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Handbook of Good Practices

Produced by University of Porto (U.Porto) and the European University Foundation (EUF)

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1. Introduction

This handbook is part of the “*How Long is Too Long*” (HLiTL) project.¹

The aim of the HLiTL project is to enable Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to adapt and improve their mobility strategies, fostering mobility schemes with the greatest impact on students’ key competences, including mobility formats with a mix of distance learning and physical mobility (blended learning) and fully virtual [1]. To achieve this goal, the consortium partners have developed several studies:

- A literature review on the topic of International Student Mobility (ISM) to provide a state-of-the-art overview on mobility types (physical, virtual exchange or blended) and lengths (short-, mid- and long term).
- Surveys to analyze the existing mobilities types and technical conditions, using the HLiTL universities as research samples.
- Surveys to help in the identification of core scientific areas for Virtual Exchange (VE) or Blended Mobility (BM), using the HLiTL universities as research samples.
- Surveys based on students focus group interviews and HEIs staff questionnaires to identify the impact of various mobility types on students and staff according to their experiences and expectations.
- A pilot online course on the topic of travel literature, designed and implemented among three consortium partners (University of Versailles Saint Quentin-en-Yvelines, University of Marburg and University of Porto).
- Institutional recommendations aimed at European HEIs with the purpose to help them improve their own institutional strategies and practices regarding student mobility.

This document reflects the work carried out during the pilot online course “*Seminar on Travel and Health in North American and British Literature*” and is based on the assessment report developed after the finalisation of the pilot module. The results gathered in the assessment report were based on a post-seminar questionnaire filled by 56 students².

This report presents a practical handbook that intends to put together a set of guidelines to plan and perform further successful virtual exchange activities, with a particular focus on the technical and pedagogical elements involved. The target audience of this handbook are HEIs

¹ Each Intellectual Outputs (IOs) of the project can be found on the project website at <https://www.hlitl-project-eu.uvsg.fr/>

² Due to the reduced number of students who participated in the assessment report, we advise the reader to take into consideration this element when reading the document.



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who intend to, or are already offering virtual exchange and/or blended mobility opportunities to their students.

2. Background

2.1 Blended Mobility Testing Phase

The activity consisted in the Master's seminar "*Travel and Health in North American and British Literature*" and was initially designed to have a Virtual Exchange (VE) with a joint seminar - twelve sessions with two hour duration each - and a physical mobility in form of a Winter School at University of Porto (Porto, Portugal)³. The pilot course involved students and academic staff from three HLiTL consortium partners (University of Versailles Saint Quentin-en-Yvelines, University of Marburg and University of Porto). The joint seminar's central objective was that students would be taught in their actual physical classrooms and at the same time through a video conference system, so they would be interacting and working together virtually with the students and professors from the two other participating universities.

The joint seminar was a great opportunity to test how an online component can help effectively prepare students for physical mobility, how VE is accepted by students and how it could be used to increase students' engagement in Erasmus+ or other forms of mobility. However, during the planning of the joint seminar sessions, the professors faced some difficulties related to varying semester plans and course requirements at the three universities, the timezone difference and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the seminar had to be redesigned for 6 joint sessions, with the first session kicking off in November 2020.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the professors from the University of Versailles Saint Quentin-en-Yvelines (USVQ) and University of Marburg (UM) were exclusively allowed to teach remotely, while the University of Porto (U.Porto) was able to offer a blended format, which translated into having the students in the classroom and livestreaming the class to others universities.

Regarding the technology used in this pilot, due to some restrictions at the University of Marburg, the video conference system that was agreed to be used was Cisco Webex. Moreover, as the teachers did not find a common learning platform to share the materials, the content sharing and communication with students concerning the classes was organized

³ Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, the physical component of the activity, the Winterschool, had to be canceled, making the activity fully virtual.



through a mailing list - with students and professors emails - managed by one of the professors.

As mentioned above, the first joint online session took place in November 2020 and was an introductory session where the professors introduced themselves and presented to the students some important information: the course syllabus, guidelines for the presentation assignments and class discussions, technical recommendations and basic rules of netiquette in the virtual room. Also in this first session, the students got to know each other by introducing themselves, their courses of study and by sharing previous experiences with international and/or digital learning. The remaining five online sessions were mainly dedicated to presentations by students from each university, followed by a joint discussion for which the professors had one or two discussants selected before the session (for each text/presentation in discussion) who were responsible for preparing some questions to stir the discussion.

2.2 Pilot results

As mentioned above, the original plan for the pilot course had to be adapted and therefore, several changes were implemented. The following pluses and minuses were identified:

Pluses:

- Ability to enrol in a course with lecturers and students from other countries and institutions, allowing the opportunity to experience learning in an international environment;
- Time-saving, because there is no need to travel and it is possible to follow classes from anywhere;
- Delivering a code of conduct (netiquette) to allow everyone know what to expect and to be comfortable in this new learning scenario;
- Plan meaningful activities for strict time frames;
- Providing an introductory synchronous session for all participants to get to know and get acquainted with the course syllabus and the professors;

Minuses:

- Different time zones between partner countries;
- Different semester class plans between partners;
- Inability to test in a classroom setting (with the exception of University of Porto);
- Inefficiency due to technological issues from each presenter;
- Not being able to interact as a class with teachers or class members;
- Not using a common learning platform for sharing reading material, presentations, and communication;



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- Technical difficulties (personal computer, mobile device, unstable internet connection);
- Hindered discussion flow as there was no possibility of actually talking to and seeing other students since the group was too large;
- Lack of reality interaction and meaningful social interaction (neither students nor professors);
- Lack of professional and networking connections between students.

3. Guidelines for future courses

3.1 Technical and non-technical recommendations

There is no evidence that allows comparing virtual exchange with physical mobility in terms of learning process, outcomes and benefits for participants, but it is clear that virtual exchange brings to the light some benefits concerning costs and time-saving, environmental impact, and can present itself as an opportunity for an inclusive education, especially regarding students' social and financial reasons [2]. However, institutions willing to promote virtual formats need to be aware of the challenges involved.

When creating and delivering such a course, some key aspects should be considered in order for lecturers and students to have a better teaching/learning experience. Below we list some of the recommendations based on the HLiTL pilot experience:

Institutional

- Have a technical and pedagogical support team specialized in e-learning and blended-learning;
- Provide training and support materials for teachers and learners;
- Ensure that all the participating students are able to get course credits recognized;

Dissemination

- To foster dissemination, work closely with the International Office within your institution;
- Provide sufficient time for students to enrol;

Physical and digital infrastructure

- Make use of a Learning Management System (LMS);
- Provide digital tools (videoconference, lecture capture, etc.), preferably integrated with the LMS in use;



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Course information and structure

- Establish a teacher training programme to all staff taking part in the course;
- Provide, beforehand, an accurate and detailed description of the course, including the language used, and its learning objectives;
- Provide, upon starting the course, a detailed description of the syllabus;
- Provide students with the opportunity to ask questions/doubts regarding the course (content, structure, recognition, assessment, etc.);
- Account for different time zones and school calendars when designing the course;
- Consider available technical conditions within all partners and the need to update them;

Contents and classes

- Reach an agreement on the pedagogical content to be used between institutions before the commencement of the course;
- Clearly acknowledge the international and multi-cultural component of the course;
- Foster a communicative and engaging learning environment for students;

Activities and assessment

- Students evaluation methods must be coordinated between institutions and specified from the beginning of the course, so that the students know how they will be assessed (individual or work group assignments, essays, presentations, quizzes, final exam or others);
- Purposefully dedicate certain time for collaborative group work to offer students the opportunity to share knowledge and different experiences;
- Clearly explain the task objectives before any learning activity;
- Do not forget to provide meaningful feedback on students' performance and let them know where and how they can improve;

Interaction

- To ensure a balanced interaction between participants from multiple universities, guarantee a similar number of students per institution;
- Keep meaningful interaction between international peers at the core of course design;

Student progress/Feedback

- In addition to a feedback opportunity at the end of the course, implement a mid-course feedback mechanism to maximise learning outcomes for students and to address potential issues.

4. Conclusion

Taking as an example the work done in the HLiTL project, it can be derived that when developing blended mobility or virtual exchange experiences for students, higher education institutions must understand the challenges brought about by these new modalities and try to overcome them. With local students and students on mobility, teaching and non-teaching staff must have the right pedagogical, technical and intercultural tools and training to provide quality education materials and experiences in both physical and virtual environments. Moreover, physical and digital infrastructure has to be updated and serve as a backbone not only for educational materials, but also for effective communication between international partners.

It is important to remark that International offices play a decisive role in fostering inter-institutional cooperation and to foster students to participate in these types of programmes. In addition, related topics such as enrollment, fees, recognition of academic credit, among others, are equally important to students' overall experience and should not be underestimated when thinking about student mobility.

Understanding the differences between institutions and cultures, given these may influence perception and outcomes is critical for successfully carrying out similar activities. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic forced the HLiTL pilot experience to be fully distance-based rather than blended, the obtained result cannot be dismissed and will certainly allow HEIs to rethink similar experiences in the future.

5. References

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