BLENDED MOBILITY

Blended mobility can be defined as a planned combination of geographic and structured virtual collaboration. The European Commission has announced that blended mobility will play an important role in the Erasmus program for 2021-2027. Blended mobility will combine short, intensive geographical mobility for students (5-30 days) with virtual mobility before, during and / or after geographical mobility. Virtual mobility involves the involvement of students in virtual international collaboration and virtual communication with other students under the guidance of teachers, practice leaders. Virtual mobility can provide important 21st century information. employability skills such as information, digital literacy, worldview, empathy, critical and analytical thinking, foreign language skills, intercultural competences.

Blended and virtual mobility has been introduced by universities. The consequences of the Covid pandemic, such as quarantine and closed borders, have led to the need for blended mobility in vocational training. Virtual mobility can compensate the reduced opportunities for geographical mobility and provide students with an international experience. Virtual mobility does not compete with geographical mobility. Virtual mobility can be used as a preparation for geographical mobility, as a complement to geographical mobility in blended mobility, and as a separate type of mobility for students or workers who are unable or unwilling to participate in geographical mobility. Virtual exchanges should also not be confused with other virtual mobility activities, where students can listen to lectures or use the library in another learning institution. Virtual exchanges must necessarily include communication and collaboration activities between students and teachers, and the development of cultural and entrepreneurial competencies. The development of intercultural competencies, digital, information literacy and empathy are not automatic components of virtual exchange, it must be consciously planned and included in the virtual exchange program.

Virtual exchanges do not simply connect groups of students. Teachers need to be prepared to create virtual teaching content and to be able to communicate virtually, to take on the role of pedagogical mentoring to support students in dealing with intercultural issues and to deal positively with cultural differences.

The share of virtual exchanges in blended mobility must be assessed and recognized by awarding ECVET points, grading, adding the virtual mobility experience to the Europass Mobility, the Diploma Supplement. Developing and running virtual mobility programs is

a major challenge for teachers and should be motivated by training, providing the necessary technical infrastructure and academic recognition (eg awards).

Various models of blended mobility are available:

- Virtual (in your home country) - real (in your partner country)
- Virtual (in isolation in the partner country) - real (in the partner country)
- Real in the partner country - virtual (on return home)

When planning a blended mobility, it is important to understand how the organization of blended mobility differs in practice from normal geographical mobility, how to prepare for it, what to look for. We will discuss the practical aspects of preparation and implementation. It is important to understand these aspects to be discussed, both in the preparation of the mobility participants themselves and in the planning to send to the partner organization.

For host partners.

Preparation phase:

Accommodation organization. If isolation is required, accommodation must be arranged upon arrival in the partner country. Often, the host partner accommodates in a dormitory, and in case of isolation, separate apartments need to be sought.

Providing Internet connection and provision of ICT means (computers, tablets, ensuring that the camera, microphone work).

Development of virtual teaching content. Creation of a cycle of virtual lessons, development of methodology.

Example of good practice:

A group of students from Vilnius, Vocational Training Center Zirmunai went on an internship in Riga, Latvia. The internship was planned to last a month, a selection of students took place. When the situation changed, due to the increase in the number of Covid cases, 10-day isolation was introduced for those who came to Latvia from Lithuania. Riga Vocational Training Center Rīgas Tūrisma un radošās industrijas tehnikums was preparing for the next school year during the spring quarantine. The partners were asked when, how many students they wanted to send to Latvia, for what period. Internship opportunities were offered at a training center or in companies. The partners had a considerable offer of companies, it was possible to choose based on the students' experience and curriculum. Latvians had experience because during the first quarantine they had accepted long-term mobility students from different countries, as well as their students did internships in partner countries. Already in the spring, they had to organize distance practical training and anticipated that during the summer they

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Co-funded by the
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would have time to prepare for the autumn if they had to organize virtual mobilities again. A virtual mobility program was developed for students majoring in cooking and confectionery, which included lessons in the host country's language, history, cultural history, restaurant and bar lessons, culinary lessons, tourism products and development in the host country, and innovation in the hotel and restaurant sector. Students received a package of necessary food, tools, and instructions. The teacher had to lead a practical session remotely, and the students had to be able to combine traditional Latvian and classic dishes and non-alcoholic cocktails together in the isolation apartments. They also had to film their work and present it to the teacher. They were appreciated for that. An interesting task was once they were brought a box of "secret products" and they had to determine which products were made in Latvia.

Implementation phase:

If participants are in isolation, it is necessary to consider how the catering will be organized. Time and human resources should be taken into account and how often food will be supplied should be well planned. Good communication is also important so that participants know that products will be delivered to them, not prepared meals. When will the products arrive. Will there be an opportunity to choose, plan the menu. Such aspects should be well thought to avoid dissatisfaction among the participants later and would not require a lot of time from the organizers.

For sending partners.

These aspects need to be taken into account when organizing blended mobility. When selecting participants, it is important to inform them about the specifics of this type of mobility, to discuss it with the participants. Internal documents are changing; adaptable mobility contracts; technical assistance is provided.

Virtual teacher visits.

When organizing virtual teacher visits, it can be taken into account that the partners are in the same situation, so it is possible to organize mutual exchanges. There is a challenge to engage and motivate teachers. If teachers are going on an internship or teachers are coming to your organization, you need to reorganize the lesson schedule, think about how the virtual visit program will be paid for.

In conclusion, it is important to understand that virtual or mixed mobility is different from geographical mobility. If you have planned geographical mobility, you may need to re-plan everything. The result is also different, but not necessarily worse. Live communication is replaced by virtual, often less intense, but communication and collaboration skills, computer skills, creativity, and language skills are developed.

Vocational skills are often less developed, as virtual training is not always suitable for all professions due to the lack of equipment or tools at home.

It will take time for educational institutions to develop a virtual mobility strategy, the necessary capacity and organizational structure to fully integrate virtual exchanges into educational practices. However, the mobility crisis caused by COVID-19 has forced this issue to be addressed immediately.