

# Coimbra Group & VICTORIOUS Project Seminar 'Student Mobility in a Digital World'

## Background

As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the universities of Europe are changing to new ways of working, but at the same time they continue to support some valuable traditions that are centuries old. Amongst these is an open-ness of each university to study visits and exchanges with students and staff of other universities, ensuring that the academic community is healthy and thriving, that ideas are exchanged and continue to flow freely in the public domain, and that cultural awareness is maintained at a high level.

Increasingly, universities are sharing students between them, either sequentially under the Erasmus mobility or similar schemes, or concurrently on joint courses that now include those delivered entirely by e-learning (part of an area known as 'virtual mobility'). These developments are supported by individual governments and through the enhanced Erasmus scheme and through the Erasmus Mundus programme. On Erasmus, Ján Figel', European Commissioner in charge of Education, Training, Culture and Multilingualism said "Encouraging mobility will remain a priority for the Commission in the coming years, as we expect to reach the target of 3-million Erasmus students by 2011 with almost 300,000 students per year."

<http://europa.eu.int/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/05/190&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

This intended expansion of both numbers of students and study modes raises challenges for universities which involve technical areas and business processes. To move to large scale physical and virtual exchanges requires a move from bespoke and hand-crafted processes to automated and systematic processes, which will include enrolment (matriculation), password generation, authority to access restricted materials plus awareness of the need for advance information about digital resources that may be hidden behind authentication barriers. Students accustomed to working with efficient ICT systems in one university may find a less well-developed situation in the one they visit, which will impact upon their view of the quality of the experience. Those who have good experiences with technology whilst away may feel less satisfied on return, and wish continued access to the good resources they had whilst on their exchange visit.

These impacts of technology on the physical exchange signal warnings for universities if they wish to venture into virtual exchanges, offering courses online to students at other universities. Automatic digital library access, information and matriculation online and well in advance of course starts, ability to see credits gained and for these to be passed smoothly to their home university will all be essentials of a successful experience. Few universities at the present time are in a position to be fully confident that all this works well and with little need for human intervention to problem-solve.

The VICTORIOUS Project is addressing a range of these challenges. Using 'physical mobility in a digital world' as a proxy for virtual mobility and also as a phenomenon which is with us on a large scale and which will remain, we are using our own universities (Bristol, Edinburgh, Granada, Groningen, Pavia, Siena, Tartu, Turku) as 'testbeds' and also exploring the experiences of students and universities across Europe. We have a particular interest in the universities of the Coimbra Group as they take more than their proportional share of Erasmus and other exchange students..

## The programme

The seminar was held during the Coimbra Group General Assembly at the University of Tartu in Estonia in May 2006. This offered the project team an opportunity to present preliminary findings to an informed audience drawn from senior staff of Coimbra Group universities with external invitees from national organisations.

The Rector of Tartu University, Professor Jaak Aaviksoo, opened the event with a welcome to the audience and offered his views on teaching and on technology. He thought that learning as an activity has not changed over the years. Research will contribute to how we teach and learn. No university can afford not to engage with technology but asked whether universities in Europe are lagging behind. Rankings indicate, for example through web visibility, that the Americans are more active and that the Chinese universities are very present in virtual space. This is an area that is important & essential and enhances universities although as we do not know what the outcome will be, COIMBRA Group universities need to be among the leaders.

Jeff Haywood (Edinburgh) then presented the rationale for the VICTORIOUS Project and the overall workplan that had been adopted, and preliminary desk research carried out in the areas of quality, interoperability and digital repositories, each of which underpins the provision of digital services to students, including those participating in exchanges. Sue Timmis and Angela Joyce (Bristol) and Cesare Zanca (Siena) described the gathering of the experiences of exchange students through interviews at all the partner universities, with video examples to highlight key points. Aune Valk (Tartu) and Steven Verjans (Leuven) offered an analysis of the data from an online student survey, which had ~2400 respondents from 29 European countries, with rich information about the details of the digital services and support offered (or not) by their home and host universities. Three of the six pilots being conducted in the partner universities were explained by Isabel Perez (Granada) and Kamakshi Rajagopal (Leuven). These were small scale tests of the universities' current or future provision of high quality information about digital services and resources before exchanges take place, the technical and administrative issues surrounding digital identity exchange through a mechanism called 'Shibboleth', and enabling students to access digital resources and services remotely as if they were on campus through virtual private networking or similar software. The seminar ended with a discussion with the audience about the developments at their own universities and also a look to the future in the area of student mobility in a digital world.

All presentations and the report can be downloaded from the Coimbra Group website at

<http://www.coimbra-group.be/victorious/>

I and the other members of the VICTORIOUS Project team would like to thank the Rector and staff of the University of Tartu for their generous support of the seminar.

Professor Jeff Haywood

University of Edinburgh & Past Chair, Coimbra Group e-Learning Task Force

August 2006



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Coimbra Group & VICTORIOUS Project Seminar,  
18th May 2006

## **Findings from student interviews & surveys I - student interviews**

Sue Timmis, University of Bristol

Angela Joyce, University of Bristol

Cesare Zanca, University of Siena

### **Interview process:**

The project team decided to investigate student experiences of ICT when studying abroad through interviews. From October 2005 to February 2006, each of the nine participating Universities interviewed between two and seven students. The targeted students were outgoing students returning from an exchange visit abroad and incoming students arriving to begin their period of study. Students had the opportunity to give their opinion, individually or in a group, on what was successful in their personal experience. Most of the interviews were video or audio recorded. The team collected data for 17 universities.

The interviews were structured using the same questions that were later used for a wider survey. These questions covered the areas of culture, access, support, resources and information, and all interviews used them although with some minor adaptations as a result of practical issues at each university.

As it was possible that we would wish to share the video and audio files the interviewed students were asked for their permission, however in the event the interview videos were sufficiently interesting for us to go back to some students and ask permission to make specific clips available at the Tartu Seminar.

### **Preliminary findings: overview**

The interviews showed the role of ICT as an integral part of the modern student exchange visit, and that the use of ICT at the student's 'home' institution tends to set the standard for comparison and expectation in their mind. Many students had very good experiences during their exchange visits and the great majority enjoyed them, even when there were problems.

The preliminary results of interviews survey helped us to classify universities according to their 'ICT culture'. For example, some are ICT-oriented, whereas others are apparently less concerned with ICT. Some institutions are flexible in their provision of and support for ICT, and others are more bureaucratic. The interviews also showed that there are sometimes big differences in the provision and use of ICT between different departments in the same institution. Even when students benefit from quite good access to PCs in a particular university, ICT may not be used in teaching activities as much as it could be. That is, some institutions offer very good resources but they are not used well because they have not developed an 'eLearning culture'.

The student interviews helped us to identify some of the enablers and barriers to use of ICT by students, which include the ease or difficulty of obtaining and using logins/passwords, flexibility or inflexibility of rules and access, differences in 'culture' between the home and host university towards students in general, and ease or difficulty in understanding the way that academic programmes are organised and delivered.

Some students gave very good and detailed feedback on their visits, and many were pleased to be asked about their experiences. Most students were happy with the information they received from their host university, and with the help provided when they had a problem. Unfortunately, some of them had bad experiences with little help and sometimes refusal to provide help. The

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main problem for many of them was the difficulty in understanding technical guidelines and rules in a foreign language. As a consequence, some had no means of access to last minute information which was often provided in the local language only. International students sometimes felt isolated.

### **Preliminary Findings: Detailed**

According to the students we interviewed, good access to digital resources and services was the main concern.

Most of the institutions offered PC-room facilities, some of them with convenient opening hours, no queue and fast internet connections. However, some others only opened few hours a day, students had to wait rather long time to get a PC, and the connection was sometimes very slow. When students could finally access a computer, they had to face login/password problems, which were not always solved quickly. Connection to the internet and access to email were necessary for them not only for educational purposes, but also because the internet is sometimes (perhaps mostly) the easiest way to communicate with family and friends whilst abroad.

Students also had problems accessing libraries and using digital libraries. Library access information is rarely available in English but is often quite complex and technical. Students were not informed that they were allowed to access the library resources. Language was again identified as a barrier to understanding and access. Students felt that information *should* be provided in the local language plus English or at least one additional foreign language. This is particularly true when the subject is difficult for no-technical students to understand. Students considered that network services in student areas or student rooms were very important when available, but it appears that this service is not widely available.

Many students complained about email services and access to email. A local email service was not always available for exchange students, forcing them to use their home university system (if they could) or to use external email. Even when it was provided, some students claimed they did not want to use that system because they knew that the service would not last longer than their stay abroad. Here again language problems existed as the help information needed to be able to access the email system was only in the local language.

Email featured strongly in student responses, not just because of its social value but because many universities used it as a communication channel with students and as a route to access services. Thus inability to use the local system had impacts on visiting students such as failure to receive important 'last minute' information about changes and exams. They tended to try to find alternative ways to overcome this such as MSN Messenger.

Another major concern was restrictions on access to web resources. The web is an essential tool for students living abroad but at some universities there were browser restrictions which meant that they could not use the web to deal with banks, travel and other services. Unlike local students, exchange students do not have a home PC to work with and rely on the university PCs for these essential activities.

Students normally have access to the same eLearning services as local students. Apparently most of them had some sort of access problem, and here again they needed to find alternative solutions. Difference in systems between universities meant that they had to learn some skills anew, for example VLE (virtual learning environment) which often differed between their host and home institutions.

Some Universities use paper-based solutions to digital problems: for example an “identity programme” for Erasmus students at one university in which students were given a paper attesting their right of access but there was no digital form of identification.

#### **Discussion points on student interviews:**

Students need ICT services even more than local students as they have to communicate with their home university, most of which is now done online, and they have social connections to maintain whilst away. They need information and access to the university systems as soon as they arrive, indeed ideally before arrival at host university so that they do not feel cut off and isolated. As a consequence, perhaps we need to adopt special access policies for exchange students to digital services and resources.

#### **Conclusions:**

- The interviews provided a detailed set of findings on the experiences of both incoming and outgoing students involved in placements abroad. They also helped to validate the questionnaire design for the survey and to identify additional issues that needed to be included. The institutions mentioned in the interviews presented a wide range of practices. University departments sometime present different levels of access, even in the same institution.
- They also helped us to understand student reactions towards ICT services abroad. Services offered by the university at home have a strong influence on students' expectation when abroad, sometimes were very much lower or higher in range and depth of provision. Students also showed their great ability to sort problems out and create 'handcrafts' solutions when needed.
- ICT services are often possibly accessible to students, but they have to be equally accessible to local and exchange students. Exchange students are in a special situation because their time abroad is limited. Access should not be time consuming. Language is almost always an issue. Support is needed in this direction. Induction and support are needed more than for local students.
- Access to ICT services and resources remains essential in terms of contact with teaching staff and materials, student life and integration, keeping in touch with family and friends at home.
- To make sure exchange students benefit from the available services should we set standard or minimal level of ICT service? What should the standard be?



## **Findings from student interviews & surveys 2 - student survey**

Aune Valk, University of Tartu

Steven Verjans, University of Leuven

### **Survey process:**

The letter of invitation to participate in the survey and the questionnaire were sent to Coimbra Group universities and to partner organisations such as European Universities Association (EUA), the European Student Association (ESIB) and the European Association for International Education (EAIE). The project partners also disseminated the questionnaire individually at a national level via Erasmus coordinators. The students were asked to fill in a questionnaire online, and offered the option to participate in a prize draw. It would take them approximately 20 minutes to fill in the questionnaire. A static PDF of the survey can be viewed at [www.victorious-project.org/](http://www.victorious-project.org/).

The questionnaire was made up of twenty-six questions grouped into broad areas. Students were asked what digital services at their host university they could access before they arrived, what they had available to them during their visit, and what digital services were still accessible after their stay abroad. We asked about the quality of these services and the support for their use. They were also questioned about the continuity of access during transitional periods (when moving from home to host and from host to home). We gathered information about them (age, gender), their home and host universities plus subjects of study. The questionnaire was anonymous but to enter the prize draw we required an email address.

### **Survey results:**

2378 students from 32 countries provided valid responses. Regarding the home country, there was a lower response rate from countries where the project partners were not represented (e.g. France) and a higher rate from VICTORIOUS partner countries e.g. UK, Finland and others. Regarding the host country the sample represented quite well the general major sources of students in the current ERASMUS population.

The majority of respondents were 21 to 25 years-old, with few over 30 years-old. 60% of the respondents were studying for a Bachelor (first) degree, 33% for a Master or other diploma. The male and female ratio was reasonably in agreement with the general student population (64% female against 36% male). Forty percent of respondents were studying sciences at their home university, with approximately 25% studying arts and the same science and engineering. The great majority took courses during their visit (90%) with 15% carrying out research and/or a dissertation. Half of the respondents stayed less than 6 months.

### **Services available online before the visit:**

Almost all students had sought information about their host university on the Internet before they left their home university. Only 10% could register for the courses they wished to take prior to their arrival at their host university.

The questionnaire results showed that language was an issue. Most of the institutions provided language courses – 86% of respondents said language courses were available - but when the institution provided courses taught in English, students may have expected that other services would be provided in English too.

Universities in five of the countries that were most represented in the survey were compared for their provision of information about student access to services. In general, the UK universities appeared to be the best providers of information online and French universities seemed to make the weakest provision. Italian universities seemed to provide students with very good online information about language courses. However, these are generalisations and experiences varied greatly between universities, and between departments in the same university.

The short written answers in the survey from students were generally quite positive. The students valued good information about social events upon arrival and the ability to contact teachers before they arrived.

### **Services available during the visit:**

Students were asked if online learning materials of various types were made available to them during their stay at their host university. Just over half said that such materials were available and 40% said that they used it. Almost half did not know, did not answer or reported that such material was not available. Services accessible online were categorised into active and passive information. Passive information (times, locations, availability, reading lists) was often available online, while activities like test, exams, discussion groups, were much less available online.

Students made interesting comments about materials available to them during their stay and their reasons for not using them. They remarked that information available online was not always relevant to their studies, and also pointed out the issue of languages, when websites were only written in a host language. This led to a difference in ease of access between local and Erasmus students.

Regarding library services, only 25-50% of respondents used the electronic services, mostly the electronic catalogue. Electronic journals, borrowing materials online and access to databases were used by a quarter of respondents and another 20% reported that these were available. A surprising 41% of students did not know whether electronic journals, subject-related bibliographic databases or an online borrowing record existed in their host university library. Fewer students, around 20%, did not know whether the library catalogue was online. Most of the students did not know if other services existed and whether they could use them. Importantly, some 30% of students continued to use the host university online library after returning to their home university.

Most students (70%) took a personal PC or laptop on their study visit, however, over 20% said that they were not able to connect them to the internet. This may partly explain why 75% of students reported that they used university computers. Approximately half the students considered access to PCs and the Internet to be a problem to some extent, and for 23% it was reported as a major problem. They were required to pay for only a few services, which were mainly printing services. This did not seem to bother them unduly, probably because this is also the case in their home university.

When facing a problem, 57% of the students said that they could get assistance, half of them face to face. This does suggest that other students may not have had such good support.

Access to the home university from the host university was not a major problem. Around two thirds of students could still access their home university email and digital library, and half could access their online student record. Access to online filespace was more of a problem, with only a quarter of respondents able to access these. However, this access to home services has to be considered in the light of what the home university offers, as some students did report rather low levels of home university services.

Many students had little knowledge of what digital services of their host university were, or would be, available to them after their return to their home university. Forty to fifty percent did not know this for the digital library, email, saved files and their student record online. Ability to access these services varied between 13% and 30% depending on service.

#### **Conclusions:**

- Almost all students could access some information online about their host university before going there, although what they were able to do online varied considerably, for example only ~14% could register for courses before going
- While at the host institution, the main problems for ~20% of students related to access to PCs and the internet
- In the case of online services at the host university, problems related to language; sometimes a limited availability of some services to exchange students; and lack of support (with 43% reporting little or no support)
- Most students lost their `connection` to their host institution after they had returned home, and this may matter more to students who visited a university with very good facilities

#### **Remarks from the audience:**

The Coimbra Group should take seriously the conclusions of the seminar. The outcomes could be linked to the CG Education & Training Task Force survey on student exchange.



## **Piloting digital service solutions to support student mobility**

Isabel Perèz, University of Granada

Kamakshi Rajagopal, University of Leuven

The VICTORIOUS project team decided to test the preparedness of universities for large scale mobility in a digital university and also to consider this as a proxy for large scale virtual mobility. The aim was to see what is actually being done in universities in several areas, and to explore how to address the points raised by students in the questionnaires.

### **Pilot testing process:**

The basis for the pilots came out of the interview and survey questions :

- What is offered to visiting students as a support?
- How much information can students find before they come?
- What is available for outgoing students when they leave?
- Does the library or IT service help students at a distance ?
- Digital identities, problem of passwords?
- ELearning materials?

The project partners were aware that universities are often not prepared, and in some cases not aware that they are not prepared for providing for the needs of mobile students, both those visiting them and their own students studying elsewhere.

The project partners identified six key questions related to libraries and repositories, interoperability and quality of experience, and used their own universities as case studies to explore the following aspects of physical and virtual mobility:

- Quality of information about the host university (Pilot 1)
- Making courses more 'visiting student friendly' (Pilot 2)
- Interconnections between virtual learning environments (Pilot 3)
- Making course choice from a remote university easier (Pilot 4)
- Sharing digital identities between universities (Pilot 5)
- Remote access to the full digital service of the home university (Pilot 6)

### **Finding and challenges:**

Pilots 1, 5 and 6 were selected for discussion during the Seminar.

### **Quality of information about the host university (Pilot 1):**

The first pilot aimed at exploring the quality of information available to supporting visiting students. In some universities, good information was available on the web, while in some

others, there was no information at all. Some students had little information about their host university before they arrived.

Firstly, pilot participants collected and translated available information into English as common language to work with. They discussed the project with their International Office as the most likely location involved in providing this information to visiting students and the website most likely to be interrogated by them. It appeared that the main information needed was about computer services, how to get an email account, library services, VPN (Virtual Private Network), wireless connection, access and use of computer rooms plus support for these services. Other useful information could be collected at the general information desk.

The main problem met by the participants to this pilot was that, because of the timing, they were not able to present it to visiting students on arrival as they had already arrived. The pilot was tested anyway and students discussed what they wished they *could* have found available when they had arrived some months previously. It appeared that students were not even aware of what information was available. When they discovered the document created by the pilot participants, they were surprised by the possibilities offered, especially the VPN (Virtual Private Network). They welcomed the initiative. The international offices were impressed too and decided to include the documents in their web page.

#### **Sharing digital identities between universities (Pilot 5):**

The aim of the fifth pilot was to explore the different ways to share student's digital identity between universities. When studying abroad, students have to combine the use of at least two digital identities (from home and host universities).

One possible solution is the use of a 'trust framework' within a federation of selected universities, in which each university allows certain defined information about students (and staff also if wished) to be searched online by other universities as needed. Students trying to connect to the host university via websites will be invisibly 'redirected' via their home university, which will check and confirm that it is indeed a known exchange student, and send this confirmation back to the host university. The host university then grants access to the student to the requested applications. As a consequence, the student would only need the one login and password for access to materials and services at both home and host universities.

The pilot team selected Shibboleth, a system that allows sharing of information, building on top of and without modifying existing individual organisation of the universities. It does not require actual **exchange** of personal information on teachers and students, merely reading access as required. The pilot testing aimed at delivering an online demonstration showing that the use of such a system is feasible and a report describing the steps to follow and the problems faced.

The pilot was tested in Bristol, Edinburgh and Leuven. A number of procedural policies and legal issues need to be solved to implement this system mostly related to the trust aspect. The importance of these issues depends on the size of the federation one wants to establish.

#### **Remote access to the full digital service of the home university (Pilot 6):**

The sixth pilot aims at solving the problem of off-campus access to digital services and materials for students who are away on a visit to another university. This pilot is also linked to the issue of allowing continuing access to students to the host university when they are back at their home institution.

The problem almost certainly arises in every single university because all resources cannot be made openly available on the internet. For example, journals and bibliographic databases have

licence restrictions. Therefore, users cannot be allowed unrestricted access to university resources from off the campus, and this applies whether they are away on a visit to another country or just in the same city but not in university premises.

The partners tried to find solutions that would allow access to students when off-campus and that would also work on campus too. Two solutions appeared feasible: use of a Virtual Private Network (VPN) or the use of a web-based authorisation system to allow access to resources. A VPN is a way to make the university 'private systems' see the users as if s/he were connected from a computer inside the university while s/he is actually connected from one outside the university. Web-based authorisation would require a user to enter via a portal or other single entry point which would tell 'tell' other services that this user was authorised to use restricted materials.

Unfortunately the use of the VPN is not very easy, even for a professional and so students could have difficulties with this approach. It requires setting up an running a small piece of software, which is simplest on the user's own computer, but cannot be used on many internet café or public PCs, and may not work even on the host university computer to enable access to the home university. The use of the web-based access should be easier for students, as all internet-connected PCs have web browsers, although not all allow all forms of information sharing. The benefit of this approach is that students already know how to use web-based resources and would only need only information about where to access and when it might not work for them.

#### **Conclusions:**

- Awareness of all the digital services useful and available to a mobile student is the main issue. It is not enough to make things available, it is also important to make people aware of the possibilities on offer. In these technical language is a problem, even for students with good language skills in academic settings.
- Another difficulty is bringing together the IT services, International Offices, Student Record Office, eLearning services and the Library to work on solutions to these problems. The partners identified lack of awareness of some of these problems even in IT departments.

#### **Plenary**

Discussion with the audience completed the list of issues stressed and raised by the project partners. Comments concerned the language issue, awareness raising in IT departments, and the difficulty of making different university departments work together.

The existence of higher level decisions was also identified as an issue as sometimes questions were dealt with at national level. This is the case with library issues in the UK. This dimension should also be taken into consideration.

University marketing strategies have to be taken in account. Universities try to keep a tight link with their students. But a good common access system could have the opposite effect.



## Ways forward

### Next step:

The partners are planning to send a questionnaire to universities to ask what they do and do not regarding the provision of services and support explored in the VICTORIOUS student survey and interviews. The outcomes of that survey plus the feedback from students will enable us to provide a checklist for universities to enable them to assess their services .

### Open questions for discussion:

Do the issues raised through the VICTORIOUS student survey and interviews agree with what the seminar participants know, or imagine to be the case, about their own institution?

The project partners suggested organising a single student identity inside the Coimbra Group Universities. Workload for the universities would be lowered by such a system, once they had surmounted the substantial amount of negotiation to set it up. The project partners enquired whether Coimbra Group Universities would be interested in such an initiative.

### Remarks from the audience:

The audience welcomed the identity-sharing initiative and agreed that Coimbra Group Universities should be involved.

In response to a question about the extent of negative views from student respondents, the partners clarified that even if they had appeared quite negative in their analysis, all students who responded were not really seriously worried about IT resource and access, and the great majority enjoyed their stay abroad regardless of these problems.

It was agreed that it would be valuable to try to establish a set of 'standards' for digital services provision.

A top-down approach is probably necessary to achieve all these proposals and perhaps solutions should be tested on 10 universities first, most appropriately within the Coimbra Group which are an alliance and have shared perspectives.

There was a suggestion that including teaching staff in the university questionnaire would be useful. Teachers are a very good source of information for students who would like to spend a period of study abroad.



## Programme

Start	End	Title	Presenters
0900	0910	Registration	
0910	0920	Welcome & introductions	Professor Jaak Aaviksoo, University of Tartu, Rector
0920	0945	Student Mobility in a Digital World - the rationale for the VICTORIOUS Project	Jeff Haywood (Edinburgh)
0945	1100	The student experience at host universities 1 our findings from student interviews	Sue Timmis (Bristol) Angela Joyce (Bristol) Cesare Zanca (Siena)
		The student experience at host universities 2 our findings from student surveys	Aune Valk (Tartu) Steven Verjans (Leuven)
1100	1115	Coffee break	
1115	1200	Piloting solutions for enhancing student experiences before, during and after visits to host universities	Isabel Perez (Granada) Kamakshi Rajagopal (Leuven) Jeff Haywood (Edinburgh)
1200	1225	Plenary discussion – “What could universities do to ensure a high quality student (digital) experience at their host university”?	Jeff Haywood (Edinburgh)
1225	1230	Close & thanks	Jeff Haywood (Edinburgh)

### Contributors:

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## List of participants

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