SUMMARY

REPORT on blended mobility in higher education institutions in the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles

February 2023

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Blended mobility is a combination of physical mobility with a virtual component facilitating a collaborative online distance learning exchange and teamwork. This is a new strand under the Erasmus+ 2021-2027 programme.

In 2022, Sonecom was contracted by the Belgium French Speaking National Agency (Agence francophone pour l'éducation et la formation tout au long de la vie - AEF Europe, BE01 National Agency) to collect existing knowledge and practices within the higher education institutions of Belgium (French Speaking part of Belgium, Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles), and to build on blended mobility experiences to identify and share good practices and recommendations for the future.

The study was also designed to identify themes for discussion at the European seminar on Transnational Cooperation Activities in June 2023.

Data was collected via an online quantitative questionnaire sent to coordinators in higher education institutions, and through semi-structured interviews with coordinators, teachers and students who had taken part in blended mobility opportunities.

The information collected allowed us to update our understanding of the knowledge, advantages, challenges, weaknesses, obstacles and good practices related to blended mobility.

The study concludes that there is a real interest in blended mobility, especially in short formats. Coordinators, teachers and students all felt that it offered significant added value.

These programmes make it possible to respond to many challenges, such as inclusion, through short formats and funding, or to the educational challenges of openness to other cultures or other types of teaching.

We were also able to identify several obstacles and difficulties, as well as incentives for the adoption of blended mobility or good practices to be shared.

These obstacles include factors that jeopardise or delay the process of creating, setting up or carrying out blended mobility projects.

The first obstacle identified is the administrative complexity of blended mobility programmes, coupled with a lack of functionality of the data entry tools (Erasmus without paper).

The second obstacle lies in the lack of clarity and precise instructions for implementing blended mobility, in particular the virtual component. It also seems difficult to integrate blended mobility within the framework of the "Décret Paysage" (Belgian-FR Decree defining the structural organisation of higher education in the French Speaking part of Belgium).

The third obstacle concerns the degree of involvement required (from all parties) in the development and organisation of blended mobility, which is sometimes hard to reconcile with an already busy schedule.

The fourth obstacle is connected to the size of establishments, which sometimes struggle to reach the minimum number of participants required to obtain funding.

The fifth obstacle lies in the inconsistency of information from the different national agencies. This complicates communication and organisation between partners.

The sixth obstacle is financial. Participant with fewer opportunities and the green travel top-ups are insufficient, reducing inclusivity in the first case and leading people to choose less environmentally friendly modes of transport in the second.

We have however also highlighted practices that make it possible to better understand, organise and implement blended mobility.

The first good practice identified is the building of student empowerment through involvement all along the process, from start to finish.

The second good practice is to share the burden of organisation between the partners involved so as not to overburden the teams.

The third good practice is to use the time spent travelling as a learning experience, thus making the most of the time spent on mobility.

The fourth good practice aims to use the virtual component to better prepare students for their mobility and to enable them to be monitored during the mobility itself.

The fifth good practice is to use the mobility as a space for students to work together on the development of a tangible output to be presented by students at the end of the exchange.

The sixth good practice is to ensure quality control of the programme by calling on and benefiting from external evaluation of the blended programmes.

The seventh good practice that emerged from the survey is to set up or strengthen communication on blended mobility by using accessible tools (video clips, presentations by former participants, etc.), as well as through the regular sharing of experiences and recommendations.

In addition to these good practices, it is important to highlight a number of factors that seem essential when talking about blended mobility. First of all, blended mobility allows for group mobility, notably through BIPs and short-term blended mobility, which increases inclusion and allows students to share a common international experience.

Secondly, project-based teaching is particularly well suited to short-term blended mobility, as it allows the virtual and physical components to be brought together on the basis of (individual or group) work.

Being part of a known and reliable network of partners makes it easier to set up blended mobility, because of the experience of working together. On the other hand, carrying out blended mobility with a new partner can be challenging.

Finally, it is important to take advantage of all the educational resources offered by the range of partners involved in blended mobility. These may include different working practices, teaching methods, or varied approaches to the field.

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