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Virtual Mobility Handbook



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1. About This Guidebook

This is an instructional handbook meant for teachers and universities who are interested in doing virtual mobilities and collaborations between different international institutions. This handbook is aimed for **virtual mobility in an academic setting**, which is becoming increasingly popular with the rise of “internationalization at home.” It is currently being used in the FORTHEM Alliance to create collaboration opportunities between partner universities in different European countries.

Virtual mobilities allow participants from around the world to exchange ideas regardless of distance. The aims of this handbook are to provide guidelines for facilitators on **how to conduct virtual mobilities and how to prepare the participants for the experience**. Virtual mobility gives space for dialogue and intercultural exchange among people by promoting research, programs, and projects. This handbook will cover topics from intercultural concepts to the benefits that come from virtual mobility and some of the different ways in which virtual mobility can be used.

To exemplify how to apply a virtual mobility in an intercultural class setting, a case study conducted between the University of Burgundy and the University of Jyväskylä is provided. The case study shows the steps and procedures which can help to make a virtual mobility successful by highlighting different tips which help overcome certain barriers when facilitating virtual mobilities.



Finally, some practical information and ideas to promote and support intercultural learning. By using structured activities in the context of exchange, instructors can promote open communication where all the participants feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and opinions in an environment which promotes collaboration and teamwork, as well as independent decisions. The goal is to **avoid reinforcing stereotypes** and create a safe place where everyone can feel free to express themselves, allowing individuals to build their **intercultural competence** where guidance and support are needed pillars in the learning process.

What is Virtual Mobility?

In the definition adopted by the FORTHEM alliance, “Virtual Mobility” for students is defined as “a set of activities supported by Information and Communication Technologies, including e-learning, that realizes or facilitate international, collaborative experiences in a context of teaching, training or learning”.

Distinctive features of Virtual Mobility

- It is not a one-directional webinar or online lecture - It focuses on **people-to-people interaction and dialogue**
- It does not just teach the course contents - It also includes the **development of soft skills**, such as intercultural awareness and intercultural understanding, as additional learning objectives
- It is not just class teaching - It is designed to facilitate **students-led learning through group activities** in and outside of the class so that students are expected to learn and seek knowledge through dialogue and interactions.¹

Benefits and Limitations of Virtual Mobility

While virtual mobility programs do not intend to replace traditional international mobilities, they provide a series of added benefits compared to physical mobility programs.

	Physical Mobility Program	Virtual Mobility Program
Accessibility	Limited accessibility for students with limited mobility, limited income, or lack of time (especially for countries with a high demand)	Fully accessible to students with limited mobility, resources, or time
	Need to physically move	Can participate from anywhere
	Can be difficult for getting scholarships in high demand locations	A larger number of slots open for students
	Administrative and bureaucratic difficulties in applying for scholarships	
Program contents	Flexibility of curricula is limited. - Curricula are fully designed by the host institution	Full flexibility in curricula - Curricula agreed upon by all of the participating institutions
	Flexible for choosing the program - The goals are explained before the mobility and the student can choose which program fits the best	Limited for choosing the program - Virtual mobility can be molded to the participants' goals and selected outcomes

	Physical Mobility Program	Virtual Mobility Program
Benefits	Able to develop intercultural communicative skills and build a personal and professional network	Able to develop intercultural communicative skills and build a personal and professional network
	Highly focused on developing students' interpersonal relationships/communication/interactions	Potentially limited on developing students' interpersonal relationships/communication/interactions due to time and virtuality
	Less possibility to develop soft skills of communication	Able to develop soft skill of communicating virtually (ICT tools)

At an individual level, virtual mobility plays an important role in **increasing intercultural awareness** as it focuses on interpersonal interactions with participants from different cultural backgrounds. This allows for the exchange of ideas and concepts while giving individuals the opportunity to work in diverse teams, develop relationships with people outside of their university context and expand their social and professional networks.

For these reasons, it is clear why virtual mobility is becoming an increasingly attractive program that can be applied to satisfy the increasing demand for individuals with intercultural experience. However, we should also be aware that there are important limitations imposed by virtuality that need to be taken into consideration. The issues related to **technical difficulties, interpersonal communication, interculturality, student participation, curricula**, and the like will be further considered later on. In addition, instructors must be aware of the limitations caused by the potential lack of access to online resources and the internet, the stability of internet connection, the digital gap, and access to computers and other resources.

Types of Virtual Mobility

As mentioned, one of the benefits of virtual mobility is its **flexibility** and **customization** which allows individuals to attend virtual mobility programs based on one's interest and goals. In this section, several types of virtual mobility will be presented, including foreign language learning, subject-specific studies, and shared-syllabus approaches. Even though these are the most widely used approaches in virtual mobility, people are **not limited** to these options. Other formats, such as informal group projects, could also be considered as a type of virtual mobility. The target audiences of the following approaches are **student-oriented** but could also be envisioned for professors, faculty and lecturers as well.

Examples of Virtual Mobility

Foreign Language Learning	Foreign language learning initiatives in virtual mobility are a good opportunity to connect language learners with native speakers of other languages in other countries and to provide them with semi-authentic experiences of communicating in these languages. However, it should be noted that body language, an important aspect of communication, is limited since it is conducted through online platforms. There are two well-known models: <i>E-tandem</i> and <i>Intercultural Telecollaboration</i> or <i>Online Intercultural Exchange</i> ² . E-tandem focuses on the autonomy of learners, which encourages them to find the topics and themes to discuss on their own. Online Intercultural Exchange puts a stronger emphasis on intercultural aspects of language learning and communication by integrating online exchanges into classroom activities.
Subject-Specific Studies	It has been considered a cost-effective way of conducting business and collaborating with colleagues in an international team. The central concept is to develop the competence to work in <i>Global Virtual Teams</i> (GVTs), which are defined as 'geographically dispersed teams that use Internet-mediated communication to collaborate on common goals, and typically consist of members who have diverse cultural backgrounds and who have not previously worked together in face-to-face settings' ³ . It provides them with experiences in professional contexts and the experiences of working in international teams. While originally used as a cost-effective way to conduct business, Global Virtual teams could also be envisioned in a university setting.
Shared Syllabus Approaches	To provide students to study the same subject from different universities to collaborate and to exchange perspectives on a particular subject area. At the same time, foster other skills such as intercultural competence and critical thinking ⁴ .

2. Definition of Concepts

Talking about culture, interculturality and internationality in the context of virtual teams deserves word of caution. Because of the international nature of Virtual mobility, in which individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds participate, sometimes instructors and participants might put an added emphasis on concepts such as culture and national identity if not being cautious. However, it needs to be noted that these concepts are

Note

Throughout this document, there will be numerous references to the notions of “culture”, “interculturality” and “cultural background”, alongside other relevant concepts such as “internationality” and “identity”. While internationality will maintain its literal meaning, in referring to the inclusion of team members with different nationalities and national backgrounds, interculturality and intercultural communication will not, as they often have, be used as its synonym. Instead, they will refer to the member’s inherently diverse and unique cultural backgrounds (in which small cultures such as family are included), and all forms of communication in which culture becomes relevant, respectively. It must be made clear that in referring to the “culture” or “cultural background” of an individual, it is neither assumed that they “have” a culture nor that it determines their behaviour or ability to perform certain tasks. Instead, it is acknowledged that individuals have learned different skills and habits as a result of participating in different social structures, have different personal qualities and values, and are familiar with a given set of practices which may differ from those of other team members. As a result, it may be necessary to actively negotiate an own way of functioning as well as to learn how to use those skills and knowledge for the benefit and enrichment of the group.

particularly problematic and should be defined and applied to Virtual mobility in a conscious and careful way. Not to do so has the potential of reinforcing differences between team members, hindering communication, stereotyping, and simplifying people’s values and experiences.

At a general level, the concept of “culture” is mostly used in a way that presumes that people “have or belong to a culture”. Additionally, “culture” is often associated with people’s national or ethnic backgrounds. However, this approach has been widely criticised in research articles, and may prove to be counter-productive and problematic when aiming for interpersonal and intergroup understanding and effective collaboration. Difference can often be emphasized, and “culture” is assumed to be an insurmountable barrier to communication. The team’s ability to work together is then hindered by stereotypes, and “culture” becomes an excuse to explain miscommunication, linguistic limitations and power inequalities between team members.

When aiming for effective collaboration, culture is best understood as the building blocks we take into, negotiate, and get out of intercultural communication⁵. In other words, culture is understood not as similarity, but as familiarity with each other's similarities and differences. This understanding is essential in international mobility. In understanding culture as a familiarity which is created between individuals and members of a group, instructors will put emphasis on interpersonal understanding, acceptance and the creation of group dynamics that may well escape whatever stereotypes or prejudice taught us about the other. Additionally, this perspective provides insight into the fact that an individual's culture is a discursively constructed and complex constellation formed over time through contact with other individuals and through imagining themselves as part of "imagined communities"⁶ with whom they share certain traits.

Therefore, culture escapes the barriers of nationality and ethnicity ("big culture"), providing more room for the possibility that more similarities may arise between two people from entirely different national backgrounds who are part of the same online community, for example, than between two people with the same national background who are part of different social groups. It also proves that familiarity-based group dynamics and an own way of functioning ("small culture") can be recreated within the classroom context, if team members are given room to develop trust, knowledge of each other, and to explore how they are similar, rather than how they differ. In other words, in practical terms, understanding culture as familiarity is an excellent way of fomenting intergroup understanding and creating affinity rather than rejection towards diversity.

3. Case Study

“Fundamentals in Intercultural and Multilingual Communication”

This case study is intended to give ideas of **how a virtual exchange course can work**, based on a concrete example between the University of Burgundy (uB) in France and University of Jyväskylä (JYU) in Finland led by instructors Lotta Kokkonen and Alexander Frame.

Although needing some adaptations to other courses/learning objectives, the aim is to show **how such a collaboration can be implemented in practice**. The following details are specific to the course: “Fundamentals in Intercultural and Multilingual Communication.”



Course Objectives

Course objectives should always clearly be identified when beginning your collaboration. They should be realistic, expressed in simple terms, and easy to evaluate.

Here is the example of course objectives.

Course Objectives
• Understand and be able to discuss fundamental issues in intercultural communication such as identification or stereotyping processes • Acknowledge and be willing to engage with different ways of seeing and with realities different than one's own both online and face-to-face • Appreciate the complexity of human interaction and understand that culture does not determine but rather may inform our communication in different ways • Be sensitive to power inequalities inherent in multilingual and intercultural communication • Have confidence to participate to online discussions in multilingual and intercultural contexts • Have tools to participate effectively and appropriately to multilingual and intercultural discussions, teams and groups

Course Content

The course, “Fundamentals in Intercultural and Multilingual Communication”, introduces students to **fundamental issues and concepts in intercultural communication from an interdisciplinary perspective**. The course offers a theoretical and practical framework for enhancing students’ knowledge of and competence in multilingual and intercultural communication. The course aims to build an understanding of multilingual and intercultural communication competence needed in modern global and virtual work life and build students’ confidence for participation in multilingual and intercultural virtual contexts.

When?

- Spring semester 2021: 12.January 2021 - 02.April 2021
- Including 6 x 1.5-hour synchronous sessions.

Who?

- BA and MA Students signing up for the optional “Fundamentals in Intercultural and Multilingual Communication” module at JYU
- MA students following the compulsory module “Introduction to Intercultural Communication” within their programme at uB.

Where?

- Moodle: hosted on the JYU platform, directly accessible through the uB Moodle for enrolled uB students.
- Zoom for synchronous online class sessions.
- Other social media platforms (Teams, WhatsApp, Facebook...) for student meetings regarding the assignment.
- Additional weekly online classes for JYU students, developing certain points, since the module in JYU involved more hours and more credits.

How?

- Synchronous online sessions
- Introductory session to build interpersonal links and present the module.
- Subsequent sessions structured around interactive activities such as discussion in breakout rooms or full group, short exercises to carry out and reflect upon, aiming to have students experience or share opinions on the topics of study.
- Slides relating to questions discussed in class were sometimes used and then shared after each session (key concepts, references, graphs, tables, etc. and indications of further reading...).
- Assignments: reading or videos as preparatory material for most sessions; individual learning log; video to produce in small international teams (involving weekly online meetings with minutes).
- Extra sessions concerning JYU students only, on other aspects not covered in the common module, but also evaluated through the JYU student logbooks.
- Grading and credits: Each teacher was responsible for their own students’ grading. Students received grades and credits from their home university upon completion of the module, according to existing practices in that university.
- The common assignments were graded collaboratively by both teachers, using the two grading systems. Logbooks and participation were graded separately between universities. Minutes from weekly group meetings were read but not graded.

Why?

- To combine theoretical and practical dimensions in learning about and experiencing intercultural and multilingual communication.
- To give students experience in international online teamwork.
- To vary pedagogical approaches and perspectives.

The course consists of online classes and discussions. In addition to this, learning methods include selected readings, a group assignment, and individual assignments to be completed in Moodle / other online platforms.

Session Outline [Only the common sessions between JYU and uB are included here]	
Week 1	Introductory session on Zoom for presentations, icebreakers and explaining the outline of the course, how it will work, its learning objectives. Videos to trigger initial discussions in breakout rooms. Assignments (class preparation, logbooks, video) are discussed as well as the written instructions and evaluation guide, and different sections of the Moodle interface (reading, group assignments section, etc.) <i>After class: Students do the reading for week 2, begin their logbooks with a specific question to answer based on the first session, and have their first weekly meeting in a time slot that suits them in their groups of 5 (they fill out preformatted minutes and upload them to Moodle).</i>
Week 2	Discussions in whole group and breakout rooms, based on introductory reading around the concepts of culture and communication. Breakout group discussions: Where do cultures come from? How do non-national cultures also affect our communication? <i>After class: Logbook question relating the reading to the students' personal experience; reading; group meeting for assignment.</i>
Week 3	Comparative national approaches to Intercultural Communication: categorisation with its biases and limits. Concept of "small cultures". Breakout rooms: How can we reconcile the idea of national cultural differences and the diversity of populations in each country? How should we approach foreigners without stereotyping them: what competencies might be involved? <i>After class: Logbook question relating the reading to the students' personal experience; reading; group meeting for assignment.</i>

Week 4	Reflexive discussion of Intercultural Communication Competence, based on reading done and experiences during course (and logbooks). Brainstorming via Flinga to identify elements of ICC, discussing ICC test tool in breakout rooms, how to develop individual ICC. <i>After class: Logbook question on the students' personal ICC; reading; group meeting for assignment.</i>
Week 5	Reflexive discussion of practices of multilingualism/translanguaging in the course, linked to reading done: power issues, questions of image, confidence, identity. Exercise on language and identity. Videos on second language / accents / language and identity to watch and discuss. Exercise in breakout rooms, using common or not common second and third languages. <i>After class: Students asked to watch uploaded group assignments during the week and share written feedback on at least 2 of them via Moodle. Logbook question linked to multilingualism.</i>
Week 6	Presenting stereotypes. Look at a few examples of stereotypes of the French/the Finns and discuss. Where stereotypes come from. How they work as a cognitive mechanism (social categorisation). Breakout discussion linked to assignments: where do stereotypes come from? Can we imagine communication without stereotypes? General debrief, recommendations for future courses. <i>After class: Final group meeting to discuss video feedback from other students. Final logbook entry with focus on the video project.</i>

Student Responsibilities

Throughout the virtual exchange, students are expected to fulfill some tasks prior to each session, during the session and after the session.

Before the session

- ☐ read preparatory readings or watch videos
- ☐ arrange a meeting time that suits everyone in their group

During the session

- ☐ attend weekly sessions on Zoom
- ☐ participate the interactive activities such as discussion in breakout rooms or short exercises to carry out and reflect upon.

After the session

- ☐ attend additional small group weekly meetings to develop interpersonal relationships and prepare for **the final project (*1)**
- ☐ carry social conversations with **the relational topics (*2)** provided by the instructors during a group weekly meeting
- ☐ keep a track of **the individual learning logbook (*3)** from each session and group meeting
- ☐ upload meeting notes to keep track of a final project

*1 The final project

As a product of the group work, each group made a short video (around 2-3 mins) presenting challenges of stereotypical representations, including national, gender, sexuality, etc. After the submission of a video, students in other groups watched it and provided feedback. Finally, it was graded by instructors.

Student's Feedback:

Having balanced small groups, an equal number of students from each university, is very important. Otherwise, the power dynamics between group members can shift and can create a sense of us vs. them within the small group which can lead to reinforcing stereotypes.

Tips from Instructor:

Involve the students in assessment (use an assessment as a tool for feedback)
Invite student feedback on the sessions during and after the course as a way to remedy possible shortcomings when they occur.

Tips: Focus on the relational development

- 1: to ensure a trusting atmosphere within the group, making everyone to speak up.
- 2: to encourage students to create interpersonal relationships, which will help break stereotypes and enhance intergroup understanding.
- 3: to use ice-breaking activities (even if they are not directly related to course contents) in initial sessions, It can give students a chance to interact in a more relaxed setting. This will lead to a more confident, productive and satisfied group in the long run.

Student's Feedback:

Interacting and getting to know group members on a personal level is an important step to break stereotypes and build team identity.

*2 The relational topics

During small group meetings, the relational topics were given by the instructors, aiming to have students share experiences and build personal connections among group members.

Examples of the relational topics are:

- Week1: What do you do as a hobby and why do you enjoy it?
- Week2: What have you done this week that makes you happy / proud of yourself?
- Week3: Share a life event that has influenced your life greatly / made you of who you are
- Week4: How do you feel about the group work and how it has progressed?

*3 The individual learning logbook

Each week, students needed to complete a given individual learning log, based on the synchronous class sessions, group assignment meetings, and the readings that students have done.

In the individual learning log, students answered a question linking to the reading done and recorded their thoughts about their own intercultural communication experience in relation to the group work carried out and a critical reflection of the topics discussed in the classes.

Advice for Instructors

The case study results, which consider both the students' and the instructors' reflections, suggest some essential steps in the development of future virtual exchanges.

01 Develop a sense of trust

Developing a sense of trust within the working groups and the class was considered an essential aspect of virtual mobility. It helped create familiarity and minimized misunderstandings and anxiety and contributed to better communication. It was considered the first step that led to collaborative learning and group work and emphasized interpersonal relationships during this virtual experience. To develop trust, instructors need to provide room for students to get to know each other by conducting icebreakers, conversation topics, and a time slot for group work.

Tip from Instructor:

Weekly conversation starters need to focus on interpersonal understanding to minimize the influence of stereotypes. Try getting students to ask each other about their favourite shows, hobbies or something they are proud of. Getting them to play a collaborative game during the first meeting can also be very helpful.

02 Appropriate volume for the weekly task load

Instructors should be aware of the volume of the weekly task load. It should be balanced and distributed so that students could work on both the weekly and final projects within the allocated time slot. Moreover, students talk about other topics, helping them increase their intercultural competence and to break stereotypes. Moreover, the weekly tasks need to be adjusted to the topic at hand so that students may use the task to participate in class.

03 Aware of demographics in creating groups

In the formation of groups, the university of origin and the field of students' studies need to be balanced so that no student ends up feeling excluded

04 Importance of motivation

Motivation was considered an essential element in the development of the course, maintaining a highly participatory ambiance and a student-focused pedagogical perspective helped motivate students to work, participate and continue with the virtual exchange to minimize course drop-outs. Additionally, any rewards (course credit-based or otherwise) should be equal for all students. If so, it ensures that students are equally motivated to put in the expected amount of work.

Tips for running online sessions:

Be sensitive to students' possible shyness – they may be uncomfortable speaking or disclosing information about themselves in front of a group of strangers, especially in a language they don't feel they master sufficiently.

Smaller breakout rooms tend to encourage interactions, but students need to receive clear written instructions about the tasks they are to carry out together (e.g. questions to discuss).

Be attentive to (mis-)understandings – students may not dare speak out to say that they have not understood. Asking a group member to reformulate instructions in order to check their understanding can be helpful for everyone.

Conclusion to the case study

The case study highlighted **the importance of building a sense of trust within a group**, having initial discussion topics to get to know each other allowed us to get to know each other more than just the initial stereotypes. It is the first step that led students to engage in collaborative learning and group work. It is essential to benefit and get the most from this virtual mobility.

An assignment or a question for students to discuss in the weekly group meeting is as essential as the interactive activities conducted in class, so students could better understand the course topics when doing the discussion in class. It is good that **the objectives for weekly discussions are not that heavy**. Students have time to talk about other topics and personal experiences, which is necessary to increase students' intercultural competence. Moreover, **interacting and getting to know group members more on a personal level is an important step to break stereotypes and to build team identity**. This case study also emerged the need to be balanced in forming a group. Otherwise, it might create an exclusion feeling from the beginning. To motivate the students, it is crucial to highlight students' incentives and the goals of the course.

Final Feedback from Students

Additional feedback was collected from all the participants. The following quotes come directly from the student participants themselves.

“What did you think about the course?”



“It is not easy to create new friends from a foreign country and this course gave us the opportunity to meet new people and to forge bonds. This course made me feel more at ease with speaking to someone I don’t know and moreover in English.”

“When we spoke while mixing different languages (especially during the course in small groups), I had the impression to share a new part of my identity, of my culture.”

“Before the group assignment, I thought that intercultural communication skills were based only on the ability to speak and communicate in the language of the interlocutor. And to tell the truth, I didn't think I had the skills to practice entirely this type of communication. Thanks to my empathy and awareness, I could easily put myself in the shoes of the other members of the group, and understand their point of view, even with a different culture from mine. I was also able to progress by practicing intercultural communication, and as our conversations progressed, I gained confidence and understanding.”

This case study shows how much participants have to gain from participating in a virtual mobility. Not only does it allow individuals to expand their social group internationally, but it provides space where people can practice various languages and become internationally aware.

4. Potential Barriers

There are several barriers that instructors may face during class sessions in Virtual Mobility. Instructors are suggested to consider the following points during the virtual mobility planning phase.

01 Language Proficiency can be one of the biggest potential barriers. Each student has a different level of language proficiency as well as different accents and intonations. In intercultural communication, misunderstandings that are considered cultural often come from linguistic misunderstandings⁷. Therefore, instructors need to acknowledge the fact that there are different variations of common languages which exist in a class. To avoid confusion and misunderstanding during lectures, discussions, and group projects, it is important to adapt language without idioms or ambiguity and to provide written information for key instructions to make sure every student is on the same page.

02 It is necessary to take into consideration that **Communication Styles and Competence** which vary across individuals, regardless of nationality and ethnicity.

03 Different Levels of "Digital Literacy," which is defined as an individual's ability associated with the use of various digital platforms⁸, can become a barrier as well. Even though virtual meeting tools have become widely available for many people today, some students may not be familiar with tools (if it is not used at their school). Therefore, it may be difficult to utilize the technology which is critical for participating in sessions in virtual mobility programs. In this case, those who find it difficult to use the technology might hinder smooth class operation and communication among students.

Tip:
Having a simple information session in the introduction of the virtual mobility can be a way to ensure that all the participants know how to navigate the technological applications which will be used during the exchange programme.

04 Mixing Different Time Zones can

impose difficulties especially in group activities outside class sessions. Even with one-hour time difference, students may find it difficult to arrange meetings since students are often occupied by other courses and activities at home universities which may differ from other universities. Also, discussing the possibly different calendars between universities, including holidays, semester dates, bank holidays etc. and differences in habits concerning working hours at the beginning can help to avoid misunderstanding or frustration.

Tips:

A possible solution to this issue would be pre-allocation of time slots for group activities at the course planning phase from both universities as it would be done for regular course hours. In this way, students would not need to negotiate meeting times while juggling different schedules and time zones.

Tips for instructor: Be involved throughout the process

Face the challenge knowing that there is help when needed (buffering effect to battle the uncertainty and anxiety)

Remember to not rely on students' ability/willingness to ask for help (face saving, personality traits, etc.)

Find a way to 'look inside' the group work (e.g., ask them to keep minutes and check them, proactively ask students individually how their group is functioning...)



5. Be Prepared For

1

As well as taking into consideration how issues, such as access to resources, scheduling and language proficiency might affect communication and the overall development of team-based tasks, instructors should be prepared for **the possibility that prejudices, stereotypes and overgeneralizations may disrupt group-work**. As it was previously discussed, **taking a critical approach to culture, intercultural communication and identity** can be helpful in dealing with such issues.

2

It can sometimes be difficult for instructors to follow/be aware of conflicts within groups. When and if an instructor becomes conscious of any problems, as a result of discrimination, misunderstandings, differences in language proficiency and motivation / ability to commit to their group work, for example, the key element in managing these potential conflicts is **to use them in a productive way**. The learning goals of Virtual Mobility lie in their potential to put individuals in contact with different ways of viewing the world, expanding their knowledge, developing soft skills such as teamwork, empathy and anxiety management, and learning to communicate with people outside of their familiar circle. Such contacts provide interesting learning opportunities through experiencing conflicts. Instead of dismissing the conflicts, instructors should aim to use them in a way that is coherent with the virtual mobility's learning goals. For example, if the conflict is rooted in prejudice, instructors can highlight some aspects such as poor communicative skills and empathetic behaviour by "negotiating reality"⁹ to analyse the dangers of oversimplification. Instructors can also identify how members could modify the interaction to be more empathetic, critical, and coherent with the objectives of the mobility. Additionally, such an approach would help to acknowledge that human beings are culturally complex, and thus, that each intercultural encounter is unique and cannot be simplified and walked through following a set of strict guidelines.

3

Additionally, **emphasizing similarities between team members and providing room for the development of a team identity and a sense of trust between team members** can greatly contribute to ensuring that stereotypes and bias do not disrupt group dynamics. However, it can happen that individuals may resist to challenging the ways in which they may be biased against their colleagues, especially if they see others as “truly reflecting” the stereotyped imagery that they had of them. It can also happen that, through the influence of the traditional imagery of “diversity”, individuals refrain from acknowledging that “identities” and “cultures” are not homogeneous social categories that people belong in and which determine their behaviour. In these cases, **it is important to shift the conversations towards, not only the dangers of overgeneralizations, but as well towards their inaccuracy to explain the individual experience.**

4

While, in working towards a common goal, it is important to remember that **power differences can affect communication and group dynamics**. Though cultural and social identities are discursively constructed and “imagined”, the fact that members see themselves (and others) as members of a marginalised groups can make them reluctant to share that social identity, as well as affect which roles they are given within a group affecting the overall group dynamics¹⁰. It is important to remember that power dynamics are also impacted by language proficiency, communication style and competence.

Tips: Prepare the student for the experience:

Provide the students basic information and tools for group work and multilingual and intercultural teams and groups

Involve students in discussions of the modes of participation, different backgrounds, and ways of participating (cultural, personal, contextual)

Involve the students in setting the guidelines/rules for the group work/discussions

6. Additional Activities

Virtual Mobility Activities

Informal contact can help participants increase knowledge of target cultures, exploring/discovering alternative identities¹¹. Building up shared references and cultural knowledge, cultivate interpersonal and intergroup relationships, and build trust and reduce anxiety.

While online format might limit the choices of ice breaker activities, there are still several activities we can do to build awareness on how participants with different cultural backgrounds have in common. To avoid oversimplifying cultures, at the same time as deconstructing stereotypes. It could also serve as a tool to facilitate participation and allow members to create their own team culture based on the shared references.

The following activities are provided as examples of possible icebreakers or team-building activities which can be included in virtual mobility activities:

2 Truths & 1 Lie

Each person shares 3 things, and the group has to guess which one is the lie. It is good to keep it conversational for a smaller group and just shout out guesses; for bigger crowds, it would be helpful to put the answers on a slide or in the chat. This can also be conducted by asking members to share little-known facts about themselves (something they did when they were younger, an interesting skill or story), which could help them to build connections on a more personal level.

Share an Object

The facilitator can leave the theme open-ended or set a specific topic. Asked participants to bring an object related to the theme, and tell everyone the story behind it: Why do you bring it? What is the story/message behind it?

In one word how would you describe...?

In order to check the overall atmosphere or the meeting the facilitator can open the meeting with a question, such as “In one word how would you describe the past week/ your mood?”. This icebreaker will also help to detect possible downturns in the team.

Notes

1. European Union, 2020
2. O'Dowd, 2007
3. Taras et al., 2013
4. O'Dowd, 2007
5. Rathje, 2017
6. Anderson, 1991
7. Piller, 2012
8. Ng, 2012
9. Antal & Friedman, 2008
10. Mikkola & Valo, 2019
11. Frame, 2012

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