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INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS IN TIMES OF VIRTUAL STUDENTS' MOBILITY

Irina A. Ushanova (a)*, Ksenija Vossmiller (b)
*Corresponding author

(a) Yaroslav-the-Wise Novgorod State University (NovSU), Veliky Novgorod, Russian Federation,
irina.ushanova@novsu.ru
(b) Stiftung Universität Hildesheim, Hildesheim, Germany, vossmiller@outlook.com

Abstract

While the goal of exchange programs of international university cooperation was, among other things, to provide students with an opportunity to deepen their acquired intercultural knowledge of the respective target country on site, in the context of a pandemic it is necessary to meet the high demand for virtual exchange alternatives. In the context of the currently existing virtual mobility of students of the University of Novgorod with FAU Erlangen-Nuremberg, University of Hildesheim as well as FH Bielefeld, questions of the digital implementation of intercultural teaching and learning formats arise. Based on the assumption that a sensitizing preparation of students with regard to the diverging institutional demands is necessary, the article will discuss opportunities and challenges of Virtual Student Mobility. For this purpose, the students of Novgorod University who participated in 2020-2021 in digital exchange programs were surveyed. The data collection method was a written survey using a questionnaire. The results of the survey showed the expectations of students from virtual exchange, as well as the problems that students face in the context of virtual student mobility. In this context it is interesting to see what goals universities should set in order to involve a larger number of students in international academic educational exchanges.

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1. Introduction

The goal of exchange programs of international university cooperation is, among other things, to provide students with an opportunity to deepen their acquired intercultural knowledge of the respective destination country on site. In this regard, academic "mobility enables to obtain new knowledge and professional skills, and to develop personal qualities such as cultural adaptation" (Puchkov et al., 2018, p. 93). Exchange students are exposed to situations that they can analyze and solve from the perspective of their own culture as well as the culture around them. Universities as institutions thus only become places of learning through the students, where intercultural communication is made possible with the help of the students (Puchkov et al., 2018, p. 93). Due to mainly financial requirements, the number of Russian exchange students participating in internationalization programs remains relatively low, which is generally in line with the number of participants in exchange programs (de Wit, 2020). In his latest publications, de Wit (2020) emphasizes that internationalization is not an end in itself. It should not serve the interests of a small elite group of mobile students, but be addressed to all students and scholars, thereby deepening its social function: "[…] internationalization is not a goal in itself but needs to be directed toward quality improvement, that it should not be of interest to a small elite group of mobile students and scholars but directed to all students and scholars, and that it should make a contribution to society" (de Wit, 2020, p. 4).

The negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on internationalization and international student mobility is already well known. Over the past year and a half of the coronavirus pandemic, student mobility has declined due to travel restrictions, campus closures, and concerns about the health and safety of students.

2. Problem Statement

Problems arising during the implementation of international academic mobility have been considered for quite a long time by both Russian scientists (Kolosova & Poplavskaya, 2017; Puchkov et al., 2018; Shelkunova & Artyukhova, 2019; Ushanova et al., 2019; Ushanova, et al., 2020; Zagvyazinskiy et al., 2020). However, the coronavirus pandemic has presented us with new challenges. Scientists continue to argue about the consequences of the pandemic for higher education and academic mobility (Altbach & de Wit, 2020; Leask & Green, 2020; Marinoni, et al., 2020): "Compared with the traditional pull–push factors for international student mobility, the COVID-19 pandemic has re-ordered the factors that students are considering to study abroad" (Mok et al., 2021, p. 9). According to Mok et al. (2021) personal safety matters related to individual well-being and socially friendly environments are becoming increasingly important variables affecting students' plans for overseas learning against the COVID-19 crisis context.

Due to the mobility restrictions of the coronavirus pandemic, it is currently necessary to liberalize academic internationalization in addition to the aforementioned demand for virtual exchange alternatives (Marinoni et al., 2020). In this context, one tendency is gaining enormous relevance: internationalization at home. Based on the current practice of Novgorod State University, the following forms of internationalization at home can be distinguished:

- Internationalization of curricula with the help of authentic scientific sources and the results of international studies.

- Joint online courses and online modules in which international and Russian students participate in a virtual seminar room.

- Participation of students and teachers in international online conferences, online workshops, winter/summer schools .

- Implementation of double degree programs in online format (new release 2020/21).

- Semester abroad programs in online format (new publication 2020/21).

The last four items could be called virtual academic mobility. According to Erasmus +, virtual mobility is defined as "[…] a set of activities supported by Information and Communication Technologies, including e-learning, that realise or facilitate international, collaborative experiences in a context of teaching, training or learning" (Achten et al., 2010, p. 2).

A distinction is made between fully virtual mobility and blended mobility. The latter is defined as "[…] combination of physical mobility and a virtual component, facilitating collaborative online learning exchange/teamwork" (Achten et al., 2010, p. 2).

3.   Research Questions

In analyzing the initial experiences with virtual mobility, we defined the following question:

- What expectations do students have of virtual exchange?
- What opportunities and challenges do students face in virtual student mobility?
- What exactly does the support of virtually mobile students mean for the design of internationalization at home?

4.   Purpose of the Study

Thus, internationalization at home comes to the fore in the time of crisis. Within the framework of the currently existing virtual mobility of the students of the University of Novgorod with FAU Erlangen-Nuremberg (Winter Schools), University of Hildesheim (semester abroad) as well as FH Bielefeld (semester abroad), the students take part in the exchange programs in the academic year 2020/21. The exchange programs take place either completely from Novgorod, or the students take the opportunity to study digitally from the location of the target university. Now the question of students' expectations from the digital format of the exchange is interesting. In addition, the preparation of the students for the exchange gains relevance: Due to the compressed exchange with the teaching staff and fellow students, the possibilities of interpersonal exchange are reduced to, among other things, communication via email as well as digital teaching. This reduction also separates the pre-prepared students from the sensitized participants in the exchange program in their performance, as experience shows. In the context of promoting international student mobility, questions about the digital implementation of intercultural teaching and learning formats as well as their continuation arise:

> *These challenges and pressures conflict with a more inclusive, less elitist approach, catering to the needs of local students and staff and creating opportunities for these groups. In other words, there is a tension between a short-term, neoliberal approach to internationalization, focusing primarily on mobility and research, and a long-term, comprehensive approach, focusing on global learning for all.* (de Wit & Altbach, 2021, p. 36)

Intercultural learning in context of study abroad can be assumed "that students (can) experience cultural difference in formal settings such as lectures at the host university, among others" (Nothnagel 2016, p.58). Here, Nothnagel (2016) considers a "non-normative understanding of intercultural learning that is not tied to formal learning settings" (p. 59). If one follows Nothnagel's (2016) assumption that "intercultural learning is based on the 'experience of cultural difference' and can thereby only be specified as 'intercultural'" (p. 61), and it can be assumed that stays abroad are not per se intercultural experience situations in which cultural learning takes place (Nothnagel, 2016, p. 58), virtual student mobility is a technical way of experiencing cultural difference in university contexts of other cultures without leaving one's own home. According to Silva (2016), intercultural learning in the context of an Erasmus stay abroad "primarily does not take place in the lecture hall, but 'out on the street', in interaction with other people and their cultural and personal characteristics" (p. 267).

5. Research Methods

Based on the assumption that there is a need for sensitizing preparation of students with regard to diverging institutional demands (Ushanova et al., 2019), this paper aims to discuss opportunities and challenges of virtual student mobility. For this purpose, we surveyed the cohort of Novgorod University students currently participating in digital exchange programs. The data collection method was a written survey using a questionnaire. A total of 18 students aged 20-23 were surveyed; 20% male and 80% female. The response rate was 11 questionnaires.

6. Findings

Most of the students surveyed had already gained experience within German-Russian exchange programs and were thus able to acquire institutional knowledge:

The necessity of making an appointment within the framework of a consultation hour is understood and applied as a peculiarity of German a.o. academic life:

„Besonders hat mir gefallen, dass alle Dozierende immer sehr hilfsbereit waren, wenn etwas bezüglich der Hausaufgaben oder des Lernstoffes unklar war. Man konnte immer den Termin vereinbaren, um was zu klären" (*I especially liked the fact that all the lecturers were always very helpful when something was unclear regarding homework or the subject matter. You could always make an appointment to clarify something*).

The accompaniment of the exchange student by a so-called buddy also takes place as institutional support on the part of the Russian university. In this context, the designation as a buddy program is adopted by the students as a form anchored in the German educational system:

"Moy badi mozhet pomoch' mne v lyuboy moment, takzhe ya mogu obratit'sya k kuratoram s lyuboy pros'boy" (*My buddy can help me at any time, also I can go to the supervisors with any request*).

International Office as an institutional contact is also advantageous through the contact point visibly represented in Novgorod as well as the function of the coordinator as head of international education programs:

"Studienberatung, verschiedene Hilfe von dem International Office und unserer Fachkoordinatorin." (*Academic advising, various help from the International Office and our subject coordinator*).

In part, it is not clear whether students are aware of the elective course credit options: *"Planen Sie in diesem Semester alle anstehenden Semesterleistungen zu erbringen?"*(*Do you plan to complete all upcoming semester credits this year?*). Students were asked whether they plan to complete all upcoming semester credits during the exchange semester. Feedback was consistently in the affirmative except for one response. However, experience shows that for organizational reasons, it is challenging to have the option of completing credits beyond the semester of residence.

According to an answer as *"Die Möglichkeit für das vollständige Auslandsstudium, ohne Heim zu verlassen."*(*The opportunity for full study abroad without leaving home*) digital study format is evaluated by the students similarly to face-to-face teaching:

"Meiner Meinung nach ist doch Studium eben an der Uni (Präsenz) besser und nützlicher und gibt mehr Varianten neue Menschen kennenzulernen und auch die Sprache zu verbessern." (*In my opinion, studying at a university (presence) is better and more useful and gives you more opportunities to meet new people and improve your language skills*).

Whereby the technical requirements, which function flawlessly, make a contributio. The surveyed students spoke positively across the board, and emphasized the technically well-developed infrastructure, such as their own email account at the partner university, the use of platforms such as Zoom, Skype, as well as the university-specific communication systems, such as OPAL of the TU Dresden:

"An der TU Dresden haben wir OPAL System, an dem wir sich bei der Kursen anmelden können, da bekommen wir auch Aufgaben zum Seminar. Und haben wir auch eine extra E-Mail Adresse, an die wir uns wenden können."(*At TU Dresden we have OPAL system where we can register for the courses, there we also get assignments for the seminar. And we also have an extra e-mail address where we can contact*).

It can be assumed that at the time the survey was conducted (summer 2021), private technical resources had also been readjusted to the extent that relatively few disruptions occurred in terms of network availability.

In addition to the technical and infrastructural factors of the digital exchange programs, the focus is now on the aspects of intercultural teaching and learning: Cultural exchange is highly rated by the students surveyed:

"Wenn wir über den Kurs sprechen, der jetzt kommt, habe ich es sehr genossen, Leute aus anderen Ländern zu kennen. Das ist sehr interessant." (*Talking about the course that's coming up, I've really enjoyed meeting people from other countries. This is very interesting.*);

"Yesli govorit' pro dannyy obrazovatel'nyy proyekt, to zdorovo, chto pered osnovnoy rabotoy nas poznakomili s uchastnikami dannogo proyekta." (If we talk about this educational project, it's great that before the main work we were introduced to the participants of this project).

The digital platform now allows students to practice another skill: academic writing. Both at their own university and at the partner university, students increasingly communicate via e-mail, the form and function of which they have to learn by comparison at their own university and at the partner university. Beyond linguistic development, getting to know other cultures shapes students' expectations of exchange programs:

"Ich hoffe, viele neue Informationen zu erhalten und mehr über andere Länder zu erfahren. Es ist sogar möglich, neue Freunde zu finden." (I hope to get a lot of new information and learn more about other countries. It is even possible to make new friends);

"Sprachkenntnisse zu erweitern und verbessern, mehr Kenntnisse in meinem zukünftigen Beruf zu bekommen. Meine internationale Kompetenz entwickeln." (To expand and improve language skills, to get more knowledge in my future profession. To develop my international competence);

"Samoye glavnoye – eto novyye znaniya i opyt mezhkul'turnogo obshcheniya." (The most important thing is new knowledge and experience of intercultural communication).

In addition, personal mobility continues to play a major role: *"Mnozhestvo puteshestviy i znakomstv."* (Lots of travel and lots of encounter).

Russian students rate their virtual experiences as competence-developing. In the institutional dialogue, they perceive the academic exchange as a means of self-development.

In summary, new forms of learning support are needed: It is necessary both to sensitize students before the exchange and to accompany them before, during and after the participation. What exactly does the accompaniment of virtually mobile students mean for the design of internationalization at home? Experience shows that with

- as few generalizations as possible,

- considering the fears and expectations of the students as well as

- appreciation of students as experts in social media, among other things, which they use as a creative practice, the exchange experiences can be increasingly implemented as intercultural knowledge in the teaching and learning practice at one's own university.

Other pedagogical implementations could include: due to the breakdown of social and physical exchanges, more intensive preparation of students is needed, as the linguistic challenges can be significantly prominent in the digital format. At the same time, in the context of virtual mobility, the use of information-communication technologies can lead to the emergence of an effect of connected presence (Kryuchkova, 2019, p. 40). This phenomenon occurs thanks to the permanent possibility of exchange in the social media (textual and audio), the overlapping Internet connection and the presence of the technical terminals among the students. This means for the preparation of students:

- Intercultural competencies should be strengthened both in the classroom context and in face-to-face counseling sessions.

- Students steer themselves through digital contexts and thus gain their experience with a positive attitude towards the digital format. Empowerment, as a method of involving students in the design of

intercultural seminars during or following the virtual semester at the host or partner university, enables a perspective of internationalization at home.

- From an organizational point of view, it would be advantageous if the semester times could be considered.

- Knowledge transfer of the university structures and expectations of the lecturers regarding the performance at the partner university.

- In times of digital restructuring, the opening of the digital library access as well as the entry of the performed service beyond the exchange semester would be an expanding and profitable development of the internationalization at home.

7. Conclusion

The conclusion of this paper is that the coronavirus pandemic and general isolation have not only created unprecedented challenges for higher education systems in all countries of the world but have also opened up a multitude of opportunities. Internationalization today focuses on curriculum and virtual academic communication. Based on the previously accumulated experience, an effective strategy for internationalization at home should be developed and improved. The forms of internationalization at home are extremely diverse, but the goals are largely identical to physical mobility. To achieve these goals, universities should critically review their internationalization strategies and take measures that could motivate non-mobile students to engage in international activities by combining digital technologies and traditional forms of interaction, and engage a greater number of students in international academic educational exchanges.

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