

Supporting students on field trips abroad

This exemplar is relevant to Digital Student challenges:

Deliver a relevant digital curriculum

Ensure an inclusive student experience, using technology to overcome disadvantage

In 2014 the University of Reading received an EU ERASMUS Intensive Programme grant to allow ten students from each of three European universities (Jacobs, Ghent and Reading) to travel to the University of Akureyri, Iceland, for a microbiology field trip. With only two weeks in Iceland to undertake the actual work – sampling microbes in extreme environments – the students needed to be well prepared. As well as familiarising themselves with the academic background and the sampling techniques to be used, they needed to feel comfortable working with staff and students from other European countries. Many had very little experience of fieldwork.

It was decided to use a private Facebook group as the online learning environment, as students from all four countries were already Facebook users. Initially the online space was used to meet virtually and prepare for activities in the field. Once in Iceland, the students were given iPads to support their data collection, allowing them to geo-log and photograph each sampling location. The iPads also enabled students to get online and post short reports to the Facebook group as well as providing material for reflection and writing up later.

In time the Facebook group became useful for other aspects of the course. Students used it to post the outcomes of group work in seminars, and staff posted 'breakfast quizzes' and discussion topics. Focus groups found that students particularly appreciated having a safe learning environment in which to meet each other and try out new techniques, allowing them to really focus on the work they undertook in the field.

How does this meet the challenge?

- Providing iPads (in this case from a departmental budget) gave all students the same opportunities to prepare and to manage their work.
- Mobile devices can help students bridge the gap between learning in the field and learning in the classroom or lab.
- Third party social spaces such as Facebook can play an important role in collaborations that extend beyond a single institution.
- Students appreciate having a 'safe' online space in which to practice new identities and techniques.

Find out more

- [Extended write-up](#)
- [Student blogs and videos](#)

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