



Editorial

During the last decade, an increasing amount of attention has been awarded by Governments but also other political, social and economical actors to mobility in Europe and most especially Higher Education student mobility. This has been related to the very ambitious and complex political initiative of implementing the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). In the aftermath of the success of the Erasmus Programme open student exchange project, the EHEA was indeed a breakthrough aimed at transforming the European Higher Education system into the most advanced and attractive in the world. As stated in the now world-famous Bologna Declaration: «an open European area for higher learning carries a wealth of positive perspectives». The **cornerstone** of this enormously difficult undertaking **was** of course **the Europe-wide adoption of the ECTS credit system and of competence-based curricula**.

Anyway, the combination of the EHEA with the widespread implementation of e-learning in Higher Education institutions around the world and particularly in Europe gave way also to a new and even more ambitious form of student mobility: virtual mobility. In this new kind of mobility, students stay at their home university or even at home or at their workplace without having to physically move to another place to learn. **By using virtual mobility, students have access to courses and study schemes in a foreign country, engaging in a learning experience with teachers and fellow students living abroad in one or more different countries via the use of virtual learning environments**. This is indeed a very different experience from the physical form of student mobility. However, it can be equally effective in educational terms because **it complements the benefits of physical student mobility**. In fact, virtual mobility can be culturally rewarding and it also addresses relevant kinds of student needs that are not accommodated by physical mobility. Furthermore, it fosters cross-country higher education, allowing for the globalization of Higher Education and employability.

In **VIRQUAL, SIG¹ 1** research refers precisely to the topic of how Virtual Mobility in the EHEA can be fostered by the combined institutional implementation of the ECTS and E-learning. In the first part of our research **we addressed the most important barriers to virtual and analyzed all the problematic of student mobility in a non-physical learning and cultural environment**. In the second phase of the research, **SIG 1 will aim at trying to set a model for facilitating virtual mobility**. Based on the findings of phase one, we will submit a set of guidelines and tools to apply when developing virtual mobility projects, including a model of agreements between institutions relating this issue and ECTS calculation recommendations for online activities.

So far, in our research we've been able to identify four **main obstacles** to the development of widespread virtual student mobility schemes in Europe. The first one is the issue of **student workload calculation**. In fact, even adopting the common ECTS framework, institutions are using very different forms of calculating student workload in online environments. Secondly, there's the issue of **assessment**. Not many Higher Education Institutions actually allow for students to conduct exams in their home country. Thirdly, there's the need to make **academic administrative procedures** compatible throughout Europe. Finally, there's the issue of **language**. In fact, virtual mobility will not be possible only by the adoption of English as a common language for students in Europe.

By the research being conducted in VIRQUAL and most especially in SIG 1 we expect to be able to **develop a set of recommendations that could serve as a reference model for European Higher Education institutions and help removing this obstacles to virtual mobility**.

¹ Special Interest Group



SIG 1: Virtual Mobility, ECTS and E-learning

SIG1 has been looking into the current state of affairs in Europe regarding Virtual Mobility (VM), ECTS and e-Learning. Our aim is to start establishing some **common understanding on possible organizational, pedagogical and technical approaches to the implementation of VM within the European Qualification Framework**.

During this first year of work, we addressed the broad guidelines issued by the EHEA implementation process, both in terms of the importance awarded to mobility and to qualifications certification and validation within Europe. In fact, although mobility is one of the action lines of the Bologna Process where there is still a lot of work to be done. VM is hardly ever referred in the documentation but **the definition of mobility of students proposed by the Working Groups does not exclude it**. There are open opportunities for the growth of VM since it **may help to overcome some of the identified obstacles to traditional mobility**.

Another action line of this SIG, was trying to position in the scenario of the ongoing European research being conducted on the topic of VM and a basic definition of the concept was proposed. We also have been describing **how HEI are dealing both with the EHEA implementation and the development of e-learning**, especially in connection with institutional strategies. Finally, we are analyzing the **main difficulties VM is facing** and also **how HEI have been adopting the ECTS system** in sync with a **new competence-based curriculum**.

SIG 2: Fundamental Research

The project team gathered **four detailed case studies** of different type and nature. To gain a better overview **a table was created to display the essential factors of each case study**. Both successful and failed projects were considered to present a balanced view for the practical reality of implementing Virtual Mobility.

Each case study was characterized based on their prevailing nature of the project in respect of outcome and usability for further research. An **evaluation repository of cross-institutional Virtual Campus** initiatives across Europe, an **operational model of Virtual Mobility in Higher Education** and two **online respectively blended learning courses** were analyzed. The project goal, main outcome, its strengths and weaknesses outline the information of the case study in a few sentences. These diverse case studies implicitly drew attention to the underlying learning potential for the project team.

Therewith the integrated case study report added a refined level of information to the detailed work done already in order to make knowledge transfer and learning from the case studies easier and more efficient. Next steps for further analyses surfaced.



SIG 3:

E-learning & evaluation of learning outcomes

The EQF – and in consequence the different national qualifications frameworks – are at the moment a political compromise and instrument for further development, but not an operationalised tool for comparison of outcomes of formal learning processes and mutual recognition of certificates and degrees.

The ECTS defines learning outcomes as “statements of **what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after a completion of a process of learning**” (EU, 2004). Learning outcomes are a description of the abilities of learners after having gone through a planned (formal) or spontaneous learning process (informal learning).

Central for the purposes of virtual mobility are the correlations between learning outcomes and qualification frameworks, credit systems and mobility & recognition. But for strategic reasons also the following topics will be relevant: **lifelong learning, curricula reform** and design **and quality assurance**.

The question how **learning outcomes** of studying abroad **can be recognised** is crucial for the promotion of virtual (and physical) mobility. The main problem in this context is the low information value of assessment (in terms of trustable documentation of student’s competences) if examinations are based on poorly or even completely undefined learning objectives.

In contrast to this unsatisfactory situation the adoption of learning outcomes would provide sufficient information. From this point of view clear, adequately detailed, and – as far as possible – **standardised descriptions of learning outcomes in combination with compatible assessment procedures** can be assumed as one of the main promoters of virtual mobility with respect to both, students and institutions. Students would be enabled to make a pinpoint choice of educational offers which meet their needs perfectly and reliably. Additionally the administrative costs of recognition could be reduced to a minimum. Institutions on the other hand could rely on the certified competences achieved abroad and handle them in the same way as internally achieved ones – again with minimal administrative effort.

SIG 4:

E-learning contributions to EQF

SIG4 has been looking into the current state of the art in Europe regarding e-learning and EQF. Our aim is **to understand the ways e-learning can contribute to the implementation of EQF – levels 5 to 8**.

During this first year of work, we researched on **policies and practices** in what concern **e-learning and virtual campus in Europe, EQF and NQF** current state of implementation and Virtual Mobility guidelines.

EQF and NQF refer to descriptors that can guaranty the qualification and certification levels in Europe allowing students and professional’s mobility within European education and labour markets. The e-learning contributions for the integration of EQF, bologna and lifelong learning are a huge challenge.

We begin to look **for case studies about the adoption of EQF/NQF in different EU countries**, especially in what concerns the application of e-learning as possible ways of learning.

Our **first aim** is to envisage **the ways e-learning will impose itself as a tool to solve many problems arising in the “new university”**. The communication between students and teachers must be faster and more adequate to the contextual needs of the students (introducing questions related with the location of students -off-campus, in the workplace, anywhere), the learning outcomes (that should be related with the “activities” performed by learners), the virtual mobility of students and teachers, the learning systems, e-learning technologies and pedagogies in use by each organization.

Second aim is to address the **Recognition of Prior Learning and how to establish better links** between formal, informal and non-formal learning?

Finally the SIG will explore the ways to **establish better links between VET and EHEA**.

A key activity of this SIG is to serve as an **observatory, maintaining up-to-date information on European projects on e-learning and EQF** for HE and CE.



VIRQUAL

Virtual Mobility and
European Qualification
Framework

Newsletter Nr. 2

<http://virqual.up.pt/>

February 2010

INFO - VIRQUAL

- Know VIRQUAL in a quick way

[Virqual in a nutshell](#)

- VIRQUAL is one year old!

To be updated in its work done and next steps visit its web at <http://virqual.up.pt/>

- VIRQUAL is in Facebook

Social networks are an important tool to communicate and share information with people. You can find general information of the project on the wall of FACEBOOK

- VIRQUAL Project will be at EDEN 9th – 10th of June, so save those days!!

- <http://www.eden-online.org/eden.php?menuId=485>

- This workshop 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 discussions 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 this debate and in the definition of the framework of the integration of virtual mobility and EQF.

- Participants are invited to join one of the **thematic discussions groups** that will address research questions of the network in this workshop. 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.



More Upcoming activities

Name and link	Date	Place
I Congreso Iberoamericano sobre Calidad de la Formación Virtual (CAFVIR 2010) + info	24 & 26 February 2010	Alcalá de Henares Spain
NTED2010 (International Technology, Education and Development Conference) + info	8, 9 & 10 March 2010	Valencia Spain
Le salon de la formation à distance et en ligne + info	9, 10 & 11 March 2010	Paris, France
Second Bologna Policy Forum, Building the Global Knowledge Society: Systemic and Institutional Change in Higher Education" + info	12 March 2010	Vienna, Austria
The 8th e-Assessment Question' Using Technology to Assess and Support Learning + info	17 & 18 March 2010	London, United Kingdom
GUIDE Association International Workshop 2010 New Challenges for e-learning in cultural, scientific and socio-economic development + info	18 & 19 March 2010	Rome, Italy
National Qualifications Frameworks and the European Overarching Frameworks: Supporting Lifelong Learning in European Education and Training' + info	15 April 2010	Dublin, Castle
Defence Academies and Colleges e-Learning Conference + info	21 & 23 April 2010	The Hague Netherlands
Future-Learning 3rd International Future-Learning Conference On Innovations in Learning for the Future 2010:e-Learning + info	10 & 14 May 2010	Istanbul, Turkey
EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR DISTANCE LEARNING Conference 2010: Making Quality Work New developments in Distance Education + info	19 & 21 May 2010	Cambridge, United Kingdom
EDEN 2010 Annual Conference + info	9 & 12 June 2010	Valencia, Spain
ICEEEL 2010 : "International Conference on e-Education and e-Learning" + info	28 & 30 June 2010	Paris, France
ICOLDE 2010 : "International Conference on Open Learning and Distance Education" + info	14 & 16 July 2010	London, United Kingdom
13 th ICL Conference - ICL2010 + info	15 & 17 September 2010	Hasselt, Belgium
EADTU (European Association of Distance Teaching Universities) Annual Conference 2010 'Strategies and Business Models for Lifelong Learning' + info	27 & 29 September 2010	Zermatt Switzerland
9 th European Conference on e-Learning + info	4 & 5 November 2010	Porto, Portugal