

Editorial

As the European Union (EU) strives to develop the most competitive, knowledge-based economy in the world, the exchange of knowledge has been recognized as a critical priority. Mobility, in all senses, is crucial in pursuing this goal and several initiatives, such as the Erasmus Program, which facilitates student exchanges among European universities, have helped to expand mobility in the EU. Yet, time and money constraints still render physical mobility out of reach for many segments of European society. However, non-traditional methods such as “distance learning” and “virtual learning” have emerged as promising complements to physical mobility. Moreover, beyond enhancing the connections between European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), virtual mobility removes some of the barriers to inclusion for socially, economically or physically disadvantaged groups for whom traditional methods of mobility are often inaccessible.

The EU’s aspirations for mobility are not limited to course contents and “cultural exchange” has long been also a priority of the EU. Indeed, Erasmus Program, which the European Commission has funded for the past 3 decades, strongly emphasizes the cultural aspect of learning processes. Therefore, a primary question for the expanding field of digital learning is how to integrate cultural learning in virtual mobility frameworks. This is one of many issues facing this burgeoning field and there are also other vital questions: How can the institutions, teachers and students of HEIs be encouraged to engage with virtual mobility? What are the current challenges and opportunities in virtual mobility?

The “UbiCamp: Integrated Solutions to Virtual Mobility Barriers” project was developed in response to these questions. It was funded by the European Commission Erasmus Multilateral Programmes and coordinated by the University of Oviedo (Spain) in partnership with Yaşar University (Turkey), Southampton University (United Kingdom), Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania) and Università Telematica Pegaso (Italy) between 2012 and 2014. The name “UbiCamp” was derived from the phrase “Ubiquitous Campus”, which describes a decentralized model of virtual mobility. The UbiCamp project aimed to make virtual mobility a more accessible opportunity for teachers, students and institutions in higher education by providing comprehensive and experience-based solutions to major barriers and difficulties in the field.

To this end, a “Virtual Mobility Practical Framework” that defines quality criteria for the implementation of different elements of virtual mobility in HEIs was constructed. In it, organizational elements (recognition of the teaching/learning experience, institutional agreements, virtual mobility session organization requirements, etc.), technological elements (minimum technological standards of learning resources in order to make them re-usable, accessible, etc.), pedagogic/didactical elements (requirements for didactical preparation of study curriculum for virtual mobility and assessment methodologies for virtual mobility), and cultural elements (learning resources to enhance intercultural exchanges during virtual mobility processes) were defined. In addition, each partner university created and tested open educational resources (OERs) on different topics. Each OER, whether a language course, country guide, country-focused game or quiz, virtual tour, or visitor’s guide to local traditions, media or entertainment, included an innovative approach to cultural exchange.

Special Issue on Virtual Mobility and Distance Learning in the European Union

The UbiCamp project was primarily an attempt to raise awareness about virtual mobility among HEIs. To multiply their impact, the project results were disseminated widely at both national and European levels. A final conference entitled “A New Generation of Education in Europe: From Distance Learning to Virtual Mobility” was organized by Yaşar University in Turkey on March 4th, 2015. This special journal issue includes peer-reviewed papers from this conference. The selected articles explain the theoretical background of virtual mobility and discuss the virtual mobility process based on the UbiCamp project experience.

Raquel Menéndez Ferreira, Aquilino A. Juan Fuente, and Ramón Pérez Pérez discuss the results of the UbiCamp pilot virtual mobility exchange. In their study, they analyze the strengths and weaknesses of virtual mobility in European university education systems based on questionnaires administered in the pilot testing process of the UbiCamp OERs. The authors contrast the expectations and motivations of students and teachers before and after the experience.

Based on his UbiCamp experience, Lorenzo Fiorito sought to explore the creation of a network for massive open online courses. The aim of his paper is to identify advantages and limitations in virtual mobility processes, and to share some ideas for making virtual mobility the customary way of cooperation among European universities.

Özlem Ozan and Yasin Özarıslan share their experience of developing a virtual learning language course both as a topic in and off itself but also as a means of cultural exchange. They argue that foreign language teaching has been neglected in virtual mobility and present their findings from their Turkish language module development process.

Finally, İsmail Özler and Hasan Çakır analyse how governmental organizations can use distance education for in-service training. In their study, they discuss whether distance education is used effectively in governmental organizations based on a document analysis process of their strategic plans.

We hope this special issue will provide encouragement for the development of virtual mobility possibilities in higher education as well as an important contribution to the related literature. More information on the UbiCamp project and the tools developed through it are available at the project website - ubicamp.eu.

On behalf of Journal of Yaşar University
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