

Virtual mobility preparing real-life mobility within international student exchange in Germany

Open Distributed Campus – an online coaching platform for international students and researchers dedicated to virtual preparation of real-life mobility

Whether it is the ERASMUS-student from Norway, the DAAD fellow from Bulgaria or the researcher from the U.S. wanting to visit a German university, all these academics are in need of pre-departure preparation for their new academic and cultural environment in order to complete a successful study or research stay. To meet the needs of all these target groups, the Center for Digital Systems (CeDiS) – which is the Competence Center for E-Learning and Multimedia at Freie Universität Berlin – developed the online platform “Distributed Campus” (DC). This web-based information and communication tool offers a coaching environment as blended mobility approach to assist international students and scholars participating in study or research abroad programs in Germany. They profit from the interactive pre-departure preparation and online support for arranging all necessary administrative, organizational and intercultural steps for their stay abroad.

At Freie Universität Berlin, DC has been successfully used for the preparation and support of foreign students by the International Office and other departments (i.e. the international Master programs, Summer Schools etc.) since 2004. Thanks to a substantial funding from the German Academic Exchange Service DAAD, DC’s technical and editing flexibility was thus enhanced in 2008 to offer the platform as “Open Distributed Campus” (Open DC) for use at other German universities and institutions.

Blended mobility prepares physical mobility

The blended mobility concept of Open DC consists of the essential knowledge transfer to exchange students via e-learning materials in German and English so the international clientele may get a feel for the authentic cultural and linguistic environment at the host institution and prepare for social and academic integration.

The content pool developed at Freie Universität Berlin currently consists of about 270 modules (articles, animations, video, interactive German modules) and is aimed at incoming students and researchers. The multimedia materials cover all relevant academic and culture reflective topics. In a holistic approach this comprehensive content pool is complemented by e-learning elements to cater to the needs of all parties involved and to better prepare the international academics for their studies at a German university, ultimately reducing culturally critical incidents and thereby also reducing dropout rate as well as academic and cultural discouragement. It particularly focuses on intercultural immersion and integration into everyday and study life in Germany.

Flexible customization for organisations

Customization for both groups and individual student users is amongst Open DC's unique features. There are various communication channels between organizers and students as well as students amongst each other. Thus, the "online-bridge" between home and host university addresses the crucial so called "pre-departure preparation" phase: during the time between nomination for an exchange program and the actual beginning of academic studies at the host university some important steps must be taken for optimum preparation of academic work and socio-cultural integration for a sometimes rather brief stay.

The concept of Open DC is based on a groups-and-roles-model allowing the separation of administrative from editorial processes as well as group specific addressing i.e. by exchange program or by nationality. No programming skills are necessary for building and maintaining content. This concept has proven very successful as it gives editing responsibilities to the support staff, the first contact for an international academic.

Thanks to the tight and interdisciplinary cooperation with partner universities in terms of conception, evaluation and realization of different topics (content, technology, target group focus) synergies are created and effectively used. The various communication tools (newsletter, community, e-mail forms) intensify and simplify communication between all involved parties.

Cultural and academic advantages for international guests

The integration of the multimedia learning environment Open DC into the support structures at the university or the supporting offices like the International Office guarantees binding support structures not only for staff but for the international students and researchers as well and brings the following advantages:

- one central platform as the universal and valid venue for all students and organizers, not requiring any further search (Google or university websites)
- the information provided is up-to-date and reliable
- individual and personalized checklists
- interactive elements that allow ratings and comments (Web 2.0)
- integrated German modules to refine language skills
- situation based materials of everyday life
- authentic reports and student inputs
- comfortable forms download

German universities using Open DC

The Open DC model has proven a successful preparation and coaching tool transferable to other university structures and individual programs and partner. There are 12 German universities using Open DC so far, please see our website for details:<http://opencdc.distributed-campus.org/en>

