



Implementation of Virtual Mobility and Internationalization at Home in Albania's Higher Education: A Catalogue of Recommendations for Action

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Purpose: Despite progressing research in Virtual Mobility and Internationalization at Home, recent theories and technologies are challenging to implement for Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). The present paper focuses particularly on Albania, where the current education system has not been able to incorporate Virtual Mobility and Internationalization in higher education programs sufficiently.

Study design/methodology/approach: This paper analyses the prevalent situation within Albania's higher education system regarding Virtual Mobility and Internationalization at Home activities. The underlying data has been collected in qualitative semi-structured interviews with teaching staff and students from Albanian universities who are experienced with Virtual Mobility modules. It was evaluated through a mixed qualitative content analysis approach by Mayring (2014) using inductive and deductive category formation.

Findings: The results show the benefits that increasing the integration of Virtual Mobility activities in the education system could facilitate for students and teachers in Albania's HEIs. Nevertheless, it became clear that to implement a higher degree of virtual mobility at the university level, it is necessary to overcome the legal obstacles set by the Ministry of Education and structural obstacles within the HEIs.

Originality/value: Due to the lack of development, concepts, infrastructures, and legal foundations, the implementation of Virtual mobility as an affordable instrument to foster the international experience of Albanian students is of high importance. This could raise the quality of academic education and tackle capacity gaps in the education system of Albania towards the grade of international experiences of students.

1. Introduction

Analyzing the international labour market, it becomes apparent how relevant digital and intercultural competencies are and how much of a competitive advantage they resemble. Because of the increasing movement towards digitalization and globalization and the necessity to operate on an international level through Virtual Mobility (VM) approaches, offering such modules is considered an indicator of the quality of educational institutions. Bijens et al. (2006, p. 5) define VM as "cross-border collaboration with people from different backgrounds and cultures working and studying together, enhancing intercultural understanding and exchanging knowledge as its main purpose". The benefits of VM are confirmed by the European Commission, which conducted a study on Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange during the years 2018 and 2019, in which 88% of respondents agreed that VM had a positive impact on their prospects

in the international job market and 91% indicated the learning experience through the cultural exchange as beneficial (European Commission, 2019). The learning and teaching activities in VM modules needs teachers and student to adapt to new paradigms regarding the materials, teaching, and learning strategies, evaluation, as well as the development of digital competencies for the new environment (Casa Nova et al. 2011).

Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL) is a suitable delivery format for VM, where participants generate knowledge by collaborating in small teams using an online platform (Hernández et al., 2014). VCL is a core skill of the current century that can enhance competency in group collaboration, which is an important component of the modern work environment (Child and Shaw, 2016). VM and VCL correlate highly with the Internationalization at Home (IaH) trend. IaH has been a subject of much discourse, though an applicable definition has been developed by Teresevičienė et al. (2011, p. 6) “any internationally related activity with the exception of outbound student and staff mobility”. In higher education, the approach leads to “integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education” (Knight, 2003, p. 2). Higher education is considered one of society’s main socioeconomic development factors. However, in Albania, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) could not keep up with the developments of international standards in recent years (Mora et al., 2014). Analyzing the prevailing situation, it can be found that there is a capacity gap between the number of students willing to study at university and the number of available places in Albania’s HEIs (Vieira et al., 2021). The trend towards VM and IaH might offer a solution to this issue.

The COVID-19 pandemic was the first starting point for VM implementation in Albania. After overcoming the initial difficulties of digitized learning, teachers felt positive about their ability to handle and design virtual modules. However, in the “post” pandemic situation, teaching is again taking place almost exclusively in the physical classroom, which is a major setback. The cause can be found in the Albanian educational system’s lack of permission and accreditation of Virtual learning and teaching (Vladi et al., 2020). Even though VM has already been implemented in different international contexts, it is difficult to transfer the international experience to the Albanian context due to the lack of the necessary legal framework within the country. Until now, the “frameworks for digital skills and competences as well as IT qualifications and curricula at all levels of the Albanian Qualifications Framework have not been defined yet” (European Training Foundation, 2018, p. 3). This paper analyses the status of the incorporation of VM and IaH within Albania’s HEIs and recommends actions to improve the prevalent system.

Furthermore, recommended actions regarding how VM and IaH could be integrated sensibly into the higher education system would allow the students to inherit competitive advantages and a higher quality academic education (Altmann & Clauss, 2020). The data collected in this paper stems from interviews in which Albanian teaching staffs’ and students’ perspectives on the situation were analyzed. To structure the contents, three separate research questions were formulated and are explained in the following:

RQ1: How could VM and IaH improve the current system in Albania’s HEIs?

As found by previous studies, a range of advantages follows the implementation of VM in HEIs (Lizcano, 2019; Gómez & Vicente, 2011). This paper seeks to highlight how Albanian institutions can benefit from VM and why the education system should enable its implementation.

RQ2: What recommendations for action can be developed to achieve VM and IaH in Albania’s HEIs?

In this respect, there are several recommendations available in the international context (Koris et al., 2021; Altmann & Clauss, 2020; Jödicke et al., 2014; Haufe et al., 2010). Therefore, this paper aims to formulate recommendations fitting specifically for the Albanian context that can go alongside recommendations from international studies.

RQ3: What could a list of demands look like that can be presented to the Ministry of Education?

HEIs will not be able to implement VM in their modules as long as legal permission and accreditation are not granted. This paper aims to assemble a list of demands to encourage the Ministry of Education in Albania to pave the way to a modern education system that supports VM and IaH.

2. Research Design

To answer the research questions, interviews were conducted with Albanian academic staff and students. These allowed for a practice-oriented collection and evaluation of data, explained in the following sections.

Interview Partners

Interviewees were selected from five different Albanian HEIs, including private and public institutions. The sample consists of five academic staff members working in foreign and Albanian Languages, Business Administration, Project Development, and Internationalization. Additionally, three students majoring in International Marketing and Logistics Management, Foreign Languages, and Finance and Accounting were interviewed. Both groups, students and academic staff members, had prior experience with VM through a VCL module conducted within the framework of the VALEU-X project. The VALEU-X project addresses the lack of implementation of VM and IaH through the transfer of the VCL framework in the Albanian HEI context (Vladi et al., 2020) and is co-financed by the European Union. A pre-existing VALEU-X connection allowed the finding of potential Albanian interview partners. Potential participants received their interview invitation via email, resulting in eight participants agreeing to participate.

Data Collection

The collection of data required a time of two weeks and was conducted in November 2022. The qualitative semi-structured online interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams. The tool was chosen because it was accessible to all participants. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes per participant and were recorded and transcribed with the permission of the interviewees and after ensuring anonymity. Open-ended questions were used to express personal opinions, motivations, additional information and contextual feedback (Adams, 2015). The questionnaires were designed following a structured interview guideline by Berger-Grabner (2016). The approach of semi-structured interviews was chosen as it enables more flexibility during the process and provides the possibility to ask for clarifications and elaborations if needed. Two different interview guidelines were used, considering the backgrounds of the interviewees. The academic staff questionnaire contained 11 core questions about VM and Virtual Learning, International Staff Mobility, and Digital Readiness in their institutions. The guideline for students had 10 core questions divided into the four following topic categories: VM at the Institutional Level, Collaborative Learning and International Exchange, Digital Readiness, and the Student's Future Prospects regarding the Implementation of VM. The core questions were expanded by additional questions depending on the statements

of the interview partners. The personal information of the interviewees was anonymized while transcribing by replacing them with codes (I1-I8). Table 1 provides further information about the interviewees.

Table 1: Coding of interviewees (own representation)

<i>Code</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Department</i>
<i>I 1</i>	Academic Staff	Foreign Languages
<i>I 2</i>	Academic Staff	Foreign Languages
<i>I 3</i>	Academic Staff	Linguistic
<i>I 4</i>	Academic Staff	Business Administration
<i>I 5</i>	Academic Staff	Project Development and Internationalization
<i>I 6</i>	Student	International Marketing and Logistics Management
<i>I 7</i>	Student	Foreign Languages
<i>I 8</i>	Student	Finance and Accounting

Data Evaluation

The data was evaluated through a combined approach of qualitative content analysis, according to Mayring, by using inductive and deductive category formation. The various sub-forms of the content analysis allow a versatile evaluation of the data (Mayring, 2014). The computer-aided data analysis software ATLAS.ti was used to perform the content analysis. This software supports coding features within bodies of unstructured data and offers visualization functions (Muhr et al., 2004). Codes were used to categorize the collected qualitative data depending on the research questions.

3. Results

In the following, the results of the interviews are summarized. Following the three research questions, the chapter will be divided into three parts. The first part explains the advantages of integration of VM and IaH if applied successfully in the Albanian higher education system. This will be followed by recommendations for actions, giving an insight into what has to be done to achieve an integration of VM and IaH.

3.1 Possible Improvements in Albania's Higher Education Institutions through Virtual Mobility and Internationalization at Home

Academic staff and students have stated that the ability to apply for VM and IaH benefits in six different areas: general skills, career perspectives, cultural knowledge, personal and interpersonal gains, direct improvements for the education system and HEIs, and an increased ability to work abroad. Within these dimensions, different aspects were mentioned that would improve the education system and individual gains for students and academic staff. Table 2 provides an overview of the identified factors mentioned in the interviews.

The most mentioned general skills that increased through IaH and VM are collecting international experience (I2, I3, I6, I7, I8), improved technical skills, and learning to work with different tools (I2, I7, I8).

In terms of career perspectives, an emphasis was laid on an improved basis for a better career (I1, I2, I7) and the ability to understand the business and job markets in other countries (I4, I6,

I8). Another factor linked directly to IaH is meeting and opening up to other cultures and broadening personal horizons (I2, I5, I6). Regarding the personal gains students are experiencing, an increase in confidence (I7) and a more independent work ethic (I8). Interpersonal gains include the ease with which students can connect with academic staff, as online tools allow them to see availability status and facilitate quick interactions via chat messages (I1, I8). Gains that can be linked directly to the education system are mainly focused on students and teachers learning from other academic profiles (I1, I2, I5, I7), as well as the cost variable, as Virtual learning allows to save on travel costs and rent (I1, I2, I3).

One of the students stated: “we could come back to our home institutions or at our country to implement it back and to bring something really different and something really worth it for Albania” (I6). Thus, further internationalization would allow for an increase in human capital within the country.

Table 2: Advantages of integrating VM and IaH (own representation)

<i>Dimension</i>	Influential factors	Interviewee
<i>Development of general skills</i>	International experience	I2, I3, I6, I7, I8
	Improved technical skills and knowledge of different tools	I2, I7, I8
	Improved language skills	I7
	Improved interpersonal skills	I7
	Thinking outside of the box	I6
	General expansion of knowledge	I6
<i>Career perspectives</i>	Improved basis for a better career	I1, I2, I7
	Learning about business and job markets in other cultures and countries	I4, I6, I8
	Understanding working in a competitive environment	I5, I6
	Preparation for competing in the job market	I7
	Knowing how business works in other cultures	I8
	Companies valuing experiences abroad	I4, I8
<i>Cultural knowledge</i>	Meeting and opening up to other cultures	I2, I4, I6, I8
	Broaden horizons	I2, I5, I6
	General Internationalization	I1, I2, I4
	International relationship building	I3, I4, I5
<i>Personal gains</i>	See life from a different perspective	I8
	Learning to be more independent	I8
	Building confidence	I7
	Learning to be more flexible	I4, I8
	Getting out of the personal comfort zone	I6
	Opportunity to show personal skills to the world	I6
<i>Interpersonal gains</i>	Ease in connecting students and teachers	I1, I8
	Identifying personal strengths and weaknesses within the team	I1

<i>Gains for the education system</i>	Interactions are more meaning	I1
	Learning from other academic profiles	I1, I2, I5, I7
	Lower/no costs	I1, I2, I3
	Collected knowledge can be applied locally in Albania	I4, I6
	Interdisciplinary learning	I6
	Same opportunities for all students and more capacity	I6
	Increased recognition internationally	I8
	Creating knowledge networks between international staff	I3, I5
Transparency of different study programs	I2	

3.2 Recommendations for Action for Albanian HEIs

To build a foundation that allows for more virtual and international practices, HEIs should consider the following adjustments. The factors mentioned by the respondents are explained below. They can be grouped into two categories, the creation of foundations and the sensible design of VM modules.

Create Foundations for Virtual Mobility:

The foundations necessary to enable VM can be clustered into three categories: digital infrastructure, communication, and collaboration, as well as the preparation of staff and students. Firstly, a digital infrastructure must be created, ensuring that all students and academic staff members can participate in VM modules. The following table lists factors that are necessary for the successful provision.

Table 3: Factors to create sensible digital infrastructure (own representation)

Digital infrastructure to be provided	Interviewee
Laboratories and classrooms equipped with computers, WIFI, technical guidance and support	I1, I2, I3, I6, I7, I8
Online portals to share documents	I5, I8
Collaboration platforms	I6, I8
Manuals on how to use portals and platforms	I8
IT specialists	I2, I6, I8
MS Teams as preferred platform	I1, I4, I6, I7, I8

In terms of collaborations, ongoing communication was demanded by the majority of the interviewees (I1, I3, I3, I8), as well as regular general cooperation between faculties (I7) and with other universities (I1, I2, I3, I4, I7). The extent and standards of this cooperation should be stated in clear contracts (I2). One proposition included appointing a governing body to establish comparability of online and offline learning quality and coordinate the implementation of VM and IaH (I7, I8). To use digital tools efficiently, staff needs to be trained on how to use them (I4, I6, I7, I8). Regarding student preparation, manuals for the different platforms should be supplied before classes begin (I6). VM must be promoted among the staff, and discourses within the universities should be encouraged (I4). Incentives should be provided to staff members who drive IaH and use VM in an institution (I4). Staff should also be trained to design syllabi in VM settings (I4). Staff exchanges should be offered to increase the IaH in HEIs (I4,

I5, I8). Moreover, professional and linguistic skills should be fostered (I2), and suggestions for students to partake in international modules should be made (I7). Generally, the willingness to use digital and international approaches must be present in both parties, students and academic staff (I2, I3).

Design Successful Virtual Mobility Modules:

To create sensible VM modules, academic staff and students must have access to the necessary soft- and hardware. Furthermore, a didactical framework should be used to ensure the quality of teaching online converges with face-to-face classes. Therefore, communication guidelines should also be given to ensure students can receive support in case of problems or questions. These three concepts are explained in the following.

For productive VM, it is crucial to ensure that the digital readiness of students and academic staff allows for the implementation of virtual approaches (I4, I7). If this is not the case, tutors and IT specialists should be there to support (I7). Though, as shown throughout the interviews, staff members and students often feel confident in using the technical devices and platforms (I1, I2, I5, I6, I8). Regarding the inequality amongst students, it must be ensured that all of them have access to a laptop (I2, I7, I8) and a phone (I7) when enabling VM. Regarding platforms, most interviewees listed Microsoft Teams as the most efficient tool (I1, I2, I3, I5, I6, I7, and I8). Interaction via chat messages for short requests and email exchanges in a more formal setting is mentioned as the preferred method of contact (I6). When communicating with internationals, it was proposed to hold intercultural training and give continuous guidance to prepare the students for cultural differences that might arise and allow them to develop cultural sensitivity (I5).

Within the didactic framework, academic staff requested a sensible organization of the tasks to be carried out (I1, I2), including clear communication of deadlines (I1). Generally, digital classes should be based on methodological frameworks (I2). As the level of interaction varies strongly in the virtual classroom, students should be actively incorporated into the given tasks (I2). Exploiting the advantages of VM and IaH, students from different study programs can be coupled in classes to create knowledge and social networks (I6). Social connections matter to many students; thus, this variable must be considered in the virtual classroom, as it frequently creates barriers to feeling distant from fellow students (I6). This could be achieved through blended learning approaches, varying between online and face-to-face classes (I3).

Lastly, the communication between staff and students, as well as learners amongst each other, plays an important role when switching from face-to-face teaching to virtual approaches. Thus, professors must create guidelines on how and to what extent student communication is expected (I6), while they themselves should be reachable through quick communication tools, such as chat or email (I6). In addition, regular check-ins and open communication are desired (I2). Regarding social variables, students also requested teaching staff to turn on their cameras while lecturing (I6).

3.3 Recommendations for Action for the Albanian Ministry of Education

Based on the interviews, implementing VM in Albania's HEIs requires essential steps by the Ministry of Education. The greatest obstacle to performing Virtual Learning in HEIs is the missing approval by Albanian law (I3, I5). Permission might be given by the ministry when Virtual Learning is aligned with the education quality standards of traditional teaching formats. With no clear and binding principles when implementing virtual modules, the quality of education may suffer, and student's academic performance may decline (I5). Conversely, Virtual Learning is required for the Albanian HEI framework to achieve modern developments

and to increase the education system’s capacity (Mora et al., 2014). Providing accreditation for virtual modules can verify the students’ competency by proving their academic achievements. Thus, virtual modules need to be certified and accredited by the Ministry of Education (I1, I2, I3, I4, I5, I7). In this context, having an acknowledged double diploma through agreements between two different HEIs could support the VM projects and bring advantages for students in their future careers (I1). In brief, it is essential to enable accreditation and certification of virtual modules (I1), adjust the law (I3, I4, I5), and assure quality within the education system simultaneously. There are several ways to realize the listed three steps.

To ensure quality within the education system, fair distributed funding is necessary. As a result of limited funding from the Ministry of Education, public universities are not equally equipped with suitable devices that enable joining the students and academic staff in VM modules (I7). Funding could be targeted towards a proper infrastructure throughout institutions (I4, I6) and be used for suitable technical tools and devices (I5). Providing more financing for VM projects and collaborations is required to incentivize high-quality and effective modules (I5, I7, I8). Consequently, the Ministry of Education must solve the previously mentioned problems. The discourse on VM started a few years ago and drew more attention to the importance of the topic in Albania’s institutions. Thus, it is recommended to support VM-related project decisions through a task force that consists of academic staff and official entities (I5, I7). The task force should define and set principles for implementing VM, binding for all universities to improve the quality of VM modules. Once the implementation process is completed, the task force should formulate additional quality assurance guidelines. In addition, extra training should be given to the academic staff on preparing and delivering VM modules successfully.

Figure 1 summarizes the key points of the recommendations for action. For the HEIs to take action, however, initial steps must be taken by the Ministry of Education, as illustrated in the figure. Once the Ministry of Education paves the path, HEIs can subsequently lay the necessary foundations for VM and then design successful VM modules.

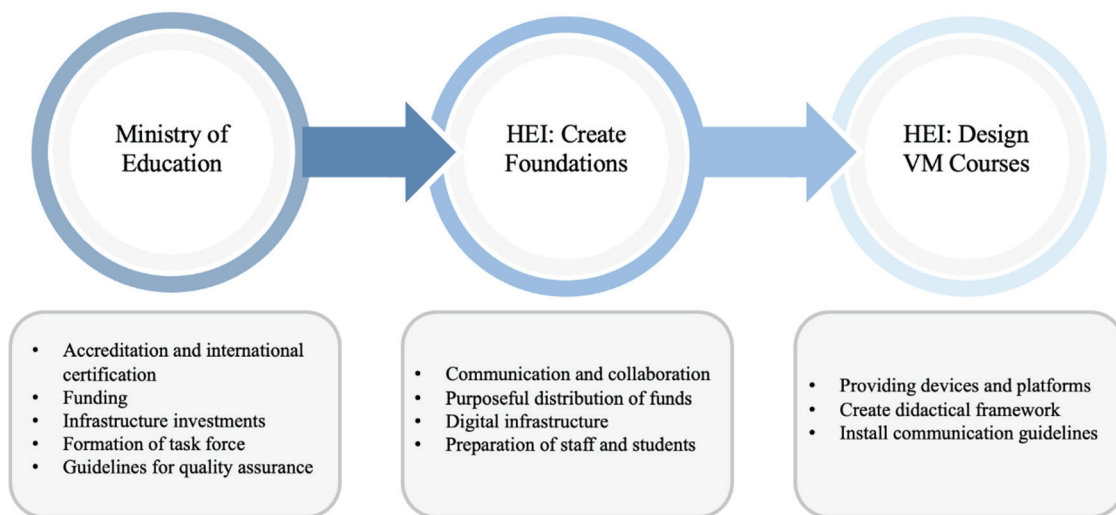


Figure 1: Schematic illustration of the recommendations for action (own representation)

4. Discussion & Implications

When reflecting on the results found in the interview process, it can be determined that the higher education system in Albania requires reforms towards more international and digital approaches. To achieve this, the Ministry of Education must lay the basis by allowing Virtual learning and certifying such modules. Furthermore, financial support can be provided by a

governing body to ensure the quality of the teaching is maintained or even improved. This support can equip universities with the necessary hardware and training. Further, the infrastructure of Albania needs to be improved to the extent that VM can take place.

“I would like to recommend to the different coordinators to implement such kind of projects [Virtual Mobility] more often in Albania and in other countries as well, because it really results to be beneficial to both, students and the academic staff” (I5)

In terms of the preparation of the HEIs, it was noted that expertise is currently developed to the point where more digital approaches would be possible. However, areas for improvement include staff and student preparation, standardization of tools used, including the provision of manuals, and more straightforward guidelines on communication practices.

If these two dimensions of expectations towards the Ministry of Education and HEIs are met, the benefits of VM and IaH, including enhancement of skills and career perspectives, gaining cultural knowledge, and stronger interpersonal skills can be realized. This will lead not only to a broader range of opportunities for students but also result in better human capital in Albania. Therefore, the issue of VM and IaH needs to be discussed and paid attention to by both academic staff and authorities.

5. Limitations & Future Research

Concerning the scientific approach, several limitations arise for the present paper. First, when evaluating the interview contents, it is essential to use a generalization approach. Conclusions have been drawn by inspecting the opinions of five members of the Albanian academic staff and three students. The results could have differed if other interviewees had been selected. Further, due to the mother tongue of the authors being German, language barriers to the Albanian literature were limiting the number of sources available, especially regarding the prevalent legal situation within HEIs. In general, the lack of discoverable legal documents drastically limited the results.

To further expand on the findings from this work, pedagogical patterns could be developed to translate the findings from theory into practice more effectively. For further consideration, validations of the design recommendations could be tested in case studies to optimize the recommendations further.

Despite the limitations, the selected starting situation is an excellent opportunity to obtain insight and initial results regarding the research questions.

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