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Digital internationalization through academic mobility

Over recent decades, the international dimension of higher education has become an essential part of the agenda of higher education institutions and governments all over the world. While countries compete with each other to host international students, supranational organisations, such as the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and UNESCO, compare the numbers of international students in several countries in order to shed light on the level of internationalisation of different higher education systems.

Internationalisation has traditionally been embraced by higher education stakeholders for its academic, economic, social/cultural and political advantages. To access these benefits, universities, on the one hand, host international students at their own institutions and, on the other hand, send their own students to study abroad.

The figures reveal that physical mobility-oriented internationalisation does not ensure internationalisation for all on its own. For this reason, strategies for internationalisation at home need to be employed to help more students experience an international curriculum, classmates and instructors. An interesting way of achieving this might be internationalisation via distance learning, which provides students with the relative independence of time and space.

Distance learning is now an integral part of mass higher education systems in emerging countries and could be an essential tool for internationalising their systems. It is

estimated that at least 21 million students from emerging countries have studied through distance higher education in recent years and this number is growing very quickly. Despite standart forms of academic mobility we observe new type of international studying as virtual mobility, studying through e-learning.

Virtual mobility is an innovation in mobility schemes to provide students an international experience on-line. It is meant for students that are not in a position to travel because of other commitments or want to combine a virtual mobility scheme with a physical mobility scheme.

By virtual mobility, students are offered the opportunity to take a course from a foreign university within a mainstreamed setting. Credits are accepted, the course is in line with the offerings of your own university and you can do the examination facilitated by your own university. The students will have an international experience by taking part in a programme fully developed by a foreign university, sometimes in a different language, including virtual meetings between students, and access to their library and student support.

It is not a second best alternative to physical mobility but an innovation in mobility that has its own benefits. Students develop for example skills to work or even manage teams on-line like in the (new) real world. Also, students can visit several universities online and build a more specialised or individual study-programme. It is different from distance education as virtual mobility is based on a contract between universities (to facilitate mobility) and not between a student and a university like distance education is. Therefore it is an extended, mainstreamed offer by your own university with an international experience as the main goal.

UNESCO provides the list of educational applications, platforms and resources aim to implement student learning online. They are categorized based on distance learning needs, but most of them offer functionalities across multiple categories.

CenturyTech – Personal learning pathways with micro-lessons to address gaps in knowledge, challenge students and promote long-term memory retention. Edmodo–

Tools and resources to manage classrooms and engage students remotely, offering a variety of languages.

Google Classroom – Helps classes connect remotely, communicate and stay-organized. Moodle – Community-driven and globally-supported open learning platform. Seesaw – Enables the creation of collaborative and sharable digital learning portfolios and learning resources. [2]

It is important to note here that having international distance students can serve internationalisation of higher education in emerging countries in several ways:

Academically, local students and academics can get a chance to meet international students in online classes and exchange knowledge.

Economically, universities generate income from international distance students' tuition fees.

Socially or culturally, international students can learn about other emerging countries' culture and history.

And politically, those countries can gain soft power as their universities access people in different parts of the world over the internet.

Internationalisation can be carried out not only via physical mobility but also through a wide range of initiatives through distance education at home. As universities make academic partnerships for physical mobility, why can they not make them for digital mobility? Students could do distance courses or modules of the foreign partner-institution at their home university.

It is important to investigate the importance of a face-to-face element for digital internationalisation: short face-to-face courses at the foreign institution – lasting only some days or a few weeks – could be an interesting way of complementing digital mobility experiences while keeping costs down.

It is time to extend the range of internationalisation initiatives and discuss new efforts to facilitate more equal opportunities for internationalisation that go beyond physical mobility. Digital internationalisation of higher education is a key element in this process.

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