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OCTOBER 2022



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Digitalisation in International Higher Education

Online International Education: The Case for Virtual Exchange.

Virtual Exchange and Virtual Mobility are sometimes conflated in policy papers, discussions and actions relating to online education in an international setting. Yet Virtual Exchange and Virtual Mobility are fundamentally different approaches to online international education ([Reiffenrath & Thielsch, 2022](#)). Failing to recognise these differences and how each can contribute to internationalisation as an approach in its own right and combined with other approaches may leave the potential for offering international and intercultural learning experiences to students in higher education untapped. In this Think Piece I will unpack some of these differences by comparing Virtual Exchange to Virtual Mobility, not only in terms of the competences supported but also in relation to integration in the curriculum.

The term Virtual Exchange has existed for quite some time ([Helm 2018](#)), but it has gained much more traction after large initiatives, such as the [Stevens Initiative](#) in the US and the [Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project](#) in Europe. Virtual Exchange is a pedagogical practice embedded in programmes at the home institution. It has been defined by Virtual Exchange experts as a practice in which "the deep impact of intercultural dialogue" is combined with "the broad reach of digital technology" ([EVOLVE Project](#)). Virtual Exchange connects individuals or groups from different cultural and/or geographically separated areas by engaging them in tasks and projects in which they work together. This sustained collaboration is a key feature of Virtual Exchange, which is also expressed in alternative names, such as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), Telecollaboration and Global Virtual Teams. There is a growing body of evidence that, with adequate teacher or facilitator support, Virtual Exchange may contribute to the development of knowledge and skills required for functioning successfully in today's globalised society, such as intercultural competence, language skills, collaboration skills empathy, and self-efficacy ([EACEA, 2021](#); [Stevens Initiative, 2022](#)).

Virtual Mobility, on the other hand, denotes a form of distance education, in which students take online courses for credits at a host university. The way in which these courses are designed and the way in which students learn is unspecified by this definition. If there



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no opportunities for students to work together, or if students' different cultural backgrounds are not taken into account as a resource for learning, Virtual Mobility may not contribute much to the development of intercultural competence or other skills and knowledge associated with studying and working in an international setting ([Van Hove, 2021](#)).

This is not to say that there are no advantages for students to participate in Virtual Mobility programmes. As [Reiffenrath and Thielsch \(2022\)](#) point out, Virtual Mobility may open up a wider range of disciplines to students than may be available at the home institution. It may expose them to other academic cultures and allow them specialisations in areas not available at the home institution, or it may offer them an opportunity to study through a language different from the default language of instruction at their home institution.

OPTIONS FOR VIRTUAL MOBILITY

It is still uncertain to which extent online or hybrid teaching and learning formats which emerged from the pandemic will develop as a model for virtual mobility. The reason is due to the fact that this type of online learning is structured by a curriculum for on-campus learning, which largely follows scheduled course times, with lectures and seminars as the main teaching and learning formats. During the pandemic, these lectures were replaced by online meetings and breakout sessions. Most institutions have now reinstated face-to-face learning and many teachers are happy to go back to face-to-face teaching and learning. For many institutions, the priority is on blended learning, i.e. creating effective combinations of face-to-face and online learning for students who are primarily based on campus. In this "new normal", some lectures may be streamed live as webinars, and individual or small group meetings replaced by online conferences to meet the demand for higher flexibility by students. However, to foster social connections, in-person contacts and face-to-face teaching and learning on campus will remain the option of choice for many HEIs. Allowing students at a distance equal access to this in-class learning is pedagogically and organisationally challenging. It is likely that such forms of online or hybrid learning will remain restricted to specific programmes and courses and that, at least for the next few years, they will not be available to international students as part of virtual mobility arrangements on a large scale.

A better option for virtual mobility may be courses specifically designed for online delivery. In the Netherlands, for instance, TU Delft, building on its strong

tradition of open education, is offering a virtual mobility program ([somewhat confusingly advertised as Virtual Exchange Program](#)) in collaboration with partners around the world. In the tradition of distance learning and MOOCs, these courses are primarily content-oriented, to be completed by individual students at their own pace and time – within specific time windows. While such courses may be excellently suited to provide access to disciplinary content and skills not available at the home institution, students may not necessarily learn to work with other students, even if they are from another country or cultural background.

A promising third avenue for virtual mobility is opened up by the Erasmus+ European Universities Initiative (EUI). Critically aware of the need for social interaction in their teaching and learning provisions, particularly after the pandemic when personal contacts between students came to a stop, many institutions working within the context of the EUI are now developing international collaborative programs. These programs are delivered through combinations of online and onsite learning. Typical steps include mapping curricula and charting study paths, aligning or designing courses to be integrated in the collaborations, and developing systems for automatic registration and recognition. Supranational initiatives, such as [Erasmus Without Paper](#) and [The Groningen Declaration Network](#), have been developed to help institutions create the necessary infrastructure to move the process forward. Strong top-level steering and decision-making, design and development through multi-disciplinary international project teams, and working with academics in the respective partner institutions are needed to achieve the desired outcomes. This has resulted in several innovative collaborative programmes now being piloted across Europe (e.g. CHARM-EU: [Master's in Global Challenges for Sustainability](#)). While such initiatives are of great importance for facilitating study at each of the partner institutions (as a long-term ambition of the EUI), a large number of administrative, technical, financial and legal challenges need to be overcome to implement these international collaborative programmes at a substantial scale. In addition, the onboarding of academic staff in such initiatives is a major challenge.

VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

Within this evolving landscape of online international education, Virtual Exchange holds a special position. Virtual Exchange is an instrument for providing highly relevant international and intercultural learning experiences to students, but it also allows these experiences to be integrated in the curriculum through

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bottom-up implementation. One of the most common scenarios in the so-called "class-to-class exchanges", involves a teacher from one institution working together with a teacher from another institution (or more institutions). They plan and design tasks for the students together, introduce the tasks in their respective courses and guide the classroom discussion and reflection, which normally follows students' online collaborative work. Virtual Exchange, in this characteristic format, is a form of blended learning. Students combine in-class activities (usually in a face-to-face setting) with online work in pairs or small groups, and bring their experiences back to their respective classes, under the guidance of their own teachers.

Not only does this blended learning model reside particularly well with the focus of many institutions' digitalisation efforts post-Covid (to provide optimal combinations of online and offline learning experiences to learners who are primarily based on-campus), it also serves to create the grassroots, bottom-up support which is needed for successful internationalisation of the curriculum. Virtual Exchange embeds an international dimension in existing courses or programmes. Unlike Virtual Mobility, where part of the teaching is "outsourced" to the partner institution, in Virtual Exchange the teachers and students are working in their home courses and programmes, under the rules and regulations of the home institution, including quality assurance. Crucially, the teachers remain responsible for the assessment of their own students. In this way, Virtual Exchange allows teachers and departments greater control over courses than Virtual Mobility (or physical mobility for that matter), where delivery and assessment are in the hands of the host institution ([O'Dowd, forthcoming](#)). Together with the focus on social, person-to-person learning, this adds to teachers' appreciation and sense of ownership of this innovative pedagogical practice.

This position of Virtual Exchange in academic curricula has implications for other aspects of provision too. Recruitment of students is not a focus of attention, since teachers on each side of the exchange bring in their own students. Mutual accreditation is not necessarily an issue, since credits can be awarded as part of regular courses in the home institutions. Because it is embedded in regular courses, Virtual Exchange may leave the space for students to take external courses at partner institutions untouched, including credits for Virtual Mobility and physical mobility. In addition, there is less dependence on specific, pre-assigned mobility windows in the programmes. Virtual Exchange therefore does not necessarily compete with physical mobility for space in academic curricula, which is a justified concern for student associations ([Rayón Gonzalez, 2022](#)). In

traditionally tightly packed programs, Virtual Exchange can thus be used to offer additional and more flexible opportunities for international and intercultural learning by students. An example of how Virtual Exchange can be integrated in an academic programme can be seen in Figure 1.

Programme Outline

Year 1				Extra
Sem 1 period 1	5	5	5	L
Sem 1 period 2	5	5	5	a
Sem 2 period 1	10		5	n
Sem 2 period 2	5	10		g
Year 2				
Sem 1 period 1	10	10	10	I C
Sem 1 period 2				
Sem 2 period 1	10	10	10	
Sem 2 period 2				
Year 3				
Sem 1 period 1	30			
Sem 1 period 2				
Sem 2 period 1	20		5	
Sem 2 period 2			5	
Courses with Virtual Exchange embedded				
Mobility window				
Extracur. language learning / intercultural competence				

Figure 1: Example of VE embedded courses in an academic programme

Virtual Exchange can grow organically in the curriculum as a grassroots activity initiated by teachers and other colleagues who see the benefits of adding international and intercultural dimensions to disciplinary courses and programmes. It is a perfect fit for Internationalisation at Home, which aims at the "purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments" (Beelen and Jones, 2015). It is a natural ally of international classrooms and other instruments for internationalising the home curriculum (Beelen and Doscher, 2022). Once started, it can have a ripple effect, which can enable dispersing this innovation to other teachers and programmes within the institution.

Virtual Exchange, however, cannot be run by teachers on their own. It requires sustained support and recognition in the institution. One challenge is to seek ways in which it can be combined with other options for online and onsite learning, as part of a structured design process for developing internationalised curricula ([Reiffenrath & Thielsch 2022](#)). It is through combinations of physical, blended and virtual forms of mobility that students may be given the maximum opportunity for developing

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their international learning portfolio and working on competences, such as intercultural and linguistic skills, digital literacy, collaboration and teamwork, and critical thinking ([EADTU, 2019](#)). Internationalisation at Home calls upon us to consider how in attuning and aligning these international learning opportunities, no students are left behind and how the experience can be equally rewarding for the home students and the partner students alike.

Moreover, teachers' additional efforts in designing and facilitating the student work within Virtual Exchange should be recognised, since they have to renew the arrangements for the collaboration every time the project is run. This involves regular contact between the participating teachers for deciding on the best period for the Virtual Exchange project, updating the tasks and tools to be used, and pairing off or grouping the students for the collaborative projects. This role of teachers is crucial in the partnerships, while international officers, who are key actors in facilitating physical mobility and establishing contacts between institutions, may not always be aware of these collaborations which are ongoing outside formal agreements at institutional level.

To strengthen the connection between international offices, curriculum developers and educators, many institutions developing Virtual Exchange as institutional practice have created the position of Virtual Exchange coordinator. This coordinator facilitates, directs and oversees the development of virtual exchanges and acts as a liaison between participating teachers and partner institutions. Whereas a key role of international officers is to attract international students to courses at their institutions and to facilitate their enrolment, Virtual Exchange coordinators provide support for establishing or maintaining contacts between teachers. This may include listing exchanges and partner finding requests in tools such as [COIL Connect](#), and running partnering fairs or engaging in other activities for finding suitable collaboration partners.

Worth noting is that the support and training available in institutions may not always be geared to Virtual Exchange. Ideally, training is provided to teachers on each side of the exchange, which is an unusual arrangement in the professional development options in many institutions. Standard technologies such as Virtual Learning Environments may not be readily available for use by external students. Similarly, students may be prevented by GDPR and other regulations from making use of tools provided by partners or third parties.

These roles, responsibilities and facilities associated with Virtual Exchange are not part of the traditional

support structures and may require a shift in resources at institutions seeking to develop Virtual Exchange. Although it has been described as a low-cost form of internationalisation, Virtual Exchange is by no means a no-cost form. It requires investments to get started and continuous funding to be maintained.

To diversify and expand the range of international and intercultural learning opportunities for young people inside and outside HEIs, several national and international initiatives are now providing training and support, and project or seed funding to help institutions, departments and teachers develop Virtual Exchange on a larger scale. In addition to the Stevens Initiative previously mentioned, specific calls for Virtual Exchange are currently in progress under the new Erasmus+ programme ([Western Balkans](#), [other regions](#)). Additional funding is also available through the [DAAD IVAC programme](#) in Germany and the [Virtual International Collaboration projects](#) in the Netherlands.

Virtual Exchange is not, as is sometimes thought, a stop-gap solution for online international education until more sophisticated, internationally supported systems become available. Unlike larger top-down initiatives, which may have difficulty finding their way in the curricula, being relegated to extracurricular programmes or made exclusive for specific groups of students, Virtual Exchange provides a potentially scalable tool for internationalisation through which substantial numbers of students may be reached. It is a long-standing, evidence-based educational practice, which allows a bottom-up approach to internationalisation. Situated in existing courses and programmes, it is a tool of empowerment for teachers and students. It makes it relatively easy for teachers in any discipline to reach out to colleagues at partner institutions and to increase accessibility, diversity and interdisciplinarity in education. If properly recognised and supported, Virtual Exchange can be a strong catalyst for change in internationalisation, digitalisation and teacher professional development.

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This article is part of the "**ACA Think Pieces**" series on digitalisation, launched in March 2022. The contributions in this series explore the multi-faceted nature of digitalisation in higher education institutions from an international cooperation perspective. They take under consideration current challenges at various levels, local/national/regional and European higher education policies supporting digitalisation and practical examples of digitalisation infrastructures, effective support services for virtual and/or blended mobilities and development of intercultural competences in a digital environment etc. Articles are authored by expert colleagues on the digitalisation of HE field, and are published electronically on ACA's website, monthly, from March until the end of 2022.