



# Blended mobility project: Ireland, Germany, and Spain

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**Abstract.** Within the parameters of the new Erasmus programme, this Blended Intensive Programme (BIP) combines virtual exchange with physical mobility. There were three institutions involved in this project: Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Ireland, Hochschule Bremerhaven, Germany, and Malaga Healthcare College, Spain. The virtual exchange ran for five weeks from November to December 2021 and the physical mobility took place in Bremerhaven in the first week of April 2022. Twenty-seven participating students from diverse academic backgrounds engaged in shared tasks during the virtual exchange on a Blackboard platform, hosted by Letterkenny Institute of Technology and were awarded two ECTS credits, which was embedded into their local curricula. Content was delivered using both synchronous and asynchronous tools. The topic was global citizenship and students collaborated in multicultural teams to create presentations on their chosen topics. In addition to this team work, they also shared their individual insights into the course content by posting to a discussion forum in Weeks 1, 3, and 4.

**Keywords:** blended mobility, virtual exchange, global citizenship.

## 1. Introduction

The trilateral partnership underpinning this project was initiated in March 2020 when Europe went into its first Covid lockdown. Subsequently, a six-week pilot project (virtual-only), supported by Unicollaboration, ran from November until December 2020, with 36 students from Malaga, Bremerhaven, and Letterkenny participating. Building on this, the current project adds a physical element to create a BIP. This article will begin with a brief discussion of the concept of blended

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mobility, before describing the specific details of this BIP. It will outline both virtual and physical elements of the programme, and describe student profiles, aims, and learning outcomes and show how the insights of prior studies in the area have informed the design and implementation of the current project.

## 2. Blended mobility

The concept of blended mobility, while in its infancy, has already generated interest among some scholars. Essentially, blended projects combine physical mobility with some element of virtual exchange; this blend of physical and virtual comes in various iterations. It is not surprising that the new Erasmus programme 2021-2027 has prioritised blended mobility, given the manifold educational benefits it can provide (Helm & O'Dowd, 2020). While recognising these advantages, scholars are anxious to emphasise the challenges to be overcome when embarking on such projects. Purg, Širok, and Brasil (2018) discuss the transformative effect of blended mobility in the context of the Master's programme in Media Arts and Practices which ran from 2011 until 2014 in four EU countries; in particular, they highlight the intercultural value added to the learning experience (Purg et al., 2018). Welzer, Escudeiro, Druovec, and Holbl (2018) also acknowledge the positive impact of such programmes, as a way of internationalising the education system in the context of the AIM project which ran from 2016 until 2018 and involved ten EU countries. Nonetheless, they identify some of the intercultural challenges associated with blended mobility and propose a toolkit for dealing with them. Helm and O'Dowd (2020) emphasise that learning pathways need to be carefully designed, so that students can get the maximum benefit from such programmes (Helm & O'Dowd, 2020). These insights informed the development of the blended mobility programme described here.

## 3. Virtual exchange and physical mobility

While the preliminary project conducted in November 2020 was supported by Unicollaboration's Moodle platform, the virtual element of this BIP was housed on Letterkenny Institute of Technology's (now ATU Donegal) Blackboard website. The virtual-only exchange had created an opportunity for transnational collaboration during socially distanced Covid times (Carthy, 2021b); however the current programme adds another dimension to this with the physical mobility visit. The five-week virtual learning pathway extended from 8 November until 12 December 2021. Malaga and Bremerhaven participants were given guest access

to this platform and completed a GDPR form, stating that they would abide by Letterkenny's privacy policy regarding personal data. This was a vital preliminary step in setting up a learning environment with social presence for students to share and engage. Another important feature of the project, which had already been highlighted in the pilot project as a creator of social presence, was the assessment strategy (Carthy, 2021a). All set tasks involved some element of collaboration or sharing among students and were weighted as follows:

- discussion forum: 40%;
- team presentation: 40%;
- synchronous sessions: 20%.

In the discussion forum in Week 1, students had to introduce themselves to the community by posting a video/photo or text and respond to at least two of their fellow participants' posts. In Weeks 3 and 4, students had to post a 50-word reflection on the synchronous session in English, Spanish, or German, and respond to at least one of the other posts.

For the group presentation, tutors formed multicultural teams, ensuring a good mix of cultural background and gender. Once formed, groups had to select a leader, agree on a topic (from six possible options), and plan to deliver their presentation, with each member contributing two/three slides to the overall PowerPoint presentation.

Finally, students were awarded 20% for their attendance at three synchronous sessions in Weeks 1, 3, and 4. These synchronous sessions were carefully managed, with a maximum of ten students per session and a good mix of nationality and gender. Week 1 concentrated solely on ice-breakers and games, to encourage maximum participation and engagement; whereas Weeks 3 and 4 focused on intercultural topics which would equip students with the skills necessary to carry out their teamwork.

The physical element of the BIP, which took place in Bremerhaven, the designated host institution, was a week-long stay from April 4-10, some four months after the virtual element was completed. Prior to their departure, Malaga and Letterkenny students had to complete Learning Agreements and take out Covid insurance (in the event that they might contract the virus while in Bremerhaven). Students attended workshops in the mornings and went on sightseeing trips in the afternoons, with Thursday given over to a full day outing to Bremen. The workshops provided opportunities for participants to apply the intercultural concepts introduced during their synchronous sessions in Weeks 3 and 4 of the virtual exchange. On the

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final day they shared their reflections on the workshop and did presentations in multicultural teams.

#### 4. Student profile and global citizenship

In keeping with the priorities set out in the Erasmus programme guide, the student profile in this BIP was quite diverse, including ‘all types of students from all backgrounds, study fields and cycles’<sup>2</sup>.

Figure 1. Cultural and academic diversity

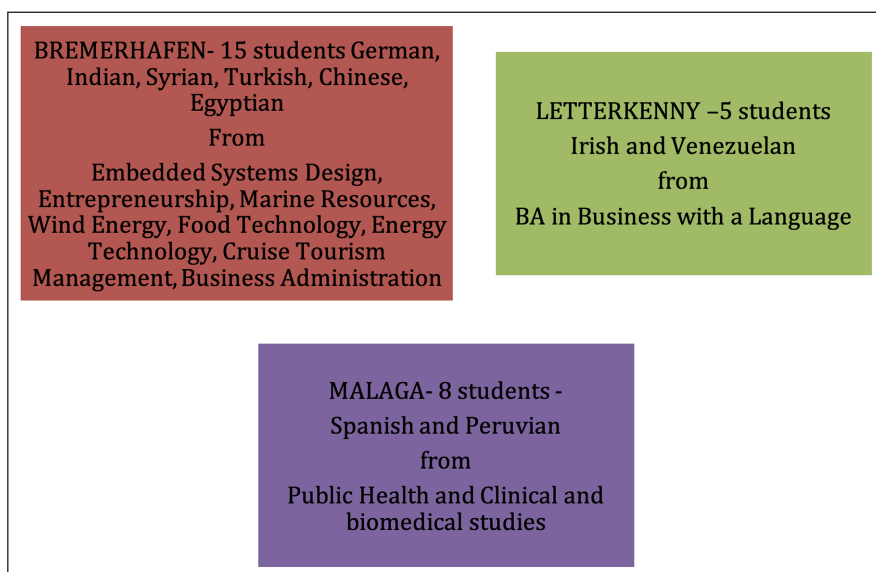


Figure 1 (above) illustrates multicultural and academic diversity within BIP participants, with six nationalities represented in the Bremerhaven cohort, two nationalities in each of the Letterkenny and Malaga cohorts. However, the academic diversity is most noticeable in the Bremerhaven cohort, with a total of eight disciplines represented. Both Letterkenny and Malaga participants are from more homogenous backgrounds, by comparison.

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2. For more information see Erasmus programme guide: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-1/mobility-project-for-higher-education-students-and-staff>

This wide range of academic disciplines and multicultural diversity among participants provided a rich resource for the topic of global citizenship. The programme aimed to equip students with the following:

- an understanding of collective identity, particularly intercultural sensitivity and respect for diversity;
- an ability to think critically about global challenges and opportunities;
- interpersonal and digital skills, with an aptitude for networking in multicultural settings; and
- an ability to engage collaboratively to create a more sustainable world.

## 5. Conclusion

The pedagogical benefits of blended mobility programmes are quite evident in both the background literature and the BIP described above. Not only do these programmes have the potential to develop 21st century skills, but also intercultural and interpersonal communication skills so important in today's multicultural workplace. However, as highlighted in prior studies, adequate design and management of both virtual and physical elements plays a pivotal role in their success. For virtual platforms, a sense of social presence on the learning pathway should ensure that students will engage and interact, thereby creating a dynamic learning community. This sense of community will be further enhanced when participants meet face-to-face for the physical element of the BIP. Further research into the learning experience of BIP participants will serve to inform future blended mobility programmes and ensure that more students from diverse academic backgrounds and nationalities have an opportunity to avail of them.

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