

## Virtual Exchange and its role in Blended Mobility Initiatives

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This position paper defines Virtual Exchange and outlines its role in blended mobility initiatives in Higher Education.

This paper has been authored by Francesca Helm and Robert O'Dowd for the UNICollaboration organisation and is intended as a contribution to the European Commission's [Public consultation launched on the new Digital Education Action Plan](#). It is also intended for use by educational institutions, organizations and university networks as they consider the integration of blended mobility in their internationalisation and international mobility strategies and policies.

### Virtual Exchange and its role in Blended Mobility

Blended mobility can be defined as a deliberate combination of both physical and structured online collaboration. This may involve a physical mobility course which is supported by online interaction, or an online course or project which is supported by physical mobility (e.g. at the start or the end of a one-year online project or virtual collaboration) (European Association of Distance Teaching Universities, Henderikx & George Ubachs, 2019<sup>1</sup>).

The European Commission has announced that blended mobility will play an integral role in the Erasmus programme 2021 – 2027. This will involve combining short, intensive physical mobility for students (5-30 days) with a virtual component before, during and/or after the physical mobility. The Commission understands

this virtual component to consist of collaborative online learning exchange and teamwork which can be carried out through joint projects and/or online courses (Tegovska & Dumitrescu, 2020)<sup>2</sup>.

We propose that any institution exploring the integration of blended mobility initiatives should consider the use of Virtual Exchange as the virtual component of these initiatives.

### What is Virtual Exchange?

Virtual Exchange (also referred to as COIL or telecollaborative learning) involves engaging learners in sustained online international collaboration and communication with online peers under the guidance of trained facilitators or educators.

Virtual Exchange offers individuals an international/transnational experience as well as the opportunity to foster a range of 21st century employability skills which include media and digital literacy, communication skills, global awareness, empathy, critical and analytical thinking, foreign language skills and intercultural competences.

There are several different models of virtual exchange. However, a broad distinction can be made between educator-led, **collaboratively designed virtual exchanges** which generally involve a partnership between two or more

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<sup>1</sup> <http://openaccess.uoc.edu/webapps/o2/bitstream/10609/93586/1/Innovative%20Models%20for%20Collaboration%20and%20Student%20Mobility%20in%20Europe.pdf>

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<sup>2</sup> Online presentation: "The Erasmus Charter for Higher Education 2021-27: New Principles"

classes, and **'ready-made'** VE programmes led by organizations specialised in virtual exchange<sup>3</sup>.

Organisational and governmental support for Virtual Exchange is growing. The UNICollaboration organisation<sup>4</sup> promotes the development and integration of research and practice in telecollaboration and virtual exchange across all disciplines and subject areas in higher education. In Europe, the European Commission launched *Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange*<sup>5</sup> in 2018, a flagship programme which aimed to expand the reach and scope of the Erasmus+ programme via virtual exchange. In the United States, organisations and networks such as the SUNY *Center for Collaborative Online International Learning* (COIL) provide training and support for educators and institutions who are interested in integrating Virtual Exchange in their curricula. The *Stevens Initiative* also provides funding for organisations to develop Virtual Exchange and training programmes and gathers resources to grow the field of VE.

### The Impact of Virtual Exchange on Student Learning

In recent years several large scale research studies have been carried out and provide a rich evidence-base regarding the impact of virtual exchange programmes.

The **EVALUATE project**<sup>6</sup> involved over 1000 future teachers from 16 different countries in 25 different exchanges based on the telecollaborative/collaboratively designed VE model. The Impact report found that engaging student teachers in structured online intercultural collaboration as part of their formal learning can contribute to the development of their **digital-pedagogical, intercultural, and foreign language competences**. It can also lead to **innovation** and **international learning** in the

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<sup>3</sup> Soliya ([www.soliya.net](http://www.soliya.net)) and Sharing Perspectives Foundation

(<https://sharingperspectivesfoundation.com/>)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.unicollaboration.org/>

<sup>5</sup> [https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual\\_en](https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual_en)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.evaluateproject.eu/>

education of future teachers, who are amongst the least mobile of European university students.

The **Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange** pilot project involved 16,210 youth participants and 2,468 trainees in 2018 and 2019. The 2019 Impact Report found that there was significant overall gain in post-exchange measures of **intercultural communicative competence, curiosity** and **self-esteem**, as well as **warmth to people with different ethnic and religious backgrounds**. The exposure to different world views and beliefs heightens young people's critical thinking and appreciation of diversity. Participants perceived an increased **knowledge of the relationship between societies**, increased awareness of stereotypes, and **built positive/meaningful relationships** with peers from different countries. Many of them reported keeping in touch with fellow participants after the end of their exchanges and growing interest in study abroad. The majority of participants felt they built skills and competences directly related to **employability**, such as **confidence in working in culturally diverse settings, teamwork** and **problem-solving**, and also **digital competences**.

The **Stevens Initiative** 2018 Impact Report found positive change in participants' **knowledge of the other country or culture** from pre-program to post-program, a small positive change in learning more about unfamiliar places, languages, and cultures and in participants' retrospective assessment of their **cross-cultural communication** skills.

Despite the growing implementation of VE, it is still far from being a common practice in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and is not included either in online education offerings or internationalisation at home strategies. A baseline study carried out in the context of the EVOLVE project<sup>7</sup> aimed to understand the current state of the art as regards understanding and implementation of Virtual Exchange in HEIs

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[https://evolve-erasmus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Baseline-study-report-Final\\_Published\\_Incl\\_Survey.pdf](https://evolve-erasmus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Baseline-study-report-Final_Published_Incl_Survey.pdf)

across Europe. It found that there was, in 2018, no institutional recognition for VE in HEIs and that VE was not widely referenced in strategies of internationalisation in the 44 responding institutions. A follow-up case study report of 9 institutions has found that the main drivers for VE are generally highly motivated individual educators or international offices, but still no concrete strategies. However the situation seems to be changing.

### Growing Interest in Virtual Exchange

Current debates on the economic and environmental cost of study abroad programmes, as well as the challenges to physical mobility posed by the recent global pandemic have made Virtual Exchange an attractive option for institutions of higher education as they search for sustainable models of international learning which will serve as preparation for or a complement to physical mobility programmes.

### Virtual Exchange and the Current Educational Context:

We argue that the promotion of Virtual Exchange is in line with the current educational context in European Higher Education, and in particular as part of blended mobility initiatives, for various reasons:

1. The European Commission recently adopted the [Digital Education Action Plan](#) which includes 11 actions to support technology use and the development of digital competences in education. The Action Plan has three priorities which include 1) making better use of digital technology for teaching and learning, 2) developing digital competences and skills and 3) improving education through better data analysis and foresight. Virtual Exchange is in line with the action plan as it involves an innovative use of digital technologies in education and also enables the development of both educators' and students' digital competences.
2. The European Commission is also committed to the development of a *European Education*

Area that will promote education and culture as drivers for jobs, social fairness, active citizenship as well as means to experience a European identity. To achieve this, [the European Council](#) has underlined the importance of promoting the development of various competence frameworks including the Digital Competence Framework, the Entrepreneurship Competence Framework as well as the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture. Virtual Exchange initiatives can facilitate the integration of these competence frameworks through the development of projects which involve the development of all these different competence sets.

3. Finally, the new international learning context brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that physical mobility numbers are likely to drop significantly in the coming years. Virtual Exchange can help to compensate for this by providing students with international learning experiences as part of their studies at their home institution.

### The UNICollaboration organisation argues that:

- Virtual Exchange should not be seen as being in competition with physical mobility. Rather, Virtual Exchange can be used as preparation for physical mobility, as a complement to physical mobility in blended mobility initiatives and as an inclusive, international learning opportunity for students and staff who may not be able to or want to have a physical or blended mobility.
- Virtual Exchange should not be confused with other 'virtual mobility' activities. While Virtual Exchange is based on learners engaging in structured online intercultural dialogue, virtual mobility may involve students using the internet to follow lectures and accessing course materials at a university in another geographical location but with no interaction with other students or intentional inclusion of

intercultural learning or development of soft skills in the curriculum.

- The development of intercultural competences, media literacy, digital competences or empathy and understanding are not natural by-products of Virtual Exchange, they must be intentionally built into the design of the VE.
- Virtual Exchange is not a question of simply connecting learners and classes. Students require mentoring by teachers or facilitators as they engage in their online intercultural interactions and collaborations with different cultural groups if VE is to meet its intended learning outcomes. Teachers should therefore be trained to design virtual exchanges and carry out this role of pedagogical mentoring in order to support learners in explicitly addressing intercultural issues and to engage positively with difference.
- The virtual phases of blended mobility require integration into university curricula and explicit recognition of students' and teachers' learning outcomes. Students' participation in VE and their acquisition of competences during the virtual phases of blended mobility should be recognised by the awarding of grades, ECTS credits and recognition in the Diploma Supplement as an online, international experience.
- Teachers' engagement in Virtual Exchange initiatives requires time and a significant extra workload. Teachers should therefore be supported through the provision of professional development and support, technological infrastructure and academic recognition (for example through teaching awards, time release...)
- It will take time for institutions to develop VE strategy and build the necessary capacity and organizational structure for the

comprehensive integration of VE practices. However the crisis in mobility that COVID-19 has presented calls for immediate solutions.

### We call for:

- Funding for a comprehensive Virtual Exchange initiative to ensure the continuity and upscaling of VE in HEIs in 2020-2021 and through to 2027. This initiative should provide access to both quality 'ready made' models of virtual exchange and training programmes for educators, youth workers and facilitators.
- Explicit recommendation to use Virtual Exchange in the digital education action plan as it is a tried and tested pedagogy that is also flexible, scalable, inclusive and cost-effective.
- Support measures and indicators to ensure the quality of virtual exchange and blended mobility activities.
- Mechanisms for the recognition of virtual exchange (e.g. badges which can automatically be included in the Diploma Supplement, Europass CV).
- The explicit inclusion of Virtual Exchange and Blended Mobility in the Erasmus Charter application.
- Funding for both the development of the virtual component and the mobility component of blended mobility initiatives.
- Organizational grants for capacity-building activities for institutions - which can be spent on building internal capacity of university staff and for partnering with VE providers to be able to offer students 'ready made' VE experiences.
- Funding for short VE planning trips for teachers.