

Article Three

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Juan Rayón González is the President of the Erasmus Student Network. As president, he is responsible for the general coordination of the organisation, external relations, policy, and advocacy of ESN. His main priorities include increasing participation in learning mobility and fostering civic engagement and participation of young people in democratic life through the Erasmus programme.

Before taking on his role as president of ESN, he was the president of ESN Spain and a Liaison Officer for Inclusive mobility of the Erasmus Student Network. He has a bachelor's degree in Law from the University of Oviedo and is currently finishing two master's degrees in International Law and European Studies.

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Digitalisation in International Higher Education

The role of Blended Intensive Programmes in the virtual learning debate and the future of internationalisation

In the last few years, the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) and other actors from the student movement involved in the internationalisation of higher education field, have felt quite frustrated with the debate around virtual exchange and blended mobility within the higher education sector. This frustration came from the perception that the renewed interest in virtual and blended learning came at the expense of a significant reduction in the attention given to new strategies and innovations in student mobility, despite the fact that the targets at both the EHEA and EU levels set 10 years ago were not achieved. However, ESN has the achievement of internationalisation opportunities for all students among its core objectives, and we really welcome the expansion of a variety of international collaboration opportunities.

Our approach to counter this situation has been trying to build our narratives around the complementarity of different internationalisation experiences, stressing the importance of maintaining outcomes-based long term mobility opportunities at the core of any internationalisation strategy. Together with our friends from the European Students' Union, we have formalised our key perspectives and conveyed them in our recent position paper ["Bringing the student perspective on the debate on mobility, virtual exchange and blended learning"](#), which we encourage you to read. In this paper, we lay out our vision of how different opportunities complement each other and their importance in strategies for the internationalisation of higher education.

Interestingly, international student and youth organisations like ESN are some of the biggest "informal" providers of international virtual learning opportunities for students in Europe. After finishing their lessons at university, thousands of students join meetings with peers from across Europe, brainstorming together and carrying out common projects across borders. All of this is done using a variety of online tools, as well as involving non-formal education methods, which are key for the youth sector but are not always considered in higher education. It is important to highlight that this was already the case before the pandemic, but our

Article Three

#ACATHINKS

MAY 2022

interest, knowledge and experience regarding virtual learning have drastically expanded in the last two years. Together with our work supporting more than 300.000 students per year, some of our latest data and our own experiences have allowed us to draw some conclusions on how to ensure a successful implementation of virtual and blended learning.

ONLINE LEARNING AND INTERNATIONALISATION: WHAT DID WE LEARN FROM THE PANDEMIC?

At the beginning of 2021 ESN carried out the latest edition of the [ESN Survey](#), which included a section on online learning activities for students who had their mobility during COVID times. In the survey we asked a number of questions related to different aspects of the online learning experience, measuring the satisfaction level of students. The results showed that the majority of students were satisfied (40,1%) or very satisfied (13%) with the quality of the online learning activities and with the readiness of the institutions to implement online activities (34,5% satisfied, 22,4% very satisfied). It would probably not come as a surprise that "interaction with other students during online activities" got the highest levels of dissatisfaction, with 12,8% of students reporting being very dissatisfied and 22,8% being dissatisfied. The interaction with lecturers got the second highest level of dissatisfaction, with only a slight majority of students reporting being satisfied or very satisfied.

Considering the particular circumstances of mobility experiences of 2021, we do not believe the results to be negative at all. Universities and lecturers should be very proud of the work they have done in the midst of a global pandemic to keep student mobilities up and running. It would also be a mistake to think that in physical mobility experiences, in-classroom interaction is the norm. Even if diverse classrooms with considerable numbers of international students provide tremendous opportunities to foster intercultural learning and collaborative skills, this is not normally the case, especially regarding collaboration between international and local students.

In Erasmus mobilities, students learn how to socialise, understand each other better and develop meaningful skills for both social cohesion and the labour market, as demonstrated by the [Erasmus+ Higher Education Impact Study](#), our own ESN Surveys, the [SIEM project](#) and other relevant literature. New internationalisation formats can complement these outcomes with more challenge-based learning that helps students to develop a sense of agency, teamwork and project management skills. We believe that in a time of crisis and transitions, young

people need to be equipped with competencies that help them to realise that they can make a difference, in their communities and at the global level, and that collaborating across borders is not only a possibility but a necessity. Virtual and blended formats of international education that prioritise interaction and collaboration can help develop these competencies.

Besides their potential benefits, we also believe that different internationalisation experiences can improve access and boost the quality of long-term physical mobilities if implemented early in the higher education journey. With mobility numbers still quite low, it is fundamental to create these internationalisation pathways that include different opportunities, in which students can participate throughout their degrees.

THE LATEST ERASMUS+ INNOVATION: BLENDED INTENSIVE PROGRAMMES – HOW TO MAKE THEM A SUCCESS?

Much has been written about Virtual Exchange (VE) and Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) in the last few years. In the midst of the interesting debate about virtual and blended international learning, the new Erasmus+ programme has created a fascinating tool that we believe can help enrich the internationalisation opportunities of many higher education institutions, fostering innovation in teaching and learning: the [Blended Intensive Programmes](#), also known as BIPs. These programmes have gained a lot of interest and there are already some very interesting practices emerging.

We find these programmes very interesting for a number of reasons. BIPs have a focus on challenge-based learning, a concept that we believe is key and that is well linked with the civic engagement dimension of the Erasmus+ programme. These transdisciplinary approaches can be very suitable to involve stakeholders and to help students gain a sense of agency during the programme. BIPs also offer a lot of flexibility regarding the implementation, and students can enrol from the first year of their degree, potentially providing their first international experience.

From our perspective, virtual and blended programmes can constitute a considerable breakthrough for internationalisation policies in Europe, and we are looking forward to contributing to their implementation. From our experience working with students in blended environments, we can already identify certain elements that we believe should be considered to make sure such programmes turn into complete success. ESN suggests

Article Three

#ACATHINKS

MAY 2022

the following points on the connections between Blended Intensive Programmes and the learning experiences provided by international student organisations:

Facilitation skills and the role of non-formal education

Non-formal activities, including skills like learning how to carry out a consultation or navigate a debate, are at the heart of the work of youth and student organisations. In higher education, the topic has remained taboo for years, and unfortunately, this also includes the international education sector. Core non-formal education methodologies are not always integrated into higher education courses or mobility experiences, but they are extremely important in fostering personal development and preparing students to be more engaged citizens and better professionals. Even if non-formal education methodologies are used, students are not always taught how to improve these interpersonal communication skills.

In the online world, communication, negotiation, and team building skills are even more important. This is why it is worth investing in training for lecturers who facilitate online courses and encouraging collaborations with non-formal education experts in the delivery of courses. Many times, such experts can even be found in local organisations that can also be involved in blended programmes.

Dedicating certain parts of the Blended Intensive Programmes to introducing students to the non-formal education-related components can make the rest of the courses more engaging and can help prepare students for real life applications of their knowledge and skills gained.

The transition between online and physical – bringing community engagement into the equation

In international student organisations, transitions between online and physical work occur all the time. Normally, collaborative online work occurs during the preparation of an initiative that then takes place physically. Therefore, when it comes to the division of tasks, most of the preparatory work happens online, and then implementation takes place on-site.

The online learning component and the physical one should always be part of the same learning process. Considering the importance of the student's motivation, making the physical part of the mobility as engaging and dynamic as possible is key. For that, the online learning dimension should already focus on aspects, such as the

expectations and fears of participants and the intercultural preparation regarding the different realities of the students. In order to maximise the learning process throughout the programme, courses should also consider activities, such as team building games, and even introducing a buddy system, either from the course or involving other students.

Engagement with local communities related to European and global challenges should be at the core of the BIP experience. Students should be made familiar with the work of local organisations before mobility exchanges and establish parallels between global challenges and the concrete work done at the local level.

We should not shy away from considering physical mobility as a relevant motivational factor to improve engagement in the online learning dimension, just like attending an interesting conference can be a motivation to prepare a quality paper.

Fostering output-oriented learning and developing a sense of agency

Students should be encouraged to feel proud of their work. BIPs offer valuable opportunities to develop programme outputs that are relevant and that can be presented to any potential employer, or anyone who is not connected to the particular field of study. In that regard, the "challenge-based" methodologies that European University alliances are encouraged to apply, and the "living labs" mentioned in the [European Strategy for Universities](#) are extremely relevant for the development of Blended Intensive Programmes. Universities can engage in pedagogical innovation that allows students to contribute to a positive change in a community and present the results externally to stakeholders, including those not involved in the academic world. For instance, if the topic of a BIP is related to sustainability and urban mobility, students can be asked to work on recommendations targeting local authorities and to design an awareness campaign directed towards the local communities from the different cities of the students involved in the programme.

We need to make sure students feel that their work is relevant and recognised, and to show them that there are processes that they can use to connect their efforts in the academic sphere with local stakeholders, such as decision-makers or business leaders. At the same time, students should be taught that in the 21st century, global and local challenges are directly intertwined and that any international challenge also requires local action. Therefore, developing a sense of agency should be a core objective of these programmes. This sense of

Article Three

#ACATHINKS

MAY 2022

agency is mainly about showing students what the path is to bring about change.

The role of informal moments: get ahead of the curve and plan them in advance, together with the students

Building a sense of community among students will be key to ensuring impactful BIPs. Ice-breaking games, debriefings and other relaxed activities can take time, but they are very important aspects to include in the learning process.

Strategically planning the informal moments can help to build trust and motivation between students and lecturers. It is important to create the right conditions for friendships to flourish, so students can really discover each other's backgrounds and stories. Instead of improvising games or activities, informal moments can be planned in advance and implemented together with the students, encouraging them to propose new online tools that can enrich the delivery of their programme.

COMPREHENSIVE INTERNATIONALISATION PATHWAYS FOR ALL

The challenges of today's world have an international dimension that requires the best from the whole society. We will not be able to solve climate change, improve gender equality or foster social justice unless we understand that international collaboration is key and that zero-sum games that prioritise competition instead of collaboration at the international level do not work. We need all the collaborative competencies, online and offline, that students can get, and we need to make sure that internationalisation experiences do not only complement each other, but actually reinforce each other.

With the BIPs, we have a great opportunity to tackle many of the existing gaps in the internationalisation strategies of higher education institutions, develop virtual skills and facilitate access to mobility opportunities.

Let's make the most out of them!

This article is part of the "**ACA Think Pieces**" series on digitalisation, launched in March 2022. The contributions in this series explore the multi-faceted nature of digitalisation in higher education institutions from an international cooperation perspective. They take under consideration current challenges at various levels, local/national/regional and European higher education policies supporting digitalisation and practical examples of digitalisation infrastructures, effective support services for virtual and/or blended mobilities and development of intercultural competences in a digital environment etc. Articles are authored by expert colleagues on the digitalisation of HE field, and are published electronically on ACA's website, monthly, from March until the end of 2022.