in differ-

ent countries to discuss diversity depending on national/local/contextual elements.

3. International teaching groups - cooperation in designing, implementing, evaluating courses.
4. Multicultural exchange (as a key objective to produce added value) - the multicultural [intercultural, see further on] component constitutes an integral part of the concept of Virtual Mobility and justifies the contribution from different countries.
5. Use of appropriate technological solutions - choices that support the different types of Virtual Mobility.
6. Joint choice of the subject to be studied through VM - in practically any subject in which comparisons from different national contexts may enhance the value of curricula and prepare students for an international social, economical and professional environment.
7. Joint curricula design - which adds value in terms of reciprocity and mutual benefits between the HEIs in the different countries.
8. Joint production of learning resources - or any activity easing communication, learning and intercultural exchange (reflective tools, non-interactive tools, collaborative tools, communication tools, social networking tools).
9. Joint titles - wherever possible, based on a long term confidence relationship.
10. Mutual confidence relationship - the originating vision stresses that the choice of subjects and the design of the learning experience should reflect the advantages of a multi/inter-cultural approach.

These ten VM components (also see Figure 2) may change and adapt to different contexts and models, answering different expectations, ambitions and existing resources that may change/evolve with the passing of time. VM can also be achieved to complement physical mobility (Op de Beeck, 2008; Achten, 2010), where the technology supports the smooth transition from different models of learning styles. Therefore, VM is a new emerging model to increase support of nomadic students when (physical) mobility becomes a natural form of specialization and curriculum development.

On the basis of this characterisation, what is proposed is not a uniform and rigid model, but rather a meta-model or a flexible modelling framework adaptable to different contexts, needs, teaching and learning goals and approaches. VM experiences may have different facets and degrees of implementation, ranging from the one-off seminar up to a full developed programme.

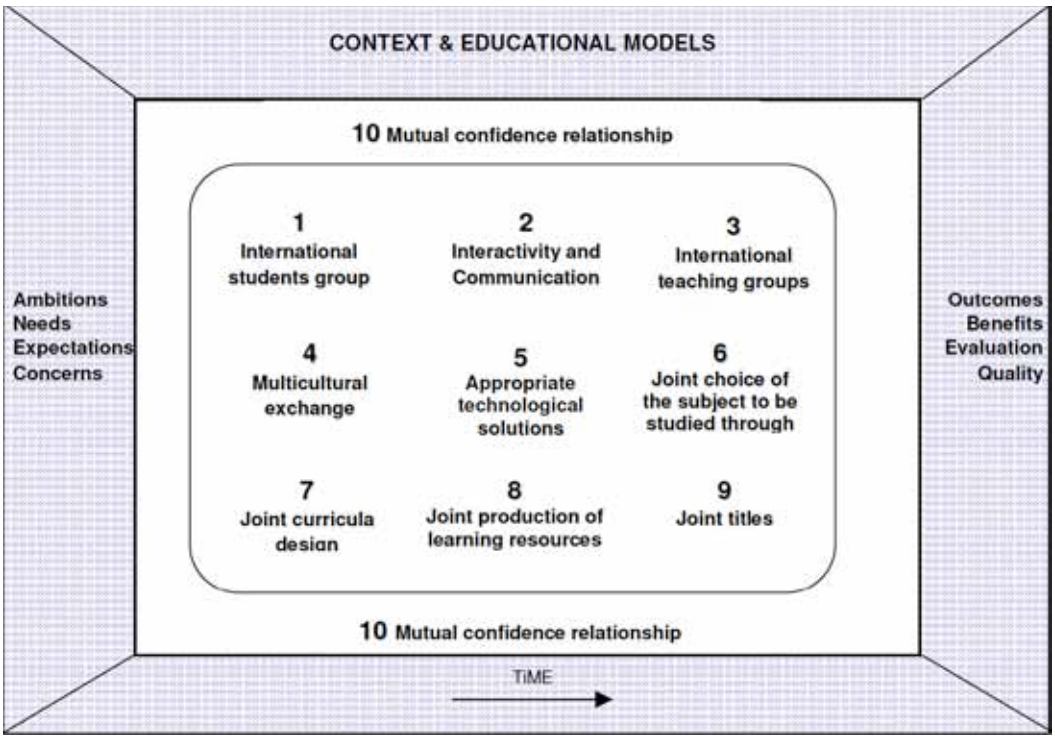

Figure 2: Virtual mobility features

For that reason different models of VM may be put in place, involving VM components at a different development stage.

But, regardless of the learning format and the involved VM components, three key-elements are essential to design an internationalisation strategy respectful of diversity securing that way the successful implementation of VM:

Interculturality – Intercultural dialogue and internationalisation of learning/knowledge are integral part of VM; when talking about VM, both must be there, as internationalisation does not necessarily imply interculturality. The intercultural dialogue implies the recognition of diversity: difference of opinions, points of view, and values existing within each individual culture but also between cultures (see intercultural dialogue definition of the International Association of Universities – 2008). Then, intercultural dialogue goes beyond HEIs internationalisation, providing and integrating insight of diversity when dealing with more complex environments. In our Society there is a great need for each individual to challenge its own perspectives on diversity: intercultural dialogue is a valuable tool to that end. It encourages people awareness of the importance of developing aptitudes open to the world, respectful of cultural diversity leading, ultimately, to common values building. This aptitude also challenges academic institutions carrying on their internationalisation process. They should slide from a multicultural perspective (culture peaceful coexistence) to the more dynamic intercultural perspective where cultural diversity is not just recognized but also understood, and there is a strive for dealing with it. Intercultural dialogue is then crucial in our changing society where people's interaction is growing faster and – to cope with these changes – HEIs should strengthen intercultural perspective in their internationalisation process.

Right about now multiculturalism is brought into question in Europe, the supposed multiculturalism failure has been publicly voiced in the European policy arena. Without knowing what would happened a few months later, the Movinter VM White Paper "In prise of VM. How ICT can support institutional cooperation and internationalisation of curricula in higher education" forestalled the discussion by giving "interculturalism" a lead position in the Movinter discussion, in particular because of its dialogic undertone, seen as a more dynamic alternative to the Cartesian monologicality which is apparently affecting multiculturalism.

We are not questioning i.e. Gidden's sophisticated multiculturalism vs. naïve multiculturalism or rejecting multiculturalism tout court, we simply find that interculturalism better suits our purpose of describing main VM facets.

Ensuring all partners' participation – In accordance with the previous key-element, all partners should actively participate in the VM experience. Each partner should contribute to the choice of the subject to be studied through VM, to the learning resources production, to the course/programme design and teaching. The active participation of each partner, allows to avoid the possible inconvenient of having a leading HEI providing the conceptual and scientific strength to the teaching/learning programme and the partner HEIs assuming a mere teaching and local support role. Moreover, the course/programme resulting from the active participation is better accepted as part of each HEI's academic production. Thanks to the active participation of all partners, HEIs develop a real cooperation experience, by fairly sharing objectives and ways to reach and assess them.

Strong communication aptitude – Communication flow among partners should be encouraged and developed at all levels to ensure dialogue, exchange of ideas and growing mutual confidence. This aptitude should go beyond the HEIs partners sphere involving all VM actors (students, researchers and teachers). Communication tools should also be carefully taken into consideration: they should be easy to deploy and easy to use to meet non-digital natives' needs and, at the same time, new communication tools and phenomena (social networking, the Semantic Web & WEB 3.0) should be embraced to meet digital natives expectations and needs.

3. The Modelling Framework

To support the capacity of HEIs to design and implement an integrated use of VM and ICT to enhance internationalization of study experiences, curricula and academic titles, the Movinter Consortium developed the Modelling Framework (MF). The MF in not a practical guide, but rather an orientation guide, that should allow HEIs (or individuals strictly related to the academic field, such as professors, researchers, students, …) to clearly define what to expect and what not to expect from their approach to VM.

The Modelling Framework is one of the key-outputs of the Movinter Project. The current section presents a dynamic system of VM modelling framework adaptable to different contexts, needs, teaching and learning goals and approaches.

The process of mapping and studying European and Latin-American VM experiences and the combination of the different VM components identified by the Movinter partnerships, allowed the identification of 5 VM sub-models (that can of course be more than 5, in the two-year Project lifespan project activities – process of VM experiences mapping, best practices identification and cross-analysis lead to the identification of these 5 sub-models). Thanks to a five-step process involving the use of different self-evaluation tools, institutions are able to position themselves along the Virtual Mobility Spectrum (see Table 1).

MOVINTER VIRTUAL MOBILITY SUB-MODELS
Sub-model 1. ENHANCED DISTANCE EDUCATION
An institution is using International distance education (traditional) and shows attention to intercultural elements by using local support centres abroad, also encouraging local content development and adoption (as an example: http://portal.uned.es).
Sub-model 2. RESOURCE-BASED INTERNATIONAL eLEARNING
Several institutions are using common resources and common repositories (http://www.universia.es as an example).
Sub-model 3. INFORMAL LEARNING
Comparative studies or common problems to be addressed. Very good use of VM. No recognition of titles. Problem-based learning issues. Informal learning, but very relevant to learners and contexts (as an example: educators or medical international learning communities of practice).
Sub-model 4. IN-DEPTH ACADEMIC COOPERATION
Several HEIs agree to develop together joint curricula but they do not agree or are not allowed to provide a joint title.
Sub-model 5. FULL DEVELOPMENT OF VM COMPONENTS
Joint (intercultural) curricula design and implementation with full title.

Table 1: Virtual Mobility Spectrum

After self-evaluating its VM state-of-the-art, HEI has then positioned itself in the VM Spectrum and can now work to achieve a different/desired VM sub-model by going through the Virtual Mobility Dynamics (see Figure 3). The Virtual Mobility Dynamics is aimed at supporting HEIs to get to the desired model regardless of their starting point. The figure below shows how the desired VM sub-model could be attained: the course starts from the International Distance Education (IDE) entering the VM context.

The VM Dynamics has a twofold purpose: (1) to allow HEIs to clearly identify its position within the scheme (2) to provide HEIs with the needed information to get to another VM sub-model. There is no hierarchic order among sub-models, each sub-model can act as a launching pad toward next sub-model, according to the HEI needs and context.

The modelling framework includes a tool for evaluation. So HEIs are provided with quality criteria & indicators to weight in function of their chose model. By self-evaluating/weighting the following criteria and related indicators, HEIs gain a clearer understand of its strategic position by assessing strengths and weaknesses of particular aspects of VM.

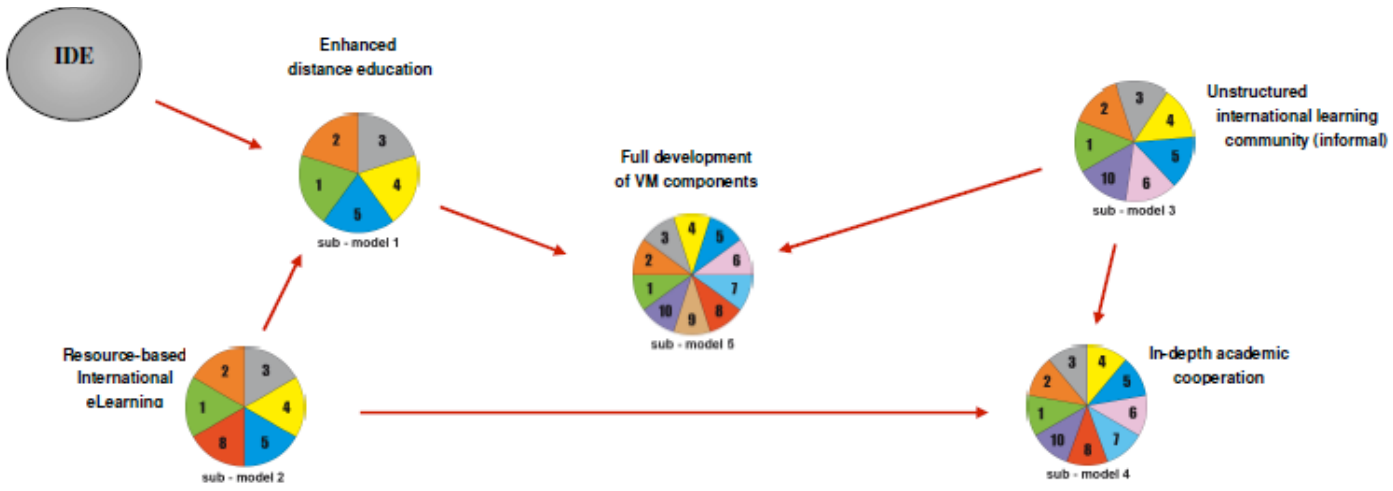

Figure 3: Virtual Mobility Dynamics

4. The EU-LA Movinter Stakeholders community

In the context of mobility interchange between Europe and Latin America, Movinter partnership is developing an online community for leading practitioners, policy and decision makers, and researchers interested in the implementation and integration of VM in order to:

- identify and aggregate existing relevant communities, and to support a stakeholders community to implement the services for virtual mobility and ICT exploitation for international cooperation;
- support the capacity of HEIs to design and implement an integrated use of VM and ICT to enhance internationalisation of study experiences, curricula and academic titles;
- support and enhance policy dialogue on the potential of ICT and VM as an engine of internationalisation;
- disseminate project results to the relevant communities and to promote the sustainability of the project outcomes.

The community, in its embryonic stages, is available online at http://movinter.eu where an open debate with/among Stakeholders has been launched and supported by a number of local and international awareness seminars on VM (carried out in the two-year project life-cycle). Information gathered through seminars and stakeholders revealed that VM seems to be an emerging trend and a strategic approach to increase internationalisation of curricula. Physical at best, represents for Universities less than the 5-10% of the overall of incoming students. As an example, University of Granada (Spain) is one of the most recognised universities in Erasmus mobility, and in 2007 was awarded as the first University with more than 3.000 students in the Erasmus programme. Furthermore, VM opens new roads (using the new opportunities based on Internet technology) to share experiences and joint curricula design in different countries, sharing teachers, students and common recognitions.

The community through discussion groups and other intercommunication tools has been a starting point to detect strengths and weaknesses in the Universities' internationalization and cooperation processes. Using the case of University of Granada, the different point of views of stakeholders about promoting and enhancing such issues could be clearly observed. At first glance, the positive aspect was that the University itself is the first step to create such framework, and therefore:

- it is important that each University (from the rector's government) has a decided vision of being international as a strategic direction. In the case of University of Granada it is true, as evidenced by the efforts to achieve the "International Campus of Excellence in e-health and ICT".
- it is important to set a strategic policy to promote in teachers and students the need of Cooperation and Internationalisation to enhance their skills, share experiences and cooperation. Also, Granada is a good example by the number of Erasmus mobility experiences, Erasmus Mundus Masters, master in cooperation with Latin America and other countries.
- the university should promote ICT among staff members, students and at administration levels to achieve the e-government. A successful implementation should achieve better results in the cooperation with other institutions.

The online community has been developed not only for discussing or disseminating such ideas through web 2.0 tools. It is also aimed at developing and launching a set of supporting VM services. This set will support HEIs intended to start a VM experience, proving advise through a set of best practices analysed by the Movinter Consortium during the project lifespan (already available for downloading at the Movinter website, www.movinter.eu), self-assessment tool are/being developed to guide HEIs reflection about their own situation with relation to VM and their objectives, VM reports developed by the Movinter team (available at www.movinter.eu) are just the first step toward further reports on VM issue. 'Policy' and management advice won't be neglected, as a matter of fact partners are planning to provide the necessary advice to support HEIs in managing its own VM experience or to identify and overcome possible 'policy' and management constraints to VM introduction or existing successful VM experiences.

5. Conclusions

We should keep questioning why is Virtual Mobility important and pay attention to the unexploited potential of this idea: (1) to democratise access to international, transdisciplinary and multicultural study experience, now reserved to a relatively small minority of students, contributing thereby to the social cohesion; (2) to produce stable collaboration among teaching and research teams, and their institutions, building on recognised complementarities and specialisations through networking activities; (3) to make the practice of joint titles, at various academic levels (undergraduate, master and doctoral programs)

and with diverse modalities (master classes, single subjects, seminars and workshops) a reality, much before a full institutional recognition of academic titles from other countries are in place; and (4) to link European universities/HEIs among them and with universities/HEIs of other parts of the world.

On the basis of the re-formulations of the aim and concept of VM the following twelve lines of action are proposed as means to build on and from the potential of VM in the next ten years. The Movinter Consortium proposes and is particularly active in action lines meant to raise awareness of VM benefits. These are:

1. set and launch information campaigns to widely disseminate VM concept, opportunities and benefits for individuals, institutions and the society as a whole;
2. invite VM *alumni* to witness their experience to promote VM, but above all to reflect on potential and criticalities to be addressed;
3. develop awareness campaigns towards policy makers and academic leaderships, presenting VM benefits and urging them to set specific policies aimed at VM promotion and advancement;

The Consortium consider important the VM experience implementation, taking in consideration the following action lines:

4. develop, document and analyse good practices in view of developing an educational model for VM;
5. include VM elements in best examples and common practices of international cooperation amongst higher education institutions;
6. invite top academics and key players in specific context-related areas to take part in VM experiences;
7. develop a case for VM at all relevant international organisations who lead the policy discourse in higher education modernisation;
8. develop approaches capable of guiding and assuring sustainability conditions for best practice, including capitalisation of learning resources developed through VM;
9. develop a quality assurance approach for VM and present it to the relevant Quality Assurance Institutions as well as HEI and their networks;

Policy actions to promote and advance VM have been identified:

10. propose (or at least allow) VM actions within existing policies and programmes (Erasmus, Erasmus Mundus, Alfa, etc.);
11. involve student unions in the debate on VM to get inputs and support for the equity potential of virtual mobility in giving access to international HE experience to all students;
12. set objectives for student participation in VM by 2020 and commit stakeholders to achieve them.

Even when all these action lines are implemented, coherent long term policy support at Government and Institutional level remains a key factor to be considered if the potential impact of Virtual Mobility has to be achieved.

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