

FINAL REPORT

February 2012

PUBLIC PART

ORIGINAL VIRQUAL

Network for integrating Virtual Mobility and European Qualification
Framework in HE and CE Institutions

Key Activity 3 : ICT / network

Project Number: 143748-PT-KA3NW

Grant Agreement: 2008 - 447 / 001 – 001



VIRQUAL

Network for integrating Virtual Mobility and
European Qualification Framework in HE and CE
Institutions

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Project information

Project acronym:	VIRQUAL
Project title:	Network for integrating Virtual Mobility and European Qualification Framework in HE and CE Institutions
Project number:	143748-PT
Sub-programme or KA:	KA3NW
Project website:	Virqual.up.pt
Reporting period:	From 01/01/2009 To 31/12/2011
Report version:	One
Date of preparation:	06/02/2012
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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission.

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Executive Summary

Europe has been investing in developing and implementing policies and tools to promote trans-European cooperation and mobility in many fields, including in Education. The Bologna Process is creating a European Higher Education Area where mobility, transparency and competitiveness are key concepts. The formal adoption of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) was an additional and important step to achieve mobility in higher and continuing education.

Joining e-learning and mobility together, it is obtained a new concept Virtual Mobility, defined by elearningeuropa.info as "The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to obtain the same benefits as one would have with physical mobility but without the need to travel".

Virqual is a project in the form of a network that proposes to help educational and training institutions to achieve Virtual Mobility and to guarantee EQF implementation through e-learning, aiming at finding specific obstacles in institutions and proposing concrete and innovative solutions. Virqual project has promoted cooperation and joint work among partner organizations and has established links with related initiatives. It has addressed other educational networks and organizations to help the dissemination of the results.

The partnership tried to encourage other institutions to participate in this network, joining the activities of the project (webinars, workshops, national events and international conferences) and contributing to the development of the European common knowledge in this area. This participation was done establishing contacts with passive members, just willing to receive information, and with active contributors in the research, in the debate and in the definition of the framework of the integration of virtual mobility and EQF.

The deliverables of the project include a learning outcomes database, four guides for learners, for teachers and for institutions, a website that concentrates the information about the project and a related Linkedin network. All these are consistent with the idea of promoting virtual mobility and the use of the EQF.

Table of Contents

1. PROJECT OBJECTIVES.....	5
2. PROJECT APPROACH.....	6
3. PROJECT OUTCOMES & RESULTS.....	8
4. PARTNERSHIPS	11
5. PLANS FOR THE FUTURE.....	12
6. CONTRIBUTION TO EU POLICIES	14
7. EXTRA HEADING/SECTION.....	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.

1. Project Objectives

Describe the project objectives.

- *Explain how the project benefits a specific community of users and how they are involved in the project.*
- *Describe the potential impact upon and benefits to the target user group.*

The objectives of Virqual are:

- a) To define, exemplify and promote discussion about using e-learning as a scenario to foster national and international collaboration of Higher Education and Continuing Education organizations to achieve virtual mobility implementation.
- b) To critically assess and exchange results, ideas and innovation about European, national and local policies and initiatives in the area of Virtual Mobility, aiming at identifying obstacles and facilitators for collaboration.
- c) To cooperate in the elaboration and implementation of concrete Virtual Mobility scenarios, by establishing partnerships among the network institutions, and providing solutions and specific tools for different processes and stakeholders involved in the process.
- d) To elaborate, implement, make available and disseminate tools to analyse, support, manage at Institutional level, contributing to improve the Virtual Mobility in Europe while trying to implement EQF requirements.

It was expected that through the results of the Virqual network, other European Higher Education and Continuing Education institutions, learners and teachers would find guidance, case studies and tools to integrate virtual mobility in their practices, contributing to the construction of a realistic European Learning Space. The project has an active website (virqual.up.pt) where the outputs referred can be consulted and obtained.

2. Project Approach

Describe the methodologies, surveys, analyses, tests carried out (if applicable), set-up of cooperation for the networks, etc.

Where relevant, address the added value of the approach used. Added value may be considered from the pedagogical, organisational or political point of view, depending on the nature of the project.

Include the evaluation strategy, approach, results etc.

Describe the dissemination and exploitation strategy and activities. Emphasise how they contribute to the sustainability of the project results.

The VIRQUAL network was constituted initially by the nine consortium members. Some of the dissemination activities were focused in expanding the network. The new participants of this network were invited to join either as active or as passive participants according to the respective interests in the project work and outputs. The work-packages, where the contribution of other institutions and network members would be more influential, were structured in the project to allow the partners work and interaction with interested members of the network. There were dissemination events in conferences, cooperation with related projects and organizations, specific workshops led by the partnership, three webinars open for interested parties and a major international conference. In all these events the goal was to inform and to interact with others.

During the second half of the project the definition of terms establishing the linkage between virtual mobility and the EQF was established and tested. This was a major advancement of the project. The major output of the project was the production of a model relevant for the three stakeholders: learners, institutions and professors.

The initial model was presented and discussed publicly in a workshop. Following the feedback the model was tested by each partner with the one case per stakeholder. The twenty seven reports were then analyzed and it was decided to create a simple guide to each three types of possible users and improve the description of the model. These were then presented at the final conference and at a conference where the workshops held allowed the final tuning of the publications. These three cycles of improvement allowed a certain confidence that major stakeholders were heard and the four publications may contribute to the promotion of virtual mobility.

The recognition of the qualifications based on competences acquired virtually is made based on the presentation of the learning outcomes and of a proper type of

assessment. Based on this rationale two studies were carried out. The first analyzed the way to choose and define the proper type of assessment for each type of learning outcome of the EQF. A table was produced and tested with stakeholders. The second study led to the creation of a template to better define the way the learning outcomes are written and chosen. This template was organized on a moodle platform and is accessible for all. The partners have tested the tool and have made recommendations. The goal of the tool is to create a template for users to verify how learning outcomes are written and how they can be related with EQF.

It was also noted that the model can also be applied to other types of situations involving mobility, virtual learning, recognition of qualifications and EQF use in professional terms. This conclusion is also supported due to the contribution of a large group of interested partners and of other institutions. Another benefit of having involved non formal partners was the access to the outputs created in this project with an eventual creation of interest to belong to the network. A major event was the addition of the Université de Genève as associate partner at the middle of the project following dissemination events where this university participated.

The partnership assumed that the public exposure of the project and of its outputs would result a proper evaluation of the progress. That was done in the presentation is conferences and workshops. That resulted in two awards received by the project being one at the EDEN conference in 2010 and the other in the IMS Global Consortium – Learning Impact Award. The project was also presented by the partners in national events to have a closer contact with local stakeholders. The project website has had more than five thousand visitors during the three years of existence.

The Virqual network also adopted a strategy to involve and disseminate the project and its outputs using web 2.0 tools. That was done using available tools from the website and using three free webinars to promote the project outputs. The web 2.0 tools promoted communication and information sharing, as well as collaboration and cooperation. The recordings of the webinars are available for others to consult and comment.

3. Project Outcomes & Results

Describe the major achievements and results of the reporting period. Make explicit the link between results and objectives.

For final products/results, explain the impact of outcomes and results on the target groups. Indicate where results can be found e.g. website details, contact details.

The project has delivered documents and tools that can be used for assessment support of learning or training, for internet-supported learning program launch and support and for learner support. It is a project that provides an international solution to problems related with mobility, recognition of qualifications (formal and informal), proper assessment of learning and adequate definition of learning outcomes (LO). The tools of the project have three components: a step-by-step manual for different stakeholders, to guide the implementation of virtual mobility at different levels; a comparative tool that provides information about the legal framework about EQF, e-learning and LO in thirty two European countries, facilitating mobility; finally, a portal focusing on the LO approach that defines a template for describing and assessing each type of LO.

The project results provide greater access to proven quality learning approaches through proper assessment of intended LO and that is crucial for the quality of learning. This project defines a model that matches LO of virtual courses to e-assessment methods, improving the confidence in virtual learning. It enables serving significantly more learners from currently served populations. A student or learner from one country can have the virtual training or education obtained in a second country recognized in a third country. It improves access to courses in a global choice to be accepted locally or in foreign country. The assessment tool is based on LO and its classification according to Blooms taxonomy and can be used in any part of the world. Provides greater convenience for learners since it allows the learners to choose with confidence any virtual course anywhere in the world. It increases the scope of choices and promotes the use of virtual learning with possible time and cost benefits. The legislation of each country was verified to ensure that it was in accordance with the recommendations of the tool.

The project enables lifelong learning since it widens possible choices of virtual learning that can be recognized and accredited. Virtual learning is the most important

environment for lifelong learning and can be fostered using the guarantee of proper and recognized assessment of the learning. The adaptation of the assessment types to the required LO is a guarantee that the learner has effectively acquired the knowledge, skills or attitudes required. Proper assessment is fundamental to assure effective acquisition of intended LO.

The instructor that uses the Virqual tools can adopt the proper assessment types for the LO chosen for the course. The instructor will be guided to the possible types of assessment in accordance with the different LO. It may also help the accreditation procedures in professional or academic terms. The project tools provide education to significant number of disadvantaged learners since quality assurance brought by the recognition of the qualifications obtained may promote the use of the virtual learning. That is a known advantage of the disadvantaged learners due to the possibilities it offers in terms of access, of time and of cost. Thus if the virtual mobility increases, due to the added confidence of its effectiveness, the savings are significant in terms of travel and of costs. The project tools aim at allowing proper assessment of the LO. This will help the definition of LO that can be verified in the virtual training and education.

The LO can also be mapped into a competence framework like the European Qualification Framework or similar. Another advantage is that learner engagement is probably more effective since the relationship between the LO and the assessment methods is clear and facilitates recognition. The pedagogy may also improve since the assessment methods may guide the techniques adopted either by the instructor or by the learner. Also the explicit connection between the LO and the assessment types may guide the learner through the learning process. It may increase the debate about the relationship and motivate critical thinking for the learner or for the instructor.

A possible main consequence maybe achieved in terms of quality. Assessment is generally not well studied either by the instructors or by the learners. The guides provide options for the proper assessment related with the LO but it will certainly improve the assessment quality either by the learner or by the instructor.

Another benefit is the expectation that institutions should use it as guidance for the design of the courses and for the accreditation of the qualifications acquired in other organizations. For the first one all teachers and academic directors can use it to guarantee proper assessments. A student that presents its portfolio can have the

recognition of qualifications through the analysis of the assessment and LO of the previous training. In fact the use of proper assessments in the LO may improve and facilitate the accreditation procedures. The verification of the competences acquired by learners may be improved due to the use of the Virqual tools.

The tools were designed to support the assurance that the key competencies were obtained by learners and by trainees. These are tools easy to use by learners, teachers and organizations when analyzing if the learning was effectively acquired. This is probably the most important consequence of Virqual. The tools were designed to help the design of the courses, the management of the course and the quality evaluation of the course. It is expected that an organization that uses the Virqual tools may have its courses recognized by others and have the learners with their competencies accredited in terms of professional qualifications. The courses will probably have a better acceptance from learners since the competencies will be easier to recognize and to accredit.

Another advantage of the project is that it utilizes open standards for data, content, or services. The tool has no implicit attachments to standards. The services, content and data are free to use by interested stakeholders. The tools were produced with public tools and documents and therefore used different sources like European frameworks and pedagogical theories.

It is expected that it will become a reference in virtual mobility to guarantee that a learner can choose anywhere its training and to have it recognized anywhere and with any type of employer or accreditation body. It is advancement in learning theory application since it combines the different types of LO of the EQF with the different modes of assessment used in virtual learning environments. It is not probably a scientific breakthrough but it is a compatible structure of different phases of the learning process. It has a theoretical and experiential background that can be used for further and deeper understanding of issues related with LO, mobility, EQF, assessment and recognition of qualifications. All public outputs are available at the project site (virqual.up.pt) and direct contact can be made at email address virqual@reit.up.pt.

4. Partnerships

Describe the added value of the multi-country partnership in executing the project (specifically, European added value). Where appropriate, refer to the added value related to the geographical coverage.

Emphasise the experience of working together in a European partnership. Describe the benefits of partnerships established with groups outside of the direct project/consortium e.g. with target users.

The project has worked to create partnerships with other projects, organizations and individuals. It was essential that the sharing of information and the debate about the possible solutions involves a large and rich number of project associated stakeholders. One of the examples of the interest and participation was the number of registered participants in the three webinars varying from 46 to 67 in total. The final conference of the project and related workshops were also attended by a large numbers.

Currently it is possible to register as an associate partner of the project either through the web or contacting directly the project members. For that reason efficient communication tools were used. There is a mailing address (virqual@reit.up.pt) created in the beginning of the project to direct any contact to the project partners. During the course of the project a Google Group (virqual@googlegroups.com) was created to facilitate the communication among the partnership. The documents and other project materials were placed in the Moodle of the coordinator. The template for defining and registering the LO were placed in the Moodle platform of one of the partners. These tools allowed the understanding of differences among the partners concerning the subjects of the project. That allowed the definition of proposals that met all partners expectations, especially in the guides directed at each type of stakeholders: learners, teachers and institutions.

The website was used to disseminate the project and its results and the groups and pages created in Facebook, Linkedin and Slideshare added a social networking dimension. These tools seemed a natural step to increase Virqual's networking capabilities and to exploit results of VIRQUAL. The interaction with other projects and organizations allowed exchange of materials and know-how that favoured the quality of the results. The addition of a formal associate partner that was highly interested in the project allowed developments like the support of webinars and writing the guides.

5. Plans for the Future

For Progress Report only: include a description of plans to carry out the remaining work to achieve the project objectives

For Final Report only: emphasise the exploitation of results beyond the project's lifetime. For example, this may concern aspects on commercialisation, intellectual property rights, copyrights etc in as far as they are not confidential. Sustainability of the project's outcomes is a key element of this section

The network created during 2010 and 2011 allowed the establishment of a network with two types of members: active and passive. The number exceeds currently five hundred from more than fifty countries. The selection of members was done by project partners that proposed about twenty each with two being selected as active members of the network. The other members were recruited based on the participation in workshops, in conferences or in the webinars. There were also members that contacted directly the project because there was interest. The passive members declared that wanted to be informed about project development and progress, about outputs and deliverables. The active members were either proposed by the partners or requested that status directly. The active members are interested in sharing experiences that are innovative and in participating in the debate of the results and of the actions. The range of areas of these active members vary geographically (some are from other continents) and scientifically (from medical rehabilitation to translation).

The future of the project is based on the exploitation of the results and on the interest of members. The project exploitation plan was created using as basis the concrete actions proposed by each partner. There are twenty seven activities listed that are structured in description, target groups, stakeholders involved and expected outcomes. These activities were created by the partners based on the exploitation plan strategy. This strategy was developed considering that possible actions would be based on partners having access to valuable national, regional and local networks. It is assumed that:

1. The VIRQUAL consortium seeks structural embedding of the project deliverables into current practices. This is done by staff working with the developed deliverables of the project.

2. Deliverables of the project are distributed among the networks and contacts of the project partners, herewith facilitating the possible usage or adoption of developed deliverables, or elements hereof, by institutions outside the VIRQUAL consortium.
3. By offering all deliverables under a free and open licence, a larger community is addressed to assure product sustainability over time.
4. By including a feedback procedure of possible future usage of the deliverables, areas for improvement will be easily identified.
5. By strengthening of the local, regional and national involvement. Sustainability and usage of end products is increased through involvement of the stakeholders in an early stage of project. All partners have a clear responsibility in compiling names of organisations that can be targeted or who already are willing to participate in the process. Partners will explicitly detail their local promotion and valorisation, regional promotion and valorisation, and national promotion and valorisation
6. By establishing a network of experts and interested stakeholders for updating and sustaining the deliverables also after the termination of the project.
7. Close cooperation with the EC and other relevant stakeholders like CEDEFOP , EDEN and ECVET Forum.
8. All partners will create a space with information concerning the project's aims, intermediate and final products together with the contact links to project partners, professional bodies, institutions, projects and associations. This can be done with submission of information to its site with a link established to each representative partner or member of the network.
9. International conference - the aim of this event is to present the results of the project, and the actions that lever the results in terms of sustainability. An active (high-quality over high-quantity) engagement and discussion was foreseen with invited stakeholders. The event provided a platform for sharing best-practice in virtual mobility and European Qualification Framework, and an opportunity to investigate potential cooperation with other initiatives going on. One of the relevant cooperation actions was with the project UNILO (<http://empleo.ugr.es/unilo/>) that was present in the conference. This project intends to promote the use of EQF LO in higher education.

6. Contribution to EU policies

Summarise how this project contributes or has contributed to key EU policies, objectives and priorities (Lisbon, Bologna, Bergen, etc). This relates to section D8 of the application form.

The project aimed at creating a linkage between Virtual Mobility and the competences relevant for EQF levels 6 and 8. The possible contribution to EU policies can be done in the context of Higher Education and of Lifelong Learning.

Concerning the contribution to the development of quality lifelong learning and to promote high performance, innovation and a European dimension in systems and practices in the field the project has promoted effective applications of e-learning cases in an European level while applying virtual mobility (VM) principles and innovating with the combination with EQF. The VM possibilities enlarged the cooperation between different institutions and organizations across Europe. The project tried to widen the use of VM and the testing of EQF for the e-learning courses while expecting to bring major development in the use of LLL materials. This is probably the major consequence of the success of this project since it is expected to have a more effective use of the LLL materials across the EHEA.

The promotion of the quality and transparency of Member States' education and training systems was achieved while fostering cooperation between the institutions of different countries. That allowed that learners and professors participated and interacted with other environments and learning materials in the case studies and using the LO database. The support of innovative ICT-based content, services, pedagogies and practice for lifelong learning was obtained through the innovative combination of VM and EQF to recognize the qualifications and accreditations.

Concerning learning to learn VIRQUAL exposed participants to learning on how to choose from different learning sources from other countries to find adequate courses. There is also the capacity of addressing the needs of learners from all sectors and origins that want to use e-learning materials. It is expected that the tools provided will favour the integration of disadvantaged learners in the classical framework of learning and training. The project used the EQF adaptation in each of the EU countries to analyze and verify the conditions of recognition of the competences acquired by the e-learning courses through the project tools.