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Pilot 1

Good practice in providing information for incoming and outgoing exchange students

Summary

This report describes the activities undertaken by the Victorious project's pilot 1. First there is an introduction to the rationale of the pilot explaining the objectives and context in which this work was done, followed by a description of the methodology used and the activities in the pilot, as well as the outputs and results obtained. Finally we report on the conclusions and further recommendations.

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1. Introduction

This pilot was undertaken in the context of a group of European Universities in which there is an important participation in Erasmus exchange programmes and other exchange visits. The increasing use of ICT as a mean of communication as well as for researching, teaching and learning has changed the needs of students visiting another country. However, the reality does not correspond with the necessity and, as we found in previous activities of the Victorious project (i.e. student questionnaires), students still find many obstacles with respect to ICT infrastructure and use while they are abroad. The first obstacle is lack of information and guide. Pilot 1 has to do with disinformation and with the changes a university has to undertake in order to facilitate the necessary information about ICT aspects to visiting and outgoing students. The provision of this information would be the first requisite to ensure visiting students will have as many opportunities as home students.

1.1 Aim of the pilot

The final aim of Pilot 1 was to facilitate all Erasmus and visiting students to be able to assess ICT and digital library infrastructure, support, and e-learning provision, before they select a university to visit or before the visit begins. The ideal situation would be that this information is available online and in more than one language, at least in the local language and in English.

1.2 Outcomes

The outcome of this pilot had to be a product that provides information on ICT to visiting and outgoing students. It might be only a demonstrator or prototype and not the final 'service' version, but the idea was that contents were complete. Different solutions could be proposed by different universities, and in fact that was the case as we will see in the following sections. Other intermediate outcomes that were produced in the implementation of the pilots served as support to achieve the final one; these included an item checklist of ICT aspects to be considered and a series of case studies with the results of the research in each university.

2. Methodology

Providing initial information and subsequent support to students was considered an essential requirement for all partners and, therefore, all partner universities in Victorious project took part in this pilot. The procedure we used in this pilot can be described in 4 differentiated phases that were subsequent in time. These are as follows:

2.1 Producing an item checklist

A first step was to agree on the information students would consider necessary and useful for an easy access and use of ICT when studying abroad. The outcome of this first phase was a checklist of items to be considered and included in information statements of this type. We agreed the final document should contain practical and relevant information, and not much repetition or superfluous data on the following items:

e-mail use:

- How to apply or get an e-mail account at the host university
- What other utilities can students access with an email account
- How long it will be accessible after finishing the stay in the host university

PC rooms

- Use of PCs in computer rooms: time restrictions and requirements.
- Printing and other facilities

Library

- How to access online catalogues: login requirements
- How to access Library electronic resources

VLE

- Availability of a Virtual Learning environment
- Details of use (login, etc.)

Online courses

- Virtual learning subjects that can be applied for and how to do it

- Where and when students can get support

Others

- VPN (Virtual Private Network) access
- Wireless connection
- Laptop loan

2.2 Checking availability of information

The second step was to check whether that information was already easily available on the web or by any other means (e.g. guides, booklets). At this point of the pilot we required the collaboration of the International Office. As experts on the issue of visiting and outgoing students, we proposed them a few questions about the quantity and quality of information on ICT available in each university taking part in the pilot. These are the questions used to interview the people in the International Office:

- 1 Is there any information available for visiting students to check about the digital facilities and services of the host University? What language is it available?
- 2 What does it include? What is missing? (eg. e-mail, PC Rooms, Library electronic access, VLE, VPN, etc.
- 3 Is this information online? Is it easily accessible?

Additionally we did a search on the Web and in other documents for International students, to actually check what was there available on how to use and take advantage of ICT while visiting another university.

As an outcome of the activities in this second phase we got several case studies reporting about the situation in each university. The studies summarised the answers to the previous questions

and the findings in our observation activity. They also included some comments contrasting what the students said about each specific university in a previous research and what we found out in our own research.

2.3 Gathering and editing information

A third phase consisted on contacting the university services that could supply the information needed (information desk, computing services, library, e-learning centre, etc.) and collecting all details to complete the items in the checklist.

The results of this phase were different in each university, but at the end we all had a complete dossier on those ICT aspects that could be important for visiting and outgoing students. Then each university had to decide how to edit that information to make it available to the students. There were different solutions as we will analyse in the results below.

2.4 Disseminating and testing information

This final phase consisted on disseminating the product of the previous phase (e.g. web pages, documents, etc). Additionally, some of the universities did an informal test asking a group of students to assess the information produced and see if it was complete and useful for them.

3. Results

3.1 Case studies

Part of the pilot's brief was to find out what information Erasmus and visiting students were able to have access before selecting university to visit or before visit begins. The interviews with the people in the International Office and the observation on the Web revealed some useful data that were collected in a number of case studies which will be summarised below.

The first conclusion was that, in most of the universities, there was no specific information for international students about use of ICT and digital infrastructures, and when there was something

there was no distinction between visiting students and home students. It normally consisted on a link to the computer service pages that in most of the cases were in the local language. So, even though in some of the universities much of the information students needed could be found on the Web, it was neither easy to find nor easy to understand because of the language or the especial technical language. In other cases, despite having much information available on the web site regarding ICT facilities, it was too extensive and therefore it lacked clarity making it unattractive and difficult to use. Finally, we have to say that, in general, the available information was only found on web sites and not in other booklets or guides especially produced for international students.

As to the actual facilities offered to visiting students, it seems that their situation is similar to that of local students. Normally, in all universities taking part in the pilot, Erasmus and visiting students can obtain a login and email address which allows them to access university IT facilities, such as digital library, pc rooms, VPN, etc. However as, in many cases, they do not have an easy access to this information, most of the students do not know about the possibilities and facilities they have until they spend some time in the host university. To be true, we have to say that there was one university where information on ICT was easy to find, as it was especially devoted to international students, linked from the International Office web site and in English, it was Turku University in Finland. The Universities of Groningen (Holland) and Pavia also had information easily accessible from the International Office web site, but at some point everything was in Dutch or Italian.

As a final conclusion of the case studies, it was proven that information on ICT use and infrastructure was not easily available for international students or at least not in a language that they can understand. Obviously, this gave more relevance to the next step in the pilot.

3.2 Final outcomes

After gathering all the information to complete the items in the checklist produced, the solution was different in each university, those that already had some information on their web pages tried to incorporate some of the missing information, for example the University of Groningen updated their

pages for International students on computer facilities, including all aspects recommended in this pilot and in English. In some universities where the information was only in one language, the existing documents were translated. For instance, in the University of Bristol the Victorious partners produced a leaflet in French with the information already available in the computing centre.

Other universities, like the University of Granada collected all the information suggested and prepared two documents, one in Spanish and one in English, to be delivered to the incoming and outgoing students together with other documentation in the International Office. These documents were also circulated by email and the International Office mean to include them in a future new website.

Finally, the most ambitious outcome was a web site developed by the University of Edinburgh containing links to all the information students would need (www.flp.ed.ac.uk/test). The site offered an organised set of links to the existing services of the university (microcomputer labs, wireless network etc) and proved to be a useful source of information. To create this site the partners in Edinburgh also used feedback from the student about problems that commonly arise when they search information. The web site is now being incorporated into the university information pages.

The rest of partners urged the International Offices to remedy the situation and adjust the existing pages for foreign students, either translating the content or including what is necessary.

3.3 Students' assessment

Only those universities which were able to make changes some months before the official period of the Victorious project finished could complete this final task. Therefore, it was carried out only by the University of Granada and the University of Edinburgh. In Edinburgh outgoing and incoming students were asked to assess the web site developed and check its usability and usefulness. They were asked if they had already looked for this information and been able to find it themselves and also about the best place to find this site, such as through a link from the International Office web site or as an email sent to them in advance of the exchange. Their responses were very positive, as they were impressed by the site and find it easy to navigate with enough information

for what they wanted. The answer to the second question indicated it should be linked on the Web from the International Office.

In the case of Granada a group of 4 students already staying in the University for some months were asked to check the documents prepared in English and Spanish and comment on its usefulness and omissions. Students were also asked to use the information. In a focus group meeting they were asked about what they already knew, what they learnt or found out in the document and whether they thought it would be useful to have the info before coming to Granada or at their arrival. As a summary of their answers we can say they did not know most of the information in the document and they were surprised by the facilities they could use and did not know about. Their final recommendation was to put this information on the web site of the International Office, as they all checked that before they arrived in Granada.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

We can say the implementation of this pilot has given evidence of the need for information and support on ICT services for international students and how this is an aspect normally neglected by the International Offices. It also demonstrates that, for many reasons, the Web is the place to put this information, as it would facilitate that students access the information from wherever they are and before visiting the host university.

As a conclusion of this pilot, we can say we achieved the final aim of facilitating all Erasmus and visiting students access to ICT information and we developed a product that could be used as a model to be adapted in each case. In fact, the test site developed by Edinburgh could be used as a model to follow by other universities.

Finally, we listed a series of recommendations for a university to be confident it is offering high quality in use of ICT to its visiting students. These recommendations are:

1. Check with the computing services that visiting students are allowed to use the same ICT facilities as home students.
2. Develop a web site with updated information on the use of ICT by incoming and outgoing students.

3. Be sure that the information on the site is in other languages rather than in the local language (at least in English).
4. Be sure that the site includes links to other relevant university pages (i.e. computing services, library, etc).
5. Include links to support services, telephones, email, and a desk help address where they can go to solve their problems.
6. Check that the explanations on the site are easy to understand and put into practice.
7. Ensure that visiting students can ask and receive support on ICT.
8. Be sure that visiting students are able to check the ICT facilities before arriving.