

ERASMUS+ WILL CONTINUE – AND DUE TO THE CORONA- VIRUS PANDEMIC IT WILL FOR THE FIRST TIME INCLUDE VIRTUAL OPTIONS

Arguments for completing a study or work placement abroad as a virtual learning experience or “blended mobility” in unusual times

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Arguments for completing an Erasmus+ stay abroad as a virtual or – where possible – “blended” experience in combination with physical mobility (1-6)

1. Proof of semester/work placement abroad

On any CV, a study semester or work placement abroad is a positive signal that sets applicants apart from their competitors on the labour market. Thanks to virtual offerings, the coronavirus pandemic should present no obstacle in this respect. Students will receive a full mobility certificate even if their stay abroad was conducted virtually. In addition, such mobility will allow them to demonstrate their flexibility and the ability to work virtually even under unusual circumstances. They will have mastered challenges, shown drive and gained new skills such as learning the language of the host country.

This also applies to online work placements: collaborating online is a particular cross-cultural experience that promotes fundamental skills for later working life. Funded individuals will gain real practical experience from the tasks they are assigned and perform online, and through the subsequent feedback from their employer.

Those who prefer physical mobility should also consider a work placement with Erasmus+ as deadlines are not so important here. Companies may have vacancies for student work placements on short notice and may be open to physical mobility. In any case, a work placement abroad will be seen especially positively when embarking on a career later on.

2. Cross-cultural experience included

Virtual lectures and seminars allow students to gain foreign language skills, cross-cultural and international experience from anywhere in the world and introduce them to a different academic culture, different curricula and different teaching and learning methods online. According to various current surveys, a physical stay abroad is especially beneficial to personal development and employment prospects. In addition to the first choice of physical mobility, “blended mobility” is also a good option – whether in the form of a physical stay in the host country whilst studying online or as a shorter stay abroad, e.g. following a virtual introductory phase.

Even if various higher education institutions are only opening their doors to foreign students virtually, a stay in the host country may be possible in accordance with the respective entry and hygiene regulations, enabling students to combine physical mobility with digital study.

3. Better prospects on the labour market

A brand-new and forthcoming survey of employers in Germany clearly highlights a significant change in the business world. Alongside the ability to communicate and cooperate, two factors are becoming increasingly important for career progression: on the one hand, in the future digital skills will be more prevalent in requirement profiles for applicants; on the other hand, a willingness to change, combined with openness, cross-cultural skills and the ability to learn are the qualities individuals will need to advance to leadership roles.

4. Digital skills

A virtual study semester or work placement abroad requires extensive digital, language and organisational skills that will not only be beneficial to students in their later professional life, but are also, according to the employer survey, highly sought-after.

5. Advantages for schedule planning

Virtual mobility and digital courses offer the advantage of greater flexibility when planning studies as well as the opportunity to combine physical appointments of all kinds in the student’s home country with studying abroad. They also lessen the impact of differences in semester planning resulting from differing academic years in other countries. Moreover, why not study abroad online and gain additional cross-cultural experience as classes at the student’s home higher education institution are also taking place online?

6. Erasmus+ education and knowledge / language acquisition

Students who participate in the Erasmus+ programme in the coming months will certainly benefit from free e-learning offerings and the reputation of the European university they choose to attend. Erasmus+ funding recipients participating in the programme virtually receive free language courses and access to the EU Commission’s language learning platform **Online Linguistic Support (OLS)**. The licences for Online Linguistic Support (OLS) are already made available to the students at the beginning of the virtual period.

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7. Multiple stays and extended deadlines possible

Erasmus+ moreover allows **multiple stays** – students can receive funding for a total of up to 12 months per phase of study.

Students wishing to apply for a **graduate work placement** must do so while they are still enrolled at the respective higher education institution. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the rules for 2020 state that work placements may be conducted within 18 months after graduation instead of the previous 12 month deadline.

8. Advantages for further Erasmus+ mobility

Students who are considering postponing their mobility in the winter semester until the 2021 summer semester should however bear in mind that there may be **capacity shortfalls** at the host institutions in 2021 due to increased numbers of applicants. You should therefore explicitly point out that this virtual stay abroad is not a student’s last opportunity to go abroad with Erasmus+; rather, funding can be provided for a period of up to one year.

9. Social dimension

Students are not alone in their situation. Extraordinary circumstances become easier to bear when others are also affected. Regular exchanges and mutual understanding are therefore essential to the Erasmus+ feeling. In Germany, local Erasmus+ initiatives are, for example, providing online sessions around well-being and social connections in the host country and at the host institution. Similar formats organised by, among others, the Erasmus Student Network and by AEGEE are also available in other European countries. Student initiatives and departments at the host institutions may also be organising corresponding exchange fora.

10. Addressing target groups with low motivation for mobility, as these are not so heavily constrained by application deadlines

Virtual mobility may be an attractive option, particularly for parents with children or people with disabilities. On the one hand, they gain documentation for a semester abroad, and on the other hand, the impact of circumstances that impede physical mobility is reduced. Such circumstances may include family organisation that makes it difficult to be away for longer periods, or other factors that are not available in the host country in the manner required by the respective individual.

11. Further development opportunities for higher education and teaching staff

Virtual language courses or courses in cross-cultural skills may be an incentive e.g. for specialist coordinators in staff mobility to access further training. Applications for these mobilities can also be submitted on short notice, rendering certain aspects of physical mobility, such as arranging lengthy absences from family, unnecessary.

12. Advantages of “blended mobility”

Some groups will benefit from the opportunity for “blended mobility”, as the period for which a person is abroad is reduced if presence at the host institution is, for example, only necessary in order to take exams. Even a shorter period abroad is better for the acquisition of cross-cultural skills than an exclusively virtual experience. This may also include further opportunities after the mobility has ended – e.g. a follow up work placement.