



## Reviewing Intercultural Learning Outcomes in Virtual Exchange

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# My plan for today

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- What is Virtual Exchange? What's the difference to Virtual Mobility?
- Why is there so much interest in it?
- What do students and teachers learn from Virtual Exchange?
- What are examples of new VE initiatives which may be of interest to university classrooms in Germany and Spain?

## First of all, what is Virtual Exchange?



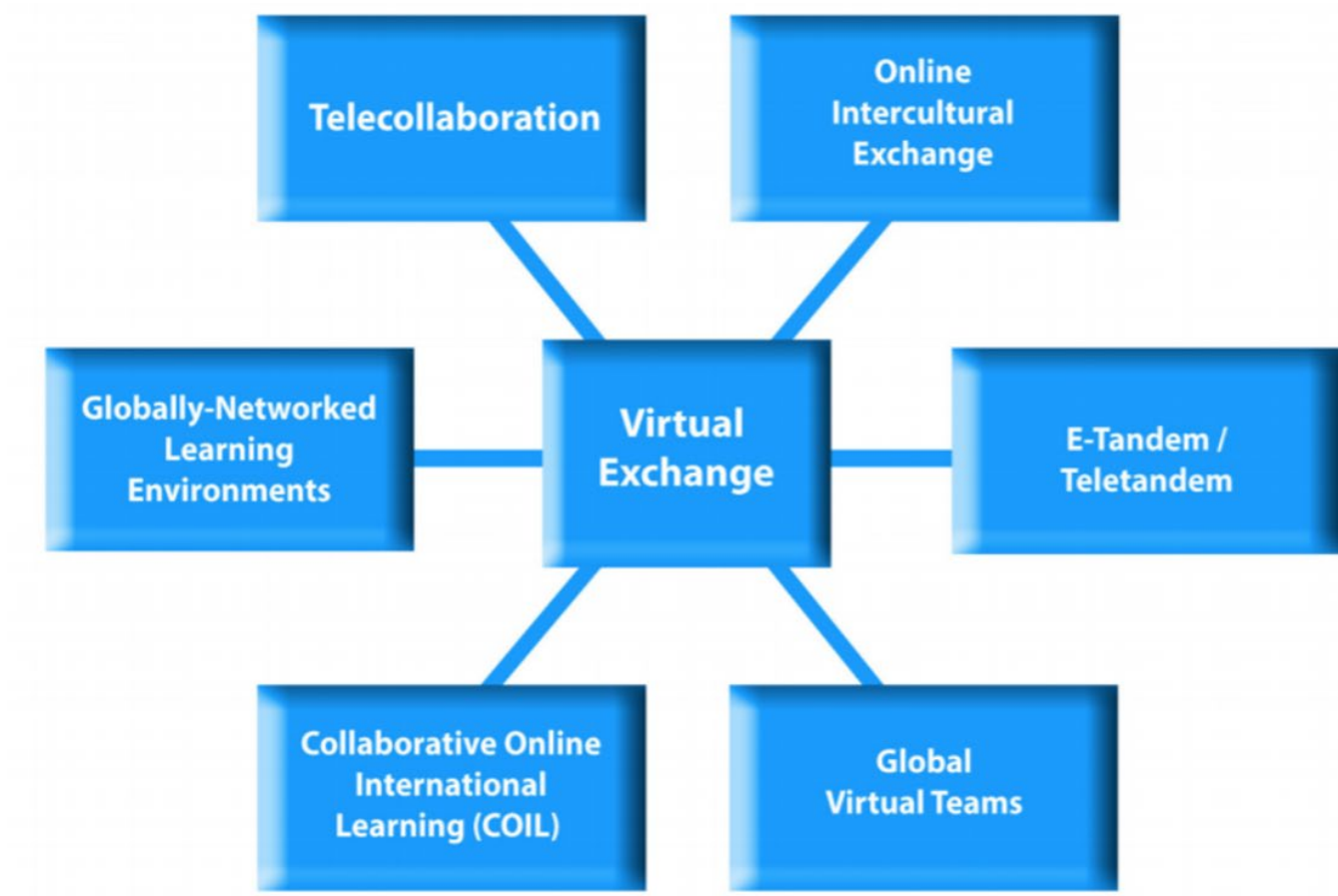
An umbrella term to describe the different ways that... learners are engaged in sustained online intercultural interaction and collaboration...

...with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations....

...as an integrated part of course work....

...and under the guidance of educators (O'Dowd, 2018).

## An overview of terminology used to refer to virtual exchange initiatives



O'Dowd, R. (2018). From telecollaboration to virtual exchange: state-of-the-art and the role of UNICollaboration in moving forward.

*Journal of Virtual Exchange*, 1, 1-23.

Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2018.jve.1>

# What makes Virtual Exchange different to ‘Virtual Mobility’?

## Virtual Mobility:

Students and teachers in higher education study or teach for a short period at another institution outside their own country, without physically leaving their home.

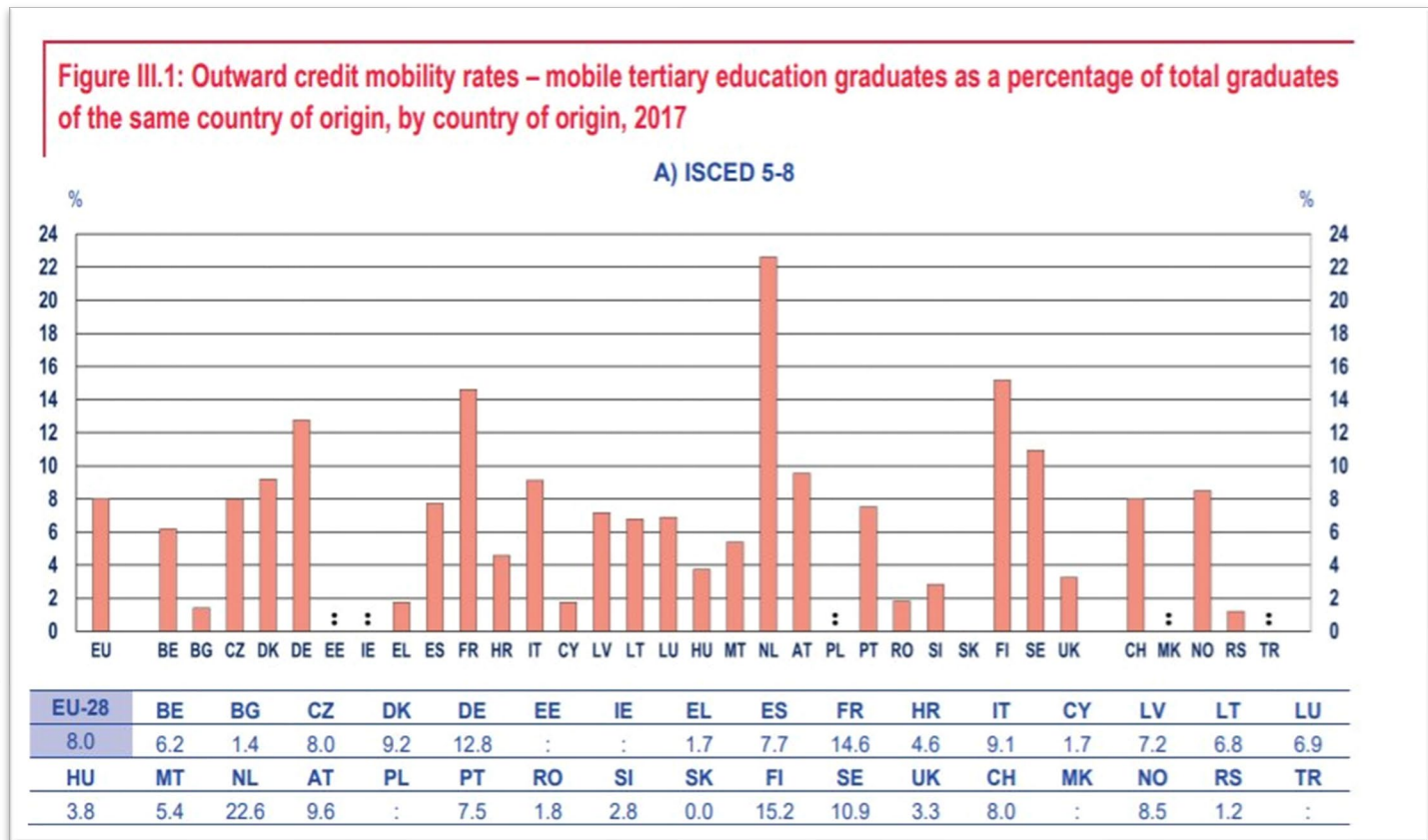
## Virtual Exchange:

Students engage in collaborative online work with students from other universities as part of their studies at their local institution.

| Virtual Mobility   | Virtual Exchange (COIL, Telecollaboration)  |
|--|---|
| Students register with foreign university.   | Students continue in their home university and following their usual courses.   |
| Students follow lectures and classes at the partner university via online platforms. | As part of their work for their course at their home institution, students interact online with other students at partner university. |
| Students focus on course content provided by lecturers in the partner university.    | Students focus on interaction and collaboration with students in the partner university.  |
| Students receive credit / grades from the partner university for their work / exams. | Students receive a part of their grade in their course at home institution for their participation and work in their online project.  |

# Why is there currently such interest in Virtual Exchange?

- One reason could be the limitations of physical mobility...
- What are the current rates of international student mobility in your country or in your institution?



[Eurydice, 2020]

## Simply getting students to study abroad is not necessarily the solution to our problems anyway...

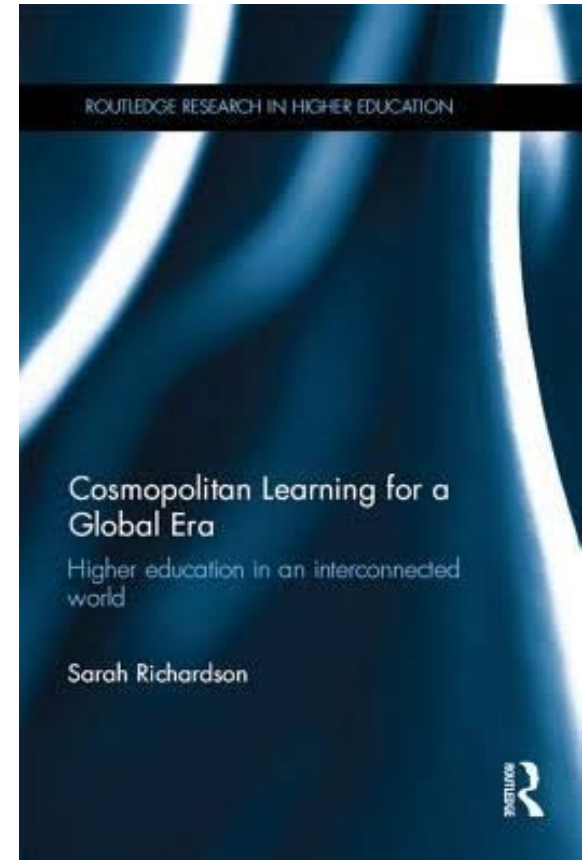
Sarah Richardson:

“...the espoused benefits from [physical] mobility do not derive from the act of crossing borders but instead from two other factors.

First, the encounters that students have.

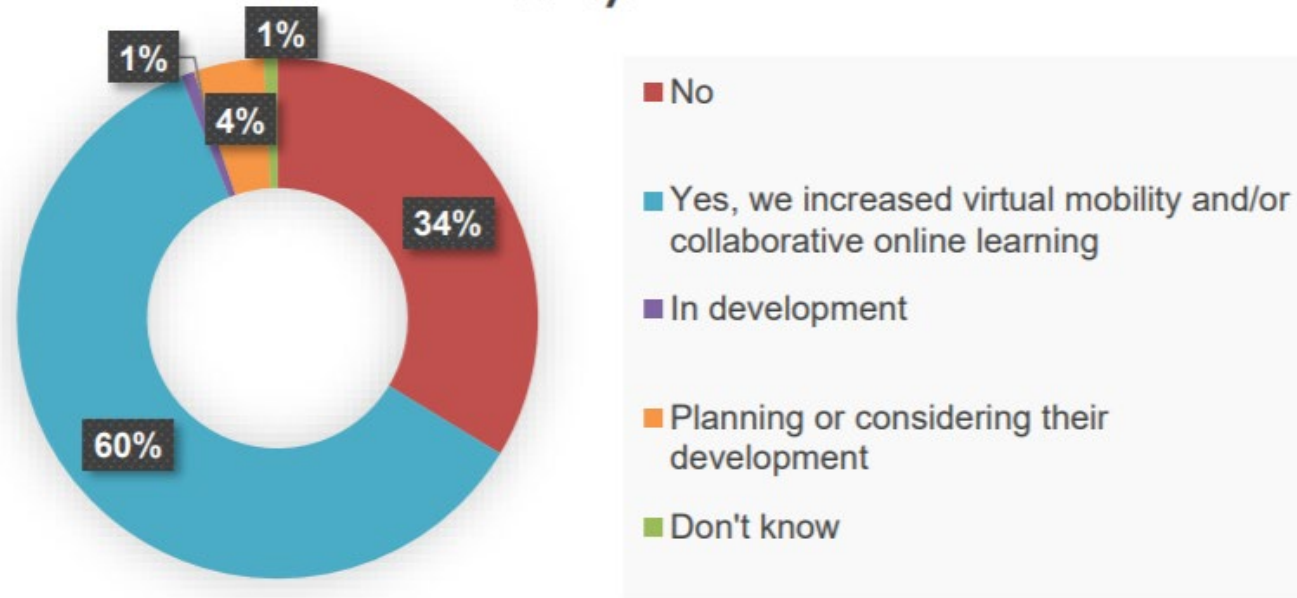
And second, the influence of their psychological make-up on how they respond to these encounters”

(*Cosmopolitan Learning for a Global Era*, 2016, p.54).



# COVID 19 and the search for online solutions

Fig. 17: Has COVID-19 stimulated alternatives to physical student mobility?



[International Association of Universities, 2020] The Impact of Covid-19 on Higher Education around the World: IAU Global Survey Report



## Another reason for governmental support for Virtual Exchange

Intercultural conflict – the need for Western – Arab/muslim dialogue (Paris Declaration, 2015)

### Connecting Youth

The Stevens Initiative is an international effort to build global competence for young people in the United States and the Middle East and North Africa by growing and enhancing the field of virtual exchange: online, international, and collaborative learning.



Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange is part of the Erasmus+ programme, providing an accessible, ground-breaking way for young people to engage in intercultural learning. Working with Youth Organisations and Universities, the programme is open to any young person aged 18-30 residing in Europe and the Southern Mediterranean.

How is  
Virtual  
Exchange  
being  
integrated  
into  
university  
education?

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***Pre-mobility*** – Students are engaged in Virtual Exchange with partners from the partner university before their international mobility

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***Blended mobility*** – Periods of online collaboration between classes before travelling to meet and complete projects at one of the partner universities

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***Class to Class Exchange***- Teachers in two or more classes organise collaborative tasks for their students to complete online as part of their coursework

# What do we know about Virtual Exchange?

## Recent large-scale impact reports:

| Year | Title of Report  | Organisation / Project  |
|------|--|---|
| 2017 | SUNY COIL Stevens Initiative Assessment  | SUNY COIL   |
| 2018 | Evaluating Global Digital Education: Student Outcomes Framework                                      | Global Cities Inc.  |
| 2019 | Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Impact Report 2018   | Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange   |
| 2020 | Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Impact Report 2019   | Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange   |
| 2019 | Evaluating the Impact of Virtual Exchange on Initial Teacher Education: A European Policy Experiment | The EVALUATE Group  |
| 2020 | The Impact of Virtual Exchange on Student Learning in Higher Education                               | EVOLVE: Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange |
| 2019 | Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report 2019   | Stevens Initiative  |
| 2020 | Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report 2020   | Stevens Initiative  |

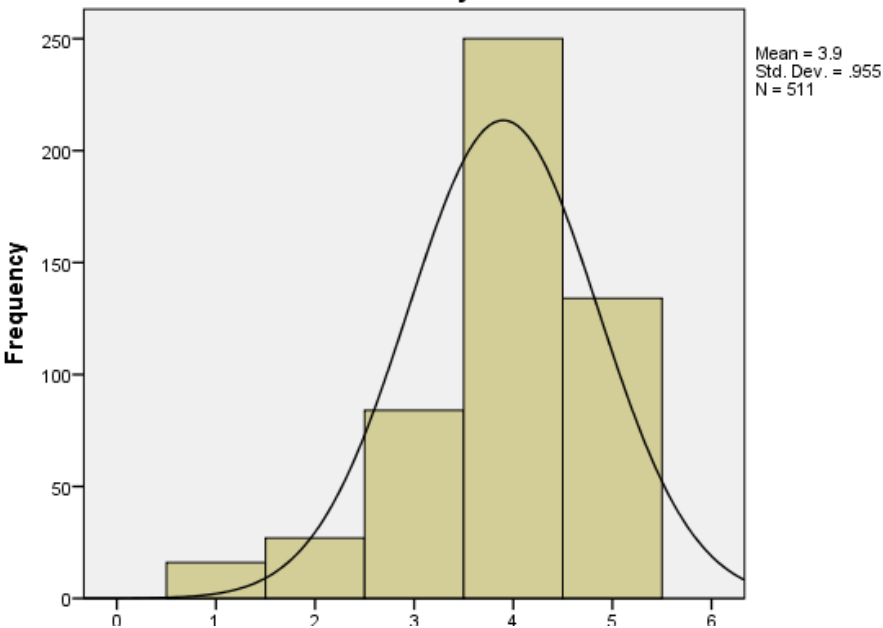
*What do students  
learn from their  
Virtual Exchanges?*



# Virtual Exchange is a very popular learning activity among students – especially for those with little experience of intercultural contact

“I’ve learned to overcome my fear of not being understood by the people from different countries. I tried to formulate my utterances as clearly as possible, and it worked. At first I was scared, but then not really. Our communication was great!”

I would recommend other student-teachers courses if they have the chance.



The EVALUATE Group (2019). *Evaluating the impact of virtual exchange on initial teacher education: A European policy experiment*. Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2019.29.9782490057337>

## Virtual Exchange contributes to key aspects of foreign language development

The EVOLVE study (2020) identified “development of the following sub-competences:

- (1) understanding/reception of the target language,
- (2) vocabulary knowledge and...
- (3) the ability to interact with other speakers in the target language.”

Language development regularly linked to pushing learners’ out of their ‘comfort zone’:

*“This virtual exchange enhances my communication skill. When we have a discussion about our project, I need to push my English communication skill to have a great discussion with my partners.”*



Uraness Anne Feuz-Kawano



Eva García Serrano



Izabell Åkerberg



Mikele



Ángela Alonso



Christina Crawford

## Awareness of cultural difference in interactional norms – Spanish examples

In terms of thinking about my own society and values, one of the aspects that I found interesting that before this project I did not even consider was tone. What I mean by tone is the way Spaniards tend to speak sometimes, we usually are quite straightforward, and it may sound rude or strong to other cultures. That aspect is something that I will be working.

I see that we (Spaniards) are more extrovert than other cultures but I already knew this. What I have realized is that this can be interpreted as 'pushing' by other cultures.

# Virtual Exchange facilitates culture learning

Students who engage in Virtual Exchange report developing different forms of cultural knowledge during their exchanges:

- Cultural information about the partner culture itself.
- The relationship between the participating countries.
- Factual information about many topics and social issues including immigration, religion, gender roles and the differing national reactions to the COVID-19 crisis.
- Growing awareness of cultural diversity and becoming aware of their partners' multiple identities and **the need to avoid regarding cultures as monolithic.**



## Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report

STEVENS INITIATIVE | 2020



# Virtual Exchange enables the development of a wide range of transversal or 'soft skills' which are considered very relevant for the modern workplace.

the majority of participants perceived improvement in their 21st century skills.

|   |   | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neither Agree nor Disagree | Agree  | Strongly Agree | total | Percentage agree |
|---|---|-------------------|----------|----------------------------|--------|----------------|-------|------------------|
| ability to listen actively                          | N | 23                | 46       | 212                        | 1424   | 1505           | 3210  |                  |
|   | % | 0.72%             | 1.43%    | 6.60%                      | 44.36% | 46.88%         | 100%  | 91.25%           |
| critical thinking skills                            | N | 33                | 81       | 408                        | 1575   | 1116           | 3213  |                  |
|   | % | 1.03%             | 2.52%    | 12.70%                     | 49.02% | 34.73%         | 100%  | 83.75%           |
| English and/or foreign language skills.             | N | 134               | 223      | 776                        | 2462   | 1902           | 5497  |                  |
|   | % | 2.44%             | 4.06%    | 14.12%                     | 44.79% | 34.60%         | 100%  | 79.39%           |
| team-work and collaborative problem-solving skills. | N | 83                | 242      | 907                        | 2527   | 1815           | 5574  |                  |
|   | % | 1.49%             | 4.34%    | 16.27%                     | 45.34% | 32.56%         | 100%  | 77.90%           |
| digital competences                                 | N | 92                | 244      | 990                        | 2637   | 1496           | 5459  |                  |
|   | % | 1.69%             | 4.47%    | 18.14%                     | 48.31% | 27.40%         | 100%  | 75.71%           |

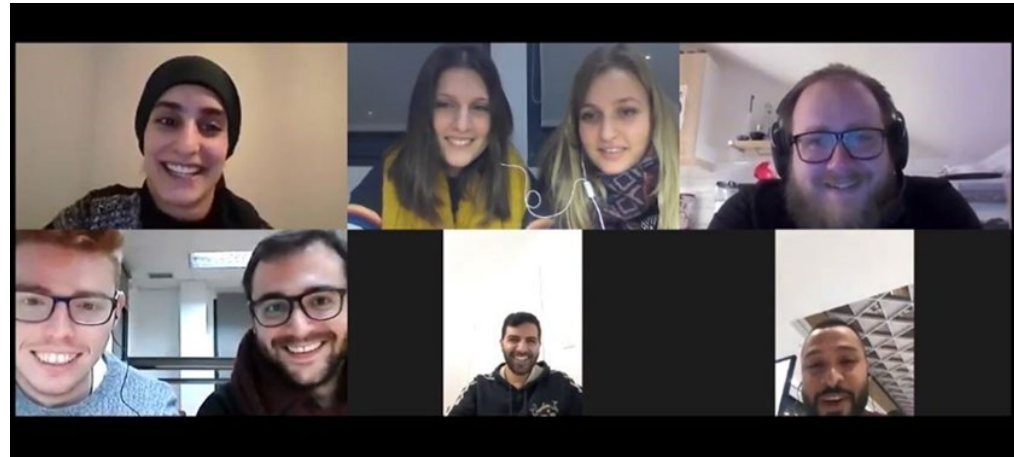


But again, it seems that skills are developed when things get challenging:

Spanish students reflect on what they learned from a transnational VE with Israeli and Swedish partners...

**Collaboration skills and adaptability:** “...I have learnt how to be patient working in groups and to *adapt to tricky situations.*”

**Time-management and empathy:** “The fact of working with people from other countries *prepares us for the future problems* that we may have. That is to say, we learnt *how to face problems of timing or agreement.* I have also learnt that we have to understand and respect other people’s thoughts.”



# But what do you notice about these Spanish students' reactions when asked about cultural difference?

- Student 1: "I will say that I liked the exchange very much and that American students looked like very nice people. I talked to them about my city and about theirs and it was nice to see that there are little differences but not as much as I thought."
- Student 2: "...It has been such an exciting experience because we have learned English while we have known a different culture. To my mind, we aren't too different, both of us like sports, music and spending time with our friends."



The Impact of Virtual Exchange on Student Learning in Higher Education

EVOLVE Project Report

December 2020

EVOLVE Project Team

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)



International Journal of Educational Research

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What do students learn in virtual exchange? A qualitative content analysis of learning outcomes across multiple exchanges

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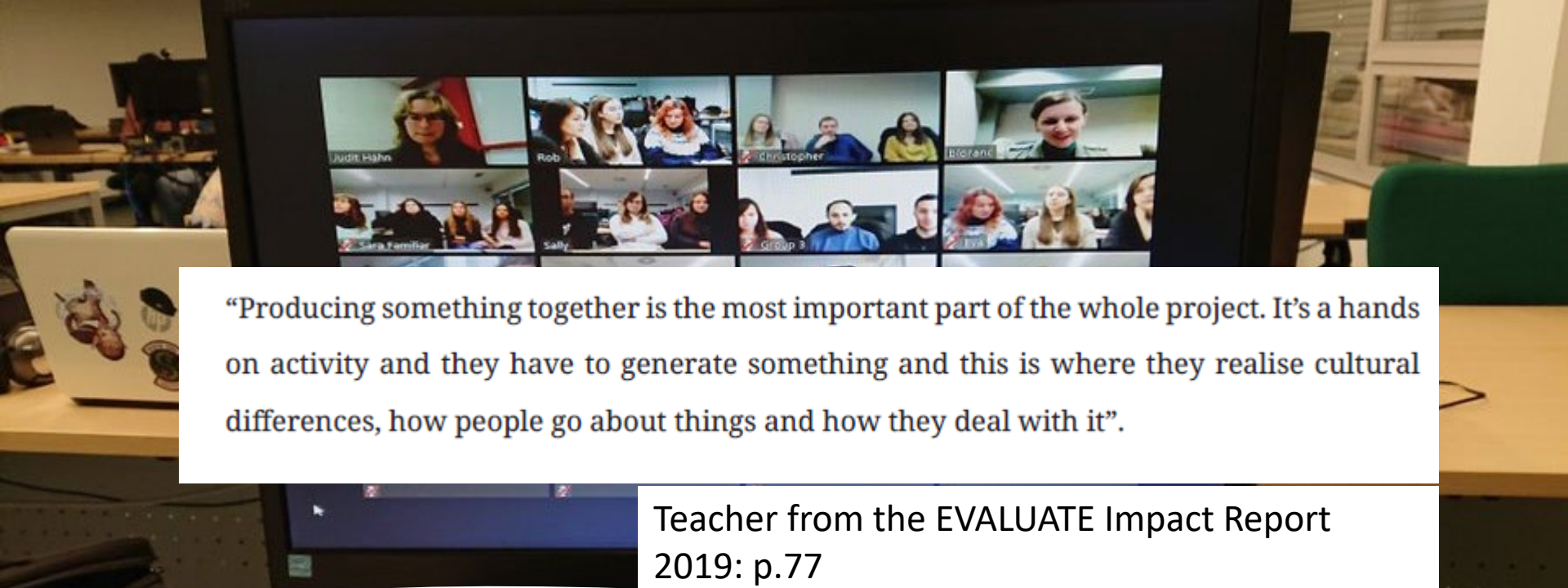
ARTICLE INFO

**Keywords:**  
Virtual exchange  
Telecollaboration  
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Intercultural learning  
Global citizenship

ABSTRACT

Virtual exchange refers to the engagement of groups of learners in online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of course work and under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators. This study presents a qualitative content analysis of reported learning outcomes by students of English in a Spanish university following their participation in one of thirteen online intercultural exchanges. Based on the analysis of 345 learner portfolios, several key themes were identified which provide insight into the type of learning which virtual exchange can contribute to second language classrooms. These included how virtual exchange contributed to overcoming students' stereotypes, gaining confidence as communicators in their second language (L2) and reconceptualizing English as a tool for communication rather than as an abstract academic activity. A comparison of two models of virtual exchange within the dataset also revealed how task design can influence the outcomes of this activity.

'Minimisation of difference' (Bennett, 1993)



“Producing something together is the most important part of the whole project. It’s a hands on activity and they have to generate something and this is where they realise cultural differences, how people go about things and how they deal with it”.

Teacher from the EVALUATE Impact Report  
2019: p.77

There is a clear relationship between learning outcomes and the type of tasks students are asked to do:

- Tell your partner about your favourite places to go out at night in your hometown.
- Post an image to the forum that exemplifies to your partners an aspect of their daily routine.
- Compared to...
- Work with your international partners to create a document called “Making the European Union more relevant for young people”. The final documents will be submitted to your representatives in the European Parliament.
- Work together with your international partners to design a promotional video of sustainable practices to help deal with an environmental problem on your two campus. Once your videos are ready, they will be published by both Universities in their social networks.

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*What do teachers learn from taking part in Virtual Exchange?*



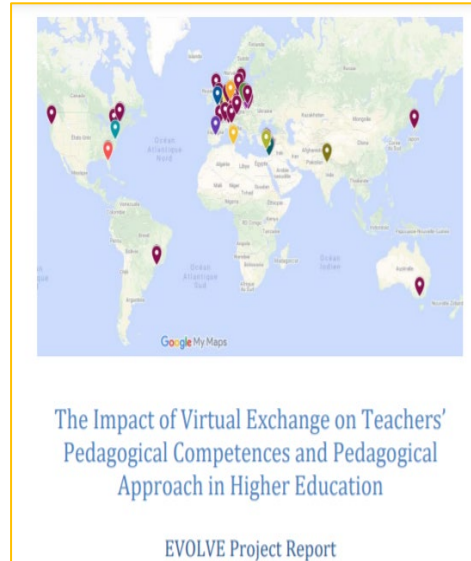
# A surprising range of learning outcomes for teachers



Valuable experience in continued professional development and methodological innovation



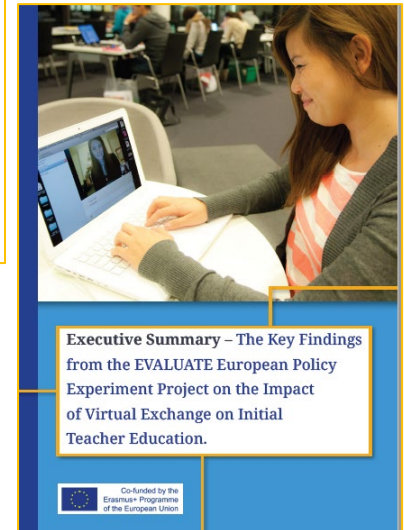
Opportunities for teachers to develop new professional partnerships and collaborative academic initiatives



Development of their own online intercultural collaboration skills



General professional competences - course design skills, organisational skills



“...[VE] means putting yourself in the position of the other, giving in at times, being more open and more aware of how other institutions work. So this collaborative work has been very enriching for me because it helped me to see other points of view and other ways of working. And it also enriched the subject, adding dimensions that weren't there before.” (Teacher in the EVALUATE study)

# But institutional support and recognition is vital

## EVALUATE teacher-trainer 1

“[We need]... a recognition of what we are doing. I believe teachers get motivated when what they do is valued. And this can be valued by giving them recognition for their work”.

## EVALUATE teacher-trainer 2:

“that’s what they are doing with everything nowadays, with all the other extra things that we do, ...including it as part of the teaching load, even if it’s just very little, like half a credit. And that might encourage some other teachers, because it is time consuming”.

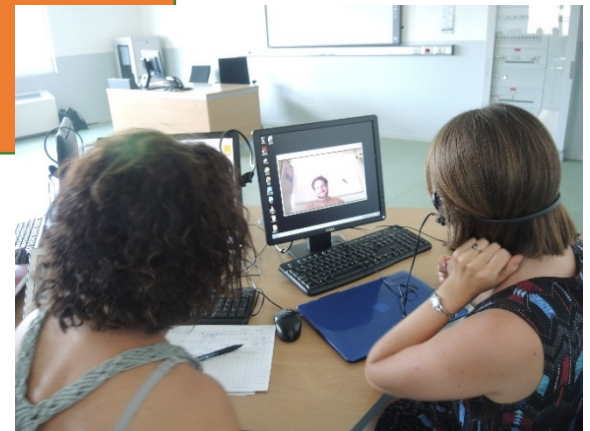
What can universities do?

Reduction in teaching load for teachers running Virtual Exchange

‘Badges’ for VE training programmes

Recognition in internal promotion systems

Micro-grants for VE planning trips



# Emerging new approaches to Virtual Exchange of interest to German and Spanish institutions

(1) Outsourcing Foreign Language Practice

(2) Blended Mobility Programmes

(3) Classroom + Real World Interaction





# (1) 'Outsourcing' Foreign Language Practice with Native Speakers

Research questions to consider:

What will be the quality of the FL learning experience in decontextualised, unmentored conversations with random 'strangers'?

How can these platforms be more effectively linked to university FL courses?

## The new Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027)



### (2) Blended Mobility

Blended mobility can be defined as a deliberate combination of both physical mobility and structured online collaboration.

Research questions to consider:

How can programmes be developed in order to best exploit the combination of virtual and physical collaboration?

How will learning outcomes differ in comparison to completely virtual and completely physical exchange programmes?

In addition, any student may participate in blended intensive programmes. In these cases, physical mobility must last between 5 days and 30 days and be combined with a compulsory virtual component facilitating collaborative online learning exchange and teamwork. A blended mobility for studies must award a minimum of 3 ECTS credits.

## (3) Classroom + Real World Interaction

Research questions to consider:

How do develop a 'win-win' set up for both teachers and classes of student teachers?

What impact will such virtual collaboration have on participants' attitudes to their profession and their future professional practices?



VALIANT

Virtual Innovation and Support Networks

VALIANT

Virtual Innovation and Support  
Networks for Teachers  
An Erasmus+ KA3 European Policy  
Experimentation



## Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report 2020 (Stevens Initiative)

“[B]ecause experience with cross-cultural communication varies among participants, basic training on communication norms and expectations should be provided in advance of the program”.

## Digital Natives ≠ Natural Online Intercultural Communicators

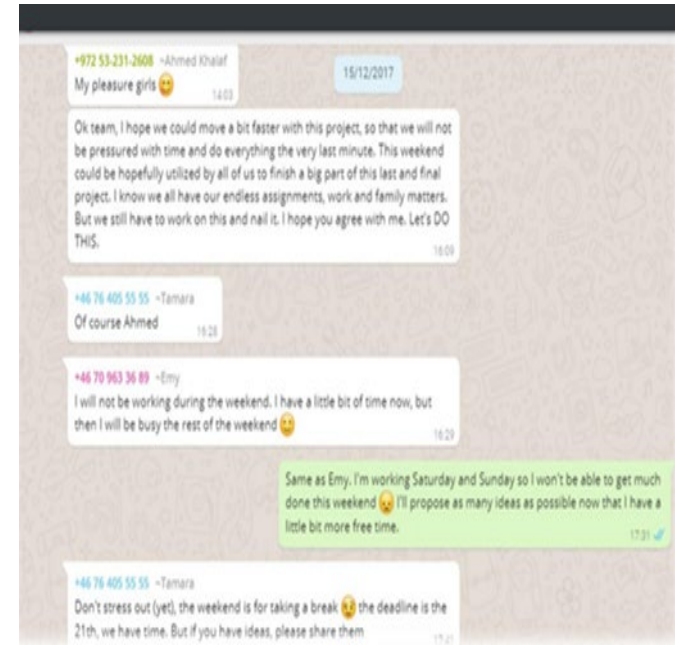
- **A German student writes this opening message to her new partner in Ireland:**
- Hello, how are you? I study English and history and I want to become a teacher. This term we do some cultural studies concerning Ireland and I very interested in it because I actually do not know much about it.
- Now I would like to ask you some questions.  
Do you live in Northern or in Southern Ireland? How many people live in your town? Are you a Catholic or a Protestant? I have heard that regular churchgoing declines more and more in your country-is it true?
- What are you doing in your free time? Do you often go to pubs? What do you think about Germans? Irish people have the reputation of being very indirect and polite in their speaking style. I have read that there was an enormous economic change in Ireland.
- How have you or your parents experienced the social and economic change in the past 20 years?
- That's all for now. I am looking forward to hearing from you!

# Intercultural challenges in Israeli-Spanish-Swedish transnational groups of student teachers...

## Cultural differences in digital practices...

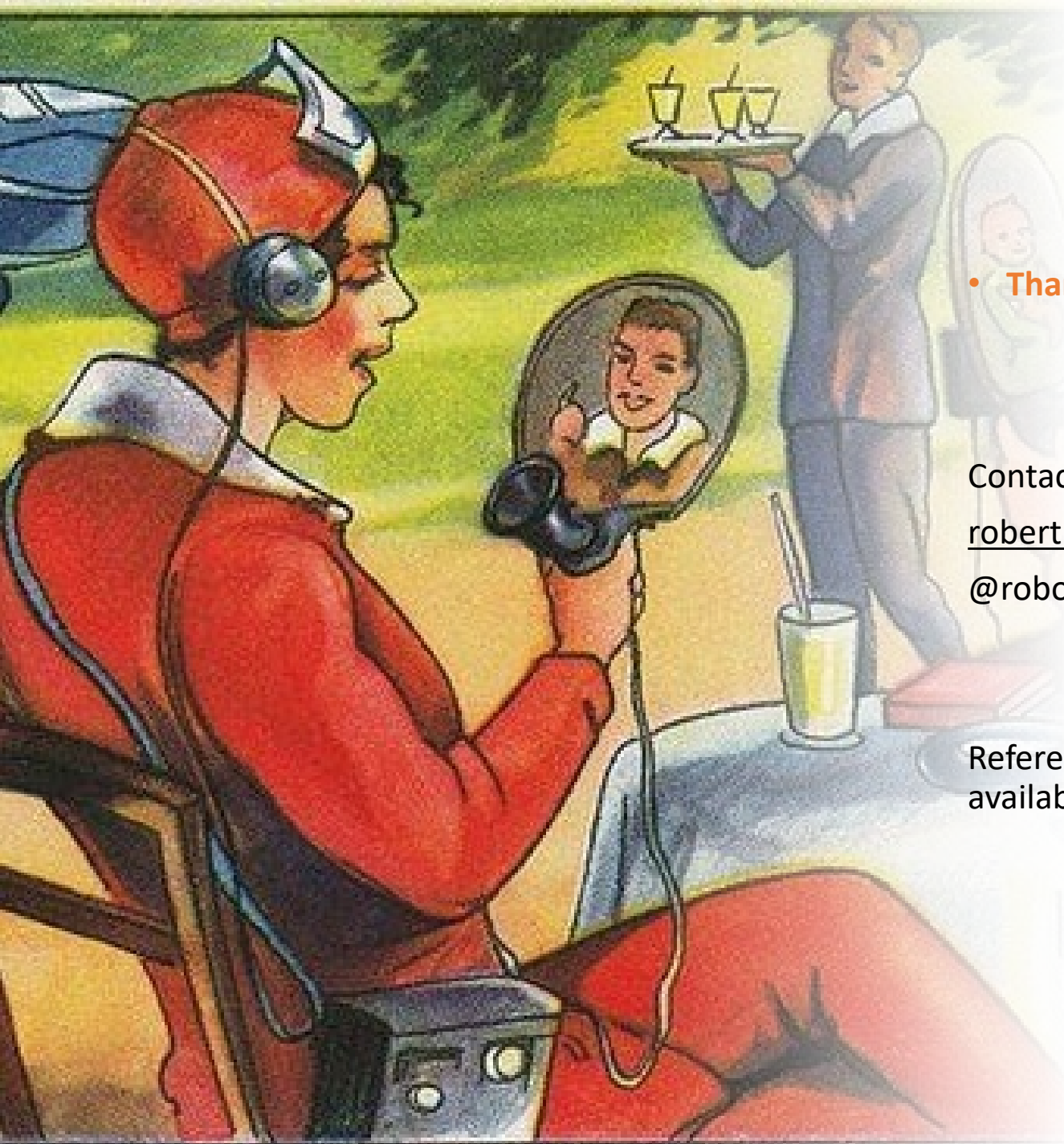
The teacher in Sweden reports:

- “One evening, a member of one of the Spanish class closed out an interaction with one of my students on whatsapp with a **kiss emoji**. Suddenly my [Swedish] student was stressed because she was faced with a difficult dilemma. Did she have to kiss her back? My student says she only sends kisses to close friends, but this was a group member and this whatsapp chat was more professional. However, if she didn't send a kiss back, what other emoji could she send?”



*To conclude:  
Some things  
we know so  
far about  
Virtual  
Exchange*

- 1. Virtual Exchange works. But it is not a question of 'match and learn'. The teachers' role in mentoring interaction and in task design are key to the success of telecollaborative learning.**
- 2. Virtual Exchange is not a replacement to physical mobility programmes. But it can be a powerful complement to them. This needs to be explored in more detail.**
- 3. Virtual Exchange requires integration into the university curriculum and explicit recognition of students' learning outcomes.**
- 4. Teachers' engagement in Virtual Exchange initiatives requires time and a significant extra workload. Institutions should support teachers through the provision of training and academic recognition (e.g. teaching awards, time release etc.).**
- 5. We know that we will still need to know more about how students can learn most effectively in VE.**



- Thank you for listening!

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References and this presentation  
available from the author.