
A PROPOSAL TO HARMONIZE VIRTUAL MOBILITY AND THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORK

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Introduction

Europe has been investing in developing and implementing policies and tools to promote trans-European cooperation and mobility in many fields, including in Education. The Bologna Process is creating a European Higher Education Area where mobility, transparency and competitiveness are key concepts. The recent formal adoption of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) was an additional and important step to achieve mobility in higher and continuing education.

Joining e-learning and mobility together, we obtain a new concept Virtual Mobility, defined by elearningeuropa.info as "The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to obtain the same benefits as one would have with physical mobility but without the need to travel".

The project of this network proposes to help educational and training institutions to achieve Virtual Mobility and to guarantee EQF implementation through e-learning, aiming at finding specific obstacles in institutions and proposing concrete and innovative solutions. It will promote cooperation and joint work among partner organizations and will link with related initiatives. It will address other educational networks to help the dissemination of the results. More specifically, the objectives are:

- a) To define, exemplify and promote discussion about using e-learning as a scenario to foster national and international collaboration of Higher Education and Continuing Education organizations to achieve virtual mobility implementation.
- b) To critically assess and exchange results, ideas and innovation about European, national and local policies and initiatives in the area of Virtual Mobility, aiming at identifying obstacles and facilitators for collaboration.
- c) To cooperate in the elaboration and implementation of concrete Virtual Mobility scenarios, by establishing partnerships among the network institutions, and providing solutions and specific tools for different processes and stakeholders involved in the process.
- d) To elaborate, implement, make available and disseminate tools to analyse, support, manage at Institutional level, contributing to improve the Virtual Mobility in Europe while trying to implement EQF requirements

It is expected that through the results of this project network, other European HE and CE institutions will find guidance, case studies and tools to integrate Virtual Mobility in their practices, contributing to the construction of a realistic European Learning Space.

General Information of the Network

The network is entitled VIRQUAL: Network for integrating Virtual Mobility and European Qualification Framework in HE and CE Institutions. The reference designating the project in European database is 143748-PT-KA3NW. The start date is 1st January 2009 with the duration of three years. It is being financed by the LLL programme of the Socrates projects in Key Activity 3 concerning ICT/Network. The current site is virqual.up.pt.

The list of partners are Universidade do Porto, Portugal, Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, Spain, Technische Universität Wien, Austria, Eesti Infotehnoloogia Sihtasutus, Estonia, Gábor Dénes Főiskola, Turkey, Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi – Sürekli Eğitim Merkezi, Turkey, Universidade Aberta, Portugal,

Organization of the Project

The project is organized in twelve workpackages that cover all activities of the project. The core group is composed by four subject interest groups (SIG) that address the main objectives of the network. They were created and activities planned with the contribution of the partners. It is planned that there will be an active participation from partners and the leaders are expected to coordinate their groups.

A detailed planning of the project activities was created using the Microsoft Project software to provide adequate adaptation of the planning and control. It is expected that the use of the tool will improve the implementation of the project and provide data for the quality assurance of the project.

The SIG 1 is dedicated to Virtual Mobility, ECTS and E-learning. It is coordinated by Universidade Aberta. The questions addressed in this group are:

- a) How Institutions are dealing with Bologna?
- b) Which are the main obstacles?
- c) How can we adapt the ECTS system to on-line courses?
- d) How can we quantify ECTS?
- e) How can we develop competences and attitudes?
- f) What type of information systems can be defined?

The SIG 2 is entitled Research. It is coordinated by EITSA. The topics addressed are:

- a) What research what has been done in projects in the area of virtual mobility?
- b) Was virtual mobility addressed in the EQF?
- c) What was researched on the definition of ECTS in virtual mobility?
- d) Are there research projects done in e-learning with guidelines that may be used in general?

SIG 3 was denominated as E-learning and evaluation of Learning Outcomes of EQF. The leading partner is the Technical University of Vienna. The questions to analyze and search for an answer are:

- a) How can e-learning tools contribute to the evaluation of the learning objectives?
- b) How can we compare learning objectives with the learning outcomes?
- c) How can the learning outcomes be related with a possible insertion in the qualifications of the EQF?
- d) Can all learning outcomes be evaluated through e-learning?
- e) Which are the e-learning outcomes that can be evaluated through e-learning in a systematic process?

E-learning and EQF is the title of SIG 4. It is coordinated by Universidade do Minho. The questions concerning this SIG are:

- a) How can e-learning courses contribute to the acquisition of qualifications in different levels of the EQF?

- b) Can we acquire all types of qualifications through e-learning?
- c) Which are the qualifications acquired by e-learning and the characteristics of these qualifications?
- d) What are the reasons why some qualifications can not be acquired by e-learning?

Calendar and Deliverables of the project

There are twelve work-packages (WP) and each one provides several deliverables and outputs. WP1 is dedicated to management of the project and has as outputs the intermediate report (at month 18 – m18) and final report (m36) plus the planning of the network (m2). WP2 is concerned with the face to face meetings and has planned seven meetings (m2, m6, m13, m17, m25, m30 and m35). WP3 is concentrated on the quality evaluation plan (m2) and evaluation reports (m6, m12, m18, m24, m30 and m36).

WP4 consists of the creation of the virtual platform to support the network (m6) and operation (until m36). WP5 is related with SIG1, WP6 with SIG2, WP7 with SIG3 and WP8 with SIG4. All have a similar set of outputs and these are the plan (m3), case studies (m10), model of virtual mobility versus EQF (m18), an online seminar (m28) and a report (m30).

WP9 is dedicated to the production of guidelines and procedures for virtual mobility using EQF in Higher Education (m32). WP10 is directed at dissemination and has the intent to create a project website (m2), to write several papers about the project (m6-m34), to produce a digital newsletter (m4-m36), to have a European workshop for presentation of the project results (m34) and to print several other dissemination materials (m32). WP11 is composed of national workshops in the countries of the partners for presentation of the project results (m30-m34). WP12 is concentrated in the creation of the exploitation plan (m24 – m34).

Growing the Network

This is a proposal of the project that aims at disseminating and promoting the activities of the current Virqual Network. It intends to encourage other institutions to participate in this network, joining the SIGs and contributing to the development of the European common knowledge in this area. This participation may be done as passive members willing to receive information or as active contributors in the research, in the debate and in the definition of the framework of the integration of virtual mobility and EQF.

Possible participants of this network are invited to join one of the four discussion groups that will address research questions of the SIGs. These are in fact the work-packages where the contribution of other institutions will be more influential and more useful to all, partners and newcomers alike. Of course the other work-packages are accessible for contribution but with expected reduced impact on the results.

In fact the definition of the terms of how this linkage, between virtual mobility and the system of the EQF, will be established, will be tested and will be accepted is the main advancement expected from this project. Therefore the contribution of a large group of interested partners and of other institutions may lead to an easier acceptance of any proposal by the learning community of e-learning. Another possible benefit of being involved as non formal partners can be the access to the information created in this project with an eventual creation of a network to progress in this theme.

References

1. “The European Qualifications Framework (EQF)” webpage, http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm
2. “European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)” webpage, http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc48_en.htm
3. “The European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)” webpage, http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc50_en.htm