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## ‘Virtual Internationalisation’ and the Undergraduate Curriculum in UK and Overseas Universities

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### ABSTRACT

The challenge of offering an international university experience is proving to be an expensive and time-consuming business for many institutions of higher education, with less than 1% of students participating in a semester or year abroad. Some students are simply unable to commit to travelling abroad for reasons such as inadequate finance, family commitments or health/disability issues. The adoption of practices such as ‘internationalisation at home’ or ‘virtual internationalisation’ can therefore offer institutions a viable alternative to expensive and lengthy overseas visits. Roehampton’s *Promoting Internationalisation through Cultural and Structural Adaptations* (PICASA) project is currently investigating these alternative ways of working.

Our research indicates that there are some effective alternative ways of ensuring that a university is able to work collaboratively with international partners, in order to offer all its students the possibility of an international experience at the home institution. Through the setting up of Web 2.0 based virtual, co-run and co-validated modules on traditional taught programmes, students can gain an excellent understanding of their discipline from an international perspective. Such modules can be run with students studying in a range of related or unrelated subject areas, and students will gain an awareness of the challenges of learning and working internationally. For the staff involved, the modules offer an opportunity to work with international academic and research colleagues, which gives them an enhanced and up to date understanding of disciplinary developments in other countries.

The ‘virtual internationalisation’ model will be explored with a selection of recent case studies from UK and European universities who co-validate modules with universities in other countries. Implications for joint planning, quality assurance and institutional learning/teaching policies will be reviewed. Case studies from the PICASA Project are due to be published in December 2016.

**Keywords:** virtual internationalisation; internationalisation at home; mobility; programme design; ICOMs

### Introduction

This paper gives a brief overview of the ‘virtual internationalisation’ model being developed by the University of Roehampton’s EU Tempus funded PICASA Project (PICASA, 2015a). The Project includes university teams from 22 EU and Eastern European institutions, who are working together to design training resources for university teaching staff and senior management teams. We are reviewing how the MINT (*Mapping Internationalisation*) tool can be used to benchmark internationalisation in our own institutions. MINT provides a useful starting point for reviewing internationalisation strategies and policies, and highlights the key importance of quality assurance at the heart of the internationalisation process (NUFFIC, 2015).

The Bologna Process has foregrounded issues of internationalisation and student/staff mobility, and emphasised the need for European universities to enhance study opportunities for students wishing to spend time in a foreign country (Tereseviciene, Volungeviciene & Dauksiene, 2011), although it appears extremely unlikely that the optimistic Bologna target of 20% mobility by 2020 will ever be achieved (Hudson, 2014). The Bologna Process has certainly had an impact in the UK and Carbonell notes that there has been a steady increase over the last few years in students studying abroad as part of their degree programmes, with just over 20,000 students from UK universities participating in a semester or a year abroad in 2013–14 (Carbonell, 2014). Yet the UK university population stands at around 2.3 million (HESA, 2015), which indicates that less than 1% of students were able to participate in an overseas experience. Our work is therefore focusing on the 99% of students who do not have the opportunity to travel abroad as part of their taught programmes and investigating alternative ways of embedding internationalisation into the university curriculum.

At the core of our work there is a strong focus on “internationalisation at home” (Crowther, Joris, Otten, Nilsson, Teekens & Wächter, 2000) and “international learning outcomes” (Hindrix & Vansteenhuyse, 2015). International learning outcomes (known as ICOMs) complement traditional discipline-based programme learning outcomes, and may include:

1. personal growth and development
2. intercultural competence
3. the development of foreign language skills

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4. global engagement and geopolitical awareness
5. international disciplinary learning (University Colleges of Leuven Limberg, 2014).

International learning outcomes are closely related to "international graduate attributes" (Killick, 2008) which focus on the requirement to ensure that our graduates are aware of the geo-political and global contexts in which their discipline is situated (Bostock, 2014; HEA 2014).

### Outward mobility or internationalisation at home?

The Higher Education Academy's (HEA) *Internationalising Higher Education Framework* directly challenges institutions to prepare "21st century graduates to live in and contribute responsibly to a globally interconnected society" (HEA, 2014). Likewise, the European Commission is encouraging all EU universities to increase students' future employability prospects by preparing them to become global citizens (EU Commission, 2014). Furthermore, the UK Higher Education International Unit emphasises that:

*Outward mobility is essential if UK higher education is to develop graduates who are equipped to compete in the global labour market, and can promote UK business and diplomatic interests worldwide. It also enhances the international profile of UK higher education, as students on overseas placements are excellent ambassadors for the UK.*  
(UK Higher Education International Unit, 2014, p. 2)

In the UK, it appears that institutional agendas and policies have typically focused on outward mobility statistics rather than ensuring that *all* students on a programme are able to benefit from an international knowledge of their discipline area. Hudson notes that universities from around the world are also keenly aware of this, and that "the problem of international opportunities being available only to students with financial resources was ranked as the most significant potential risk of internationalisation for institutions" (Hudson, 2014). Therefore, it can be seen that a narrow focus on outward mobility will fail to satisfy the needs of the many students who do not have the opportunity to complete a semester or a year in another country. The challenge of offering overseas placements for undergraduate students is proving to be an expensive and time-consuming business, in spite of the fact that many universities express the desire to prioritise student mobility and international research collaborations (Hudson, 2014). However, more than 50% of the staff and students that we have interviewed have indicated that they would love to learn more about international issues and research, but do not have the funds, the confidence or the foreign language skills to travel away from their home country (Vamvakari, 2014). Political instability (for example in Ukraine and Greece) and concerns about levels of immigration in some parts of Europe are also affecting the progress of new educational initiatives, and are having a clear impact on students' willingness to travel abroad (Vamvakari, 2014). Our research also indicates that many undergraduates with a disability or family commitments are unable to commit to travelling abroad, and would welcome the opportunity to learn more about international issues on their own taught programmes (Middlemas & Peat, 2015).

The adoption of practices such as "internationalisation at home" (Wächter, 2003) or "virtual mobility" (Tereseviciene et al, 2011; Villar-Onrubiaa & Rajpala, 2015) can therefore offer institutions a viable alternative to expensive and lengthy overseas visits (European Commission, 2014). Internationalisation in higher education is being re-defined as institutions gradually move away from a narrow emphasis on outward mobility and move towards a stronger focus on "teaching and learning in a culturally diverse setting" (Wachter, 2003, p. 5).

### Virtual internationalisation

We would like to argue that by revising the curriculum on some of our taught programmes and introducing opportunities for students to collaborate and learn in a virtual international setting, a university can ensure that students are able to develop an informed international perspective of their discipline area and its associated professional practices. Our development of a 'virtual internationalisation' model enables staff and students to maximise the potential of web technologies such as Skype, Twitter, a virtual learning environment or a course wiki (Austin & Soetanto, 2012; Nichol, Hunter, & Yaseen, 2012). Informal links can also be set up, to make the most of regular e-contact between learners studying the same discipline, but in another country (Messenger, 2015; Steele, 2015). By incorporating elements of virtual internationalisation into the undergraduate curriculum, and by revisiting institutional understandings of international graduate attributes, taught programmes can ensure that students gain an awareness of their discipline from an international perspective. We define virtual internationalisation as a flexible learning and teaching approach that makes the most of everyday web-based technologies to support the achievement of international learning outcomes on taught programmes. Virtual internationalisation can be formally embedded in a credit bearing course, or can simply be an informal arrangement between two geographically remote course teams. The timing may be asynchronous, or at a pre-agreed time. The aim is to enable students and staff to develop a more in-depth understanding of their discipline and profession from an international perspective, through engaging in discussions, webinars, presentations, design activities or virtual conferences. Learners will be able to develop international skills of social communication, professional awareness, diplomacy, collaboration and foreign language skills, as well as a heightened awareness of geo-politics (Middlemas, 2014).

We are currently researching good practice in the areas of biomedical science; languages; physiotherapy; health and media and journalism; construction and the built environment; and business studies. Our focus has been to investigate ways in which a taught programme can offer cost-effective opportunities to learn more about professional standards or local ways of working without the

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inclusion of a semester or a year abroad. One excellent example was noted at the University of Coventry/University of Loughborough's Building Information Modelling (BIM) Project (Austin & Soetanto, 2012) which enables BSc Built Environment students to develop the skills to "think, behave, study and work collaboratively in multi-disciplinary teams" (BIM, 2015). Students from three universities (two in the UK and one in Canada) worked remotely on a joint project over a number of weeks, sharing their ideas via web-based planning tools and video-conferencing. The BIM Project has highlighted a number of considerations that need to be taken into account when working with another institution, such as the equivalency of assessment tasks; the dates and timings of joint tasks; the challenges of working in an international multi-disciplinary setting; and the need to work sensitively and collaboratively with another programme team that you may never meet face to face.

We will be publishing other case studies on our PICASA website in December 2016. For each case study, we have considered the implications for quality assurance; funding; timetabling; joint planning; staff workloads; staff development; assessment; social and professional skills; and learning and teaching policies. Virtual internationalisation can be used as part of the teaching of the core curriculum, but can also be used to support the development of international graduate attributes related to employability and future professional practice, such as:

- Awareness of international etiquette issues (What do I wear? How do I greet people on Skype? Is there anything that I need to find out about in advance?)
- Ability to work collaboratively with geographically distant teams (Do I know our partners' location? City or rural?)
- Awareness of professional communication skills (How clearly/slowly do I need to talk?)
- Understanding local customs and ways of working (Who will lead the session?)
- Understanding of working across different time zones (If it is 9:30 in London, what time is it in Ontario?)
- Development of foreign language skills/technical and professional terms (Which language will we write in /speak in?)
- Using different IT systems and unfamiliar platforms (Will the software work? Is the internet connection good enough?)
- Development of organisational and planning skills (How can I make sure that our session goes as well as possible?)

To conclude, an adoption of the virtual internationalisation model can ensure that all undergraduate students are able to benefit from a collaborative experience with students and staff from other countries, and gain an international awareness and understanding of disciplinary developments (European Commission, 2014; Middlemas, 2014). This approach to curriculum design is certainly a cost-effective contribution towards the HEA's recommendation that universities should prepare "21st century graduates to live in and contribute responsibly to a globally interconnected society" (HEA, 2014). This will ensure that a more inclusive and equitable approach can be offered on a whole-institution basis, rather than simply focusing on the 1% of students who are able to afford a semester or a year abroad.

### Biography

Bridget Middlemas and Jo Peat are both senior lecturers in learning and teaching in higher education at the University of Roehampton, London. They are based in the University's Learning and Teaching Office, and run a range of staff development programmes for staff at Roehampton as well as for Roehampton's collaborative partners in the UK, Europe and India. Bridget is the lead academic for the EU funded PICASA Project, which will be completed in December 2016. The PICASA Project website can be seen at: <http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/Services/Learning-and-Teaching/Research/PICASA/>

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