Virtual mobility: providing opportunities for students in global health education?

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Introduction

- Harmonization of education through the Bologna process has facilitated student mobility between countries

- Students can opt to study at other institutions during their programme.

- Physical mobility improves cultural, personal and career outcomes

- Educational institutes may offer students modules on topics in which they lack expertise.

It has been speculated that virtual mobility can offer similar benefits compared to physical mobility

Student mobility: Internationalization and ICT

Mobility (physical or virtual): Internationalisation of education

- **Students perspective**: students follow a learning activity, a course or part of a curriculum in another university

- **Institutional perspective**: 2 or more institutions organize and recognize study periods of their students followed in an exchange programme or in a networked/joined programme.

Physical mobility: Student travels to another institute

- Need for visa, housing, ticket, extra expenses

- Student not present for other duties (private or professional)

Virtual mobility: Mobility is organized blended or completely online depending on educational design

- Needs good internet connection and computer literacy

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Pilot blended Master with virtual mobility

Blended MSc programme in international/global health in 3 training institutes

22 students from 16 countries and diverse professional background enrolled in one of the institutes

- Face to face component: core module in own institute

- E-learning: advanced modules: 4 modules of 5 EC

- Distance or face to face: thesis/dissertation

A web-developer assisted module coordinators to transfer face to face modules to e-learning modules

Context of the pilot

Pre-existing network TropEd

- International network of institutes for higher education in international/global health from Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia and Latin America

- Focus on improving the management of health services for disadvantaged populations

- Based on mobility of people, exchange of experiences in different disciplines and establishment of a common standard in education and training

  - Similar educational vision (peer to peer learning)
  - Similar (international) student profiles: work experience, degree, language
  - Core module objectives defined
  - Well established quality assurance within the network
  - 22 Years of experience with physical mobility and intercultural teaching

Context: differences between institutes

- Platforms (Moodle, Blackboard, Canvas)

- Teaching methodologies and assessments

- Experience in use of ICT for learning

- Expertise and course subjects

  - TB epidemiology
  - Project design and management
  - Research Design and proposal writing
  - Mapping inequalities (Geographical information systems)
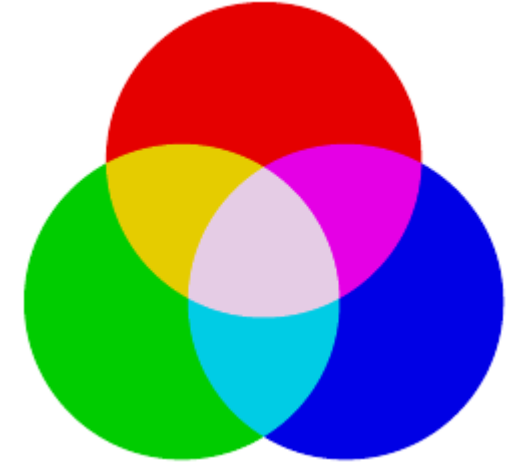
This study aims to evaluate experiences with virtual mobility from students, educators and institutes

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Methods

- Baseline survey (online) on students expectations on virtual mobility among students

- Focus group discussion with students after completion of the programme

- Semi structured interviews after completion of the programme with
  - Students
  - Teachers
  - Institute managers

- Analysis:
  - Coding in Nvivo
  - Looking for common themes
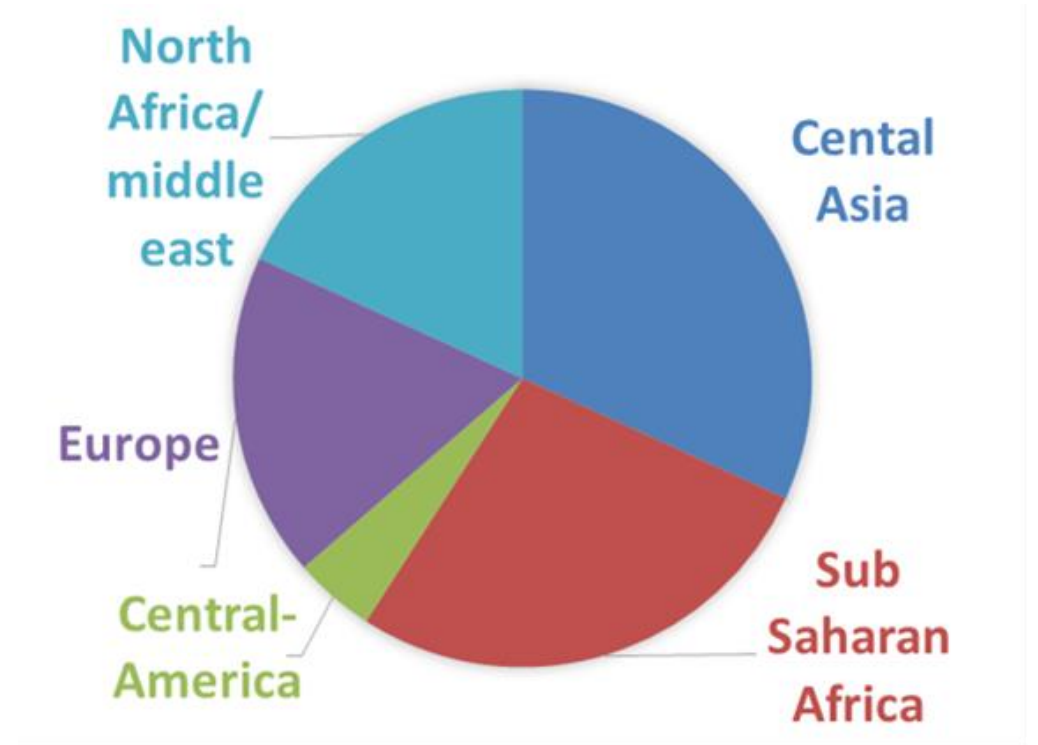
Students enrolled N=22
Mostly: MD, nurse, dentist, pharmacist, BPH
Age 27-43, 41% Female

Results on student perspective

Students experienced benefits of virtual mobility comparable to those of physical mobility

- Variability in learning methods

- Development of digital and online collaborative competencies

- Benefits to their professional network

- Friendships? Cultural exchange with guest country?

Challenges consisted of

- Enrolment in different platforms

- Technical and communication issues

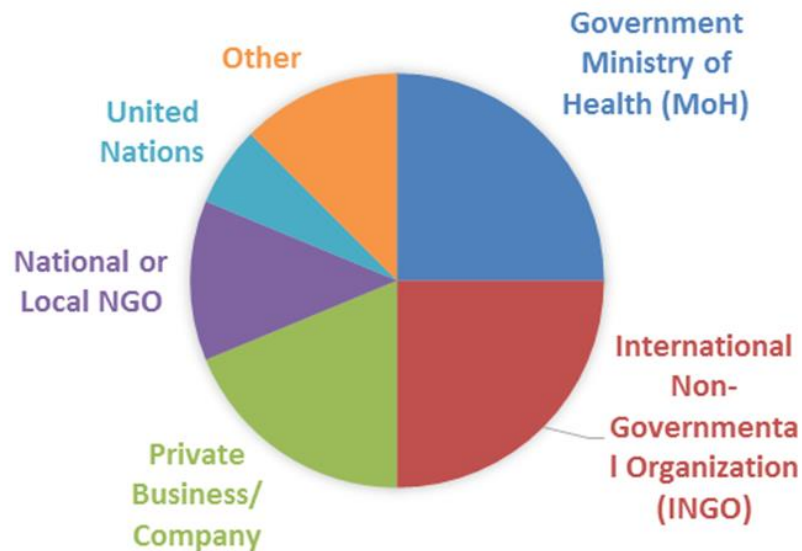- Diverse marking methods across institutes

Opening up education

- Students found virtual mobility flexible in terms of content, use of resources like different libraries and possible combination with work and care for dependents

- They experienced mobility while avoiding visa application and housing issues

ORGANISATION WHERE THEY
WORKED BEFORE

- *I could study whilst keeping my job...*
- *I wouldn't have been able to attend course in other locations in person with a toddler*
- *It worked out with the international career of my partner*
- *I will be able to look after my family, go to work while I will be studying*

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Results: Teacher perspective

- Benefit to students: relevant digital competencies for global health and increased professional network

- Appreciated student diversity:
  - increased access for students from LMIC

- Increased online teaching and moderation skills

- Stimulated innovation in assessment, teaching

- Took a lot of time to develop

- Limited learning from colleagues from other institutes

'But even our own students are so different anyway, and I am not sure that the fact that student at another institution, make them represent that institution. So I am not sure how to compare them'

The idea has always been with this module is to stimulate the real life, in the sense that in real life situations, we always have a team working together to do a project and then submit to the funders and I found the idea of actually trying to do this online to be thought provoking in terms of competence.'

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Challenges for teachers/institutes

Financial challenges

- University system does not give funding per e-learning student
- Higher management not fully aware of the cost needed to set up and manage e-learning

Communication challenges

- The internal communication was not always clear within the program leading to misunderstandings
- Expectations for the student's time investment in courses were not always managed well

Results institutional perspective

Potential benefits perceived by management include

- Increased collaboration opportunities with southern partners
  - Support Southern institutions to start online courses.
  - Have students follow online courses in different institutes

- Opening up education
  - Reach groups of students who cannot get visa/afford travel

- Peer to peer learning from the other institutes
  - Different expertise available in other institutes

- Enhanced position in the 'market'
  - increases student numbers
  - the sustainability, competiveness and quality of online courses increase with international students

"Advantage of working with other institutes as compared to alone, is that it boosts the program, you have commitments to others to deliver something and other competent people to discuss issues with. You get ideas from meetings, it is inspiring"

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Discussion

In this pilot, the <u>benefits</u> to virtual mobility were mostly because of use of e-learning and to a lesser extent because of internationalization

- Intercultural aspects not specifically mentioned as an advantage nor disadvantaged – possibly because students and teachers were already accustomed

- Classrooms in face to face component are already intercultural, international, multidisciplinary

- The involved training institutes came from a face to face training perspective

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Discussion

Challenges were also mostly related to use of ICT and also to internationalization or collaboration between institutes

- Staff is already used to teach intercultural audiences

- Important to have: ICT support (web developer), institutional prioritization and resources, an e-learning platform, staff motivation to work with ICT

- In this pilot limited peer to peer learning organized between institutes

- Pre-existing network arrangement made collaboration more smoothly, though still challenges arose (alignment in schedules)

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Conclusions and recommendations

- Virtual mobility may contribute to the EU vision to open up education and by use of technology **widen access** to programmes with mobility to people who are constrained to leave home

- Virtual mobility potentially contributes to development of **digital competencies** as described in the European Digital Competence Framework. These are relevant to global health where online collaboration is frequent

- Virtual mobility is seen as an attractive alternative to physical mobility for students and educational institutes provided that institutes share a **similar vision, sufficient trust and interest in ICT for learning**

- Further investment in peer to peer learning between educational institutes may optimize benefits for teaching staff

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