

# Advancing blended mobility to foster effective cooperation between higher education and industry

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**Abstract - Professional life in the digital era is depending ever more on mobility and requiring collaborative and communication skills in an international, cross-cultural environment. However, the development of soft skills and international exposure are seldom addressed by undergraduate curricula. Moreover, mobility of students is constrained by several barriers such as financial and health issues that become serious barriers to young students' mobility. Innovative approaches are required to tear down barriers to mobility and facilitate international exposure of students during their education. The work developed by a group of European universities during the last 10 years has generated an innovative teaching-learning paradigm that overcomes common barriers to mobility while promoting team work and communication competences. We have enrolled more than 200 students in a distributed project course unit based on this innovative blended mobility paradigm with remarkable results for all those involved. This paper describes our work in this field focused on the Blended-AIM project.**

*Keywords* – blended mobility, project-based learning, soft skills.

## INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEI) aim to prepare students to succeed in the labour market. Today's labour market values soft skills as much or even more than hard skills. Professional life is dependent on mobility and requires professionals to excel in collaborative and communication skills at an international, cross-cultural environment.

International exposure during studies has a significant impact on personal and inter-personal development of students. Innovative teaching paradigms are required in order to develop soft skills and facilitate international contact to higher education students within the available timespan and resources and without demanding for costly curricula revisions. Blended mobility overcomes typical barriers to mobility thus allowing students to experience and take advantage of the benefits of mobility and international exposure. However, despite its added value, blended mobility

is hardly used and barely recognized as a serious alternative with great potential to overcome the common barriers to international mobility. Blended-AIM is an Erasmus+ project that continues the work we have been doing in this area since 2018. Blended-AIM sets the foundation to raise awareness, promote, systematize and test blended mobility in general and streamlines innovative teaching paradigms to promote students' employability by means of blended mobility.

At most higher education institutions (HEI), final-year-undergraduate students enroll in a project course unit that requires them to demonstrate the technical skills acquired during their studies in a professional-like setting. A capstone project is probably the most effective academic activity to foster students' employability. It is a unique chance for students to cooperate with professionals and other students in a professional setting. When students enroll in an internship outside their home country, the benefits for their personal and professional development are even more valuable and evident.

International mobility creates a unique setting to experience and develop transversal skills through non-formal learning. But there are several barriers to international mobility of students:

- The cost of international mobility is a significant barrier. Many students willing to experience an international internship give up due to lack of financial resources.
- The risk of missing local job opportunities during the period of stay abroad. Students give up their plans to go on an international internship if this forces them to be away from their local labour market for long periods.
- Anxiety while anticipating long periods abroad, away from their family, friends and way of living. It is common that students give up without even trying, when experiencing these symptoms.
- Students with certain disabilities or those with chronic diseases permanently requiring specific treatment also experience difficulties when planning long periods abroad.

Blended mobility overcomes all these barriers. It promotes equity and inclusion giving all students a chance to start

experiencing international work. This first step is crucial. Very frequently, this is all that is required to completely change students' attitude and launch them into the European citizenship. Blended mobility offers students the opportunity to experience internationalization and promote their employability regardless of these handicaps.

The Blended-AIM initiative empowers international mobility and employability by raising awareness to blended mobility, by providing the resources - including training, supporting tools and information - to support students and companies hosting internships and by testing and streamlining innovative teaching paradigms aimed to develop soft skills in an international environment.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The Blended-AIM methodology is devoted to create and manage international multidisciplinary teams of students who collaborate in order to develop a solution for a challenge by a company. The students have a chance to be members of an international team while working at their home institution. The problem specification will be briefly described by the company; students have to interact and cooperate during the semester in order to agree on the solution details. At the end of the project all modules must be integrated and the fully operational system, a unique product, will be presented to the company and the group of teachers by the students as a team.

Each team member will be responsible for: (a) developing a part of the whole solution, (b) justifying their technical options as an integrating part of the whole solution proposed by the team, (c) collaborating with other team members to guarantee that problems are solved in due time, and (d) that all parts integrate into a unique final solution.

The team as a whole must: (a) guarantee that all parts integrate well to produce a unique solution for the problem, (b) produce a unique report describing the full solution and (c) present the full solution to the project jury. The project jury will be composed by a teacher from each partner institution.

Partner institutions are responsible for: (a) selecting students for the team, (b) defining a supervisor and (c) following, guiding and evaluating students.

Students meet together at a five days meeting at the beginning of the Spring semester to get acquainted with the rest of the team members, to know the company offering the challenge for students to solve and to organize their work plan for the semester and distribute responsibilities. Then students go back to their home university where they stand during the semester working as a team to solve the problem while communicating and cooperating online. At the end of the semester, students get back all together again for the final meeting to conclude the integration of all modules, to present the solution they have developed and to be evaluated by an international jury.

**CASHE**

### **FINDINGS**

The analysis of students' and companies' feedback as regards the potential of this teaching/learning paradigm allows us to conclude on the significant added value of this approach for the students, the teachers as well as the companies benefiting from the prototypes developed by these multidisciplinary teams of students and their supervisors.

This setting contributes to improve students team work and communication skills at an international level. Team work skills improve due to the academic/learning outcomes of the course while communication skills in an international setting improve due to the innovative aspects in the project execution and the chance to profit from an intercultural exchange of experiences. Students' comments during the course lifetime and one year after being involved in the project reinforce the added value of such paradigm.

Companies have a chance to essay new ideas and new products. Blended/AIM provides a low/cost proof of concept of significant value to companies. In the last two editions we had more offers from companies than those we can cope with. The number of companies offering problems for the students and willing to participate has been steadily increasing.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Blended-AIM raises awareness to the added value of blended mobility with regards to its potential to overcome barriers to mobility, mainly international mobility, and provide the information and the tools to facilitate its implementation in HEI and companies. We have developed the European foundation for blended mobility, a centralized access point where all those interested in blended mobility might find the information and the tools and how to set them up so that they can be easily streamlined.

The core purpose of Blended-AIM is to revamp international mobility and empower students' employability by means of blended mobility. The blended-AIM project settled the foundation to promote and systematize blended mobility in general. In concrete, blended-AIM empowers international mobility and employability by raising awareness to blended mobility, creating the resources to support students and companies hosting internships and by streamlining innovative teaching paradigms aimed to develop students' soft skills in a blended international setting.

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