

Introducing virtual exchange: towards digital equity in internationalisation

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1. Background

The European Commission report (Helm & van der Velden, 2019) on the impact of Virtual Exchange (VE) on Higher Education (HE) students highlights the importance of VE in developing a wide range of skills, including 21st century skills, digital competences, soft skills such as teamwork, and collaborative problem solving, critical thinking, and media literacy. The report also evidences positive impact on perceived self-esteem, curiosity, intercultural sensitivity, reflection on beliefs and behaviours, and an ability to see complexity in intercultural communication. More recently, the value and role of VE in ‘Internationalisation at Home’ (IaH) has been foregrounded with an emphasis on the design of more environmentally sustainable, accessible, equitable, and meaningful intercultural and multinational experiences (Helm & Beaven, 2020). Improvement in employability skills and competences such as the ability to work in virtual, international, and intercultural environments has also been a key driver for recent VE projects (European Union and EACEA, 2020). The reduction in physical mobility opportunities due to the COVID-19 pandemic further increased interest in VE. But what is and what is not VE? How does VE support internationalisation agendas? What is the importance of digital equity in VE? This introductory chapter will attempt to briefly address these questions, and provide an overview of the organisation of this book which involves selected short papers presented at the International VE Conference (IVEC) 2020.

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2. What is VE and what it is not?

“Virtual exchange is a pedagogical approach which involves the engagement of groups of learners in extended periods of online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programmes and under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators” (O’Dowd, 2020, p. 478).

Although VE is a relatively new term, it is not a new pedagogy. VE is also known as *telecollaboration*, *online intercultural exchange*, *Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)*, *international online learning*, and *globally networked learning*, among others (O’Dowd, 2018). While not everyone is completely happy with this new term, it is an attempt to bring together cross-disciplinary perspectives and promote wider cross-community collaboration and synergies (O’Dowd, 2021). Yet for the uninitiated, the term VE may not mean much since all educational exchanges in many countries were forced to take place virtually with the sudden impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020. Thus, exploring what is *not* VE may also help clarify the concept for newcomers to the field.

First, while VE involves participants collaborating and learning from each other through online interaction, it is not ‘distance education’. Distance education is an umbrella term for learning and teaching which takes place outside a physical classroom whereby students enrol in courses/programmes and work towards certificates and/or degrees offered by one or more institutions. Second, VE is not ‘online teaching and learning’ (or e-learning), which is one type of distance education where courses are offered online with digital delivery of materials, and interaction between teachers and learners taking place synchronously and/or asynchronously. Third, VE is not ‘blended learning’, which aims to combine online materials and interaction with teaching and learning within the classroom. Blended learning enables varying levels of physical and virtual presence, thus giving learners flexible amounts of control over where, when, and how to learn. Finally, VE is not ‘virtual mobility’. Virtual mobility can be considered

in comparison to physical mobility whereby HE students and teachers visit an overseas institution for a limited period to study or teach. An excellent example of physical mobility is the European Union Erasmus Programme for study abroad. Virtual mobility is then a response to widen opportunities for study abroad by enabling students and teachers to join teaching and learning at an overseas institution virtually without having to travel abroad. Yet VE is not an alternative to or replacement for physical mobility, with each generating equally valuable but different learning experiences.

VE can be incorporated and introduced as part of institutional programmes designed and delivered in the physical classroom, in distance education, online learning and teaching, or blended learning, or as tasks or modules for pre-mobility (Batardière et al., 2019; O'Reilly, 2021). Yet what distinguishes VE is that it focuses on the agency of the participants and highlights person-to-person digital engagement, interaction, and collaboration amongst intercultural groups of learners with the facilitation of their educators. The students continue to study at their own institutions, and their VE activities may be optional or compulsory as part of their programmes, and may or may not be assessed by their own institution.

3. VE, internationalisation, and digital equity in times of COVID-19

Internationalisation is “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight, 2003, p. 2). It responds to the need to offer global perspectives at HE and equip students with intercultural communication skills. Intercultural skills and competencies support HE graduates in their ability to interact and negotiate differences with people from various cultural backgrounds. Growing physical mobility in the last two decades amongst HE staff and students has increased the importance of internationalisation. More recently we have witnessed further interest in “the collaborative, mutual benefit, capacity building, and exchange aspects of internationalisation to

optimise the benefit for individuals” (Knight, 2013, p. 84). Learning and practising intercultural competencies are essential to achieving these aspects of international education.

Internationalisation is a key strategic priority, yet, travel disruptions in the times of COVID-19 have really put the ‘virtual’ and ‘digital’ on top of internationalisation agendas at HE. VE and virtual mobility are sustainable and more accessible forms of mobility offering IaH to larger groups of staff and students. Previous studies have shown that VE can support meaningful interaction between learners of different lingua-cultural backgrounds (Dooly, 2017; O’Dowd & Lewis, 2016). The benefits of successful VE in the development of digital competences are also well established (Helm & van der Velden, 2019; Sadler & Dooly, 2016). Moreover, Hauck (2019) suggests that VE “offers an ideal backdrop” for the development of (critical) digital literacy skills (p. 205). Thus, VE is increasingly embraced by HE institutions as part of their IaH strategies.

However, digital intercultural communication in VE is “by default mediated twice” (Hauck & Satar, 2018, p. 133) by the technology and by the lingua franca and/or multiple languages used by the participants. On the one hand, technology enables VE participants to draw on a range of digital multimodal meaning-making resources and linguistic repertoires, thereby freeing them of the challenges experienced due to unequal linguistic competencies when communicating and collaborating with their intercultural peers. On the other hand, it poses new challenges to those who lack necessary ‘digital’ intercultural communication and semiotic competences. While VE as an approach to IaH seemingly offers equitable and accessible experiences to those who cannot participate in physical mobility, it is essential to remind ourselves that “online communication spaces [...] are not inherently equitable, and learners’ varied levels of digital literacies, multimodal communicative competence, and semiotic skills tend to influence, if not determine, their VE experience” (Satar & Hauck, *in press*).

The theme for the IVEC 2020 conference was identified within this perspective which generated numerous high-quality presentations on the topic, some of which are reported in this volume.

4. IVEC 2020 and overview of this volume

This volume includes summaries of selected presentations from the second IVEC (2020)² virtually hosted at Newcastle University, UK. IVEC is the most prominent event in the discipline which brings together practitioners, administrative staff, educational leaders, researchers, instructional designers, and non-governmental organisations. Building on the success of the inaugural conference in 2019, IVEC 2020 widened participation and marked the convergence of VE networks and communities across the globe at a single event. It was an exciting event for UNICollaboration³ members since the biannual UNICollaboration conference merged with IVEC at the IVEC 2020 conference. We welcomed 500 delegates from 47 countries with 90 pre-recorded presentations, 27 live workshops and symposia, and 14 highly-engaging networking sessions led by VE experts from the IVEC supporting institutions. Newcastle University Deputy Vice-Chancellor **Prof. Julie Sanders** opened the conference with a timely, eloquent speech. Thought-provoking keynote addresses by **Dr Mirjam Hauck**, from the Department of Languages at the Open University, and by **Prof. Thérèse Laferrière**, from the Faculty of Education Sciences at Université Laval in Quebec were warmly received. The recordings of the welcome speech and the keynote addresses are available on the IVEC website⁴. **Prof. Anita Patankar**, **Dr Maha Bali**, and **Dr Paulo Goes** closed the conference by offering their global VE perspectives in their well-received, inspiring panel discussion skillfully moderated by **Eva Haug**.

IVEC 2020 was planned as an on-site event taking place at Newcastle Upon Tyne, yet a difficult decision had to be made to hold the conference online as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international travel became apparent. Sadly, the pandemic has brought great suffering to many around the world and tested – and perhaps built – our resilience, patience, and flexibility. While VE is not a new pedagogy for many, as physical mobility for education was

2. <http://iveconference.org>

3. <https://www.unicollaboration.org/>

4. <http://iveconference.org/2020-conference/>

suspended due to the pandemic, we witnessed an exponential increase in interest and immediate need to connect students and educators across borders virtually. This pushed VE high on the internationalisation agenda at HE, which was at times perceived as the silver lining for the promotion and adoption of VE. The conference organising committee at Newcastle University and the IVEC 2020 steering committee were humbled by the high amount of interest and excellent feedback we received. I was both delighted and honoured to chair such an exciting, timely, and vibrant event.

The short papers reported in this book complement a special issue in the Journal of VE⁵, which is also dedicated to selected manuscripts presented at IVEC 2020. The chapters address the conference theme ‘towards digital equity in internationalisation’ from the perspectives of students, educators, and administrators, and discuss the current state and future of online intercultural communication and collaborative learning. The volume is organised in four sub-themes: (1) the local and the global, (2) digital communication skills, (3) multisensory VE projects, and (4) staff and student voices. The chapters outline current pedagogy and research in VE by first providing an overview of project design and then reporting learner experiences and/or research outcomes.

4.1. The local and the global

The chapters in the first part report transnational and transdisciplinary VE projects that focus on local and global issues. First, **Patricia Szobonya** and **Catherine Roche** describe Generation Z students’ engagement with local and global issues such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, ethics, privacy, and sexuality. The authors illustrate how students explored and challenged these issues in three VEs organised between a community college in the USA and three countries: Morocco, China, and Iraq. The authors conclude that VE can be a welcoming environment for the young generation and help “make the world a better place for all citizens”.

5. <https://journal.unicollaboration.org/>

Next, **Alun DeWinter** and **Reinout Klamer** describe an EU-funded project, iKudu, which aims to establish long-term COIL projects between five South African and five European universities. By setting up over 50 COIL exchanges during the lifetime of the project, the consortium members will establish relationships based on trust, co-creation, and co-equal partnerships, thereby bringing African perspectives to EU institutions and supporting decolonisation of the curricula as well as unpacking issues of diversity, equality, and north-south collaborations at HE through a decolonised lens.

In Chapter 3, **Paula Fonseca**, **Kristi Julian**, **Wendi Hulme**, **Maria De Lurdes Martins**, and **Regina Brautlacht** present opportunities and challenges in implementing multidisciplinary VE projects at HE. The authors report transversal skills students have gained through their intercultural, interdisciplinary exchanges including teamwork, teambuilding, and project management in international teams as they worked on environmental issues related to sustainability while contributing to discussions on global issues from their local and discipline-specific perspectives. The authors also elaborate on the challenges they encountered when designing and implementing interdisciplinary exchanges such as differences in syllabi, outcomes, and assessment.

Nadia Cheikhrouhou and **Kenneth Ludwig**, in Chapter 4, describe a USA-Tunisia exchange involving students from different disciplines, such as psychology, engineering, and computing working together to offer innovative solutions to water scarcity in the region of Khniss, Tunisia. While working on a local environmental problem in Tunisia, the authors describe how transdisciplinary teams developed transferable skills for life and work in global settings including critical thinking, problem solving, communication, teamwork, and information literacy skills. The teams had opportunities to reflect on availability of clean water as a global issue, and adopt a creative and flexible approach sensitive to various perspectives. On the other hand, the authors also report that at times some Tunisian students felt their American partners dominated the conversations which they attributed to their proficiency level in the language of the exchange, i.e. English.

4.2. Digital communication skills

The two chapters in the second part of this book zoom in on learners' linguistic competence and engage with issues around language and digital communication skills in VE. **Ruiling Feng** and **Sheida Shirvani** explore the uneven distribution of language proficiency amongst VE participants and elaborate on the different conversational strategies second language users adopt when communicating with VE partners who are first language users. The authors describe the compensatory strategies employed by Chinese learners of English during a five-week VE between China and the USA. Their findings indicate that second language learners used a variety of compensatory strategies depending on their conversational style and only corrected those errors in their language that interfered in meaning communication. The authors conclude that VE can support language learners' use of compensatory strategies with increased immediacy.

In Chapter 6, **Marta Fondo** explores visual communication via videoconferencing among Spanish and English speakers in four countries: Spain, Ireland, Mexico, and the USA. Fondo shows how language learners engaged in "visual supported actions (VSAs)", i.e. multimodal information exchange whereby learners show physical objects and other people to each other on camera during their online intercultural exchanges. Her findings indicate that participants achieved higher-levels of self-disclosure as they participated in visual communication through videoconferencing.

4.3. Multisensory VE projects

Chapters in the third part of this book direct our attention further to the visual in multisensory VE projects which require collaborative production of digital artefacts. In Chapter 7, **Kelly M. Murdoch-Kitt** and **Denielle J. Emans** describe a longitudinal VE between Middle East and North America over nine years in which participants engage in visual thinking activities producing 'boundary objects' such as sketches, photographs, and visualisations that generate shared understanding across cultural and disciplinary boundaries. The authors propose that the creation of boundary objects enhance relationship-building and trust, and

offer tangible and tactile experiences to long-distance intercultural exchanges. They particularly promote visual communication activities to overcome barriers in lack of a common instructional language “to create more equitable, inclusive, and meaningful relationships”.

In the next chapter, **Colin B. Dodds**, **Alison Whelan**, **Ahmed Kharrufa**, and **Müge Satar** describe a VE in which participants engage in the production of digital cultural artefacts on a web app⁶ as they explore each other’s cultural activities and identities. The exchange is designed within an experiential learning pedagogy in VE for future language teachers from two language teacher education programmes in Turkey and the UK. In this chapter, the authors describe the aims of the EU-funded project, the app design, and its implementation for VE as a model to “facilitate deeper, immersive virtual intercultural exchange experiences” and offer equitable, hands-on cultural experiences to all participants.

In the last chapter in Part 3, **José Luis Jiménez** and **Ilka Kressner** report their six-week task-based COIL project on expressions of popular culture between Venezuela and the USA. The project encourages learners to reflect on concepts and perceptions of popular culture in the North and the South through explorations of Indie music, graffiti, street art, and contemporary media. As the project culminated in a co-production of a ten-minute video, the authors observed how visual communication and collaboration led to “fostering empathy towards transcultural awareness and equitable collaboration”.

4.4. Staff and student voices

The final three chapters in this book (Part 4), turn our attention to VE participants: staff and students. In Chapter 10, **Sofía Ruiz**, **Santiago Hernández**, **Alicia García**, and **Jesús Chacón** offer their learner voice as they describe their personal experiences of the USA-Venezuela VE explained in Chapter 9. They express learning gains from their exchange during – what they describe as – a time of crisis in Venezuela. Following an overview of the project, each author

6. www.enacteruopa.com

offers their individual perspective and the ways in which they managed to overcome challenges through their commitment, resilience, and agency.

In Chapter 11, **Elke Nissen**, **Catherine Felce**, and **Catherine Muller** report student expectations and outcomes identified through a large-scale survey as part of the Erasmus+ EVOLVE project with data originating from 16 VEs and 248 students. Their results indicate that VE outcomes are “unsurprisingly, more nuanced and manifold” than the initial expectations. While student expectations pertaining to intercultural gains largely match their perceived outcomes, students report unexpected gains in relation to transferable skills such as collaborative and communicative skills, which, the authors have found, are not always considered in course objectives.

The final chapter that concludes this volume focuses on the perspectives of HE staff considering both educators and administrators. **Ana Beaven** and **Gillian Davies** describe the structure of the Erasmus+ VE training offered to HE staff and illustrate how trainees developed their pedagogical, technical, and administrative VE skills and competencies through experiential learning. With highly positive responses received from the trainees, the authors remind us of the role of continuous professional development in VE since HE staff themselves may require experiential training to develop their own intercultural and digital communication skills as well as embracing new teaching practices to become successful VE facilitators for their students.

5. Concluding remarks

Although VE is not a new pedagogy anymore, it has never been so timely and strong given the risks and restrictions in international travel due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Online/virtual connections ensured the continuity of intercultural interaction and mobility during an extremely challenging period for HE institutions. From the conversations that emerged during IVEC 2020, it is clear that HE institutions are ready for VE to become more mainstream, to provide brave spaces, and to break the online echo chambers. Yet, as Mirjam

Hauck argued in her keynote speech at IVEC 2020: “I want to warn against the superficial understanding of third space in virtual exchange because the digital spaces where most virtual exchanges take place are not neutral grounds; they are not necessarily levelling places”. Thus, the challenge now is to ensure digital equity, social justice, diversity, and inclusion in VE, which, however, is not an easy task. As [Satar and Hauck \(in press\)](#) remind us:

“[i]t is challenging for educators to ensure equal digital experiences for those involved in collaborative online learning and teaching communities such as VE. Equal access to technologies and the Internet, or – at least – a choice of accessible tools, is only one important precondition. In fact, equity in digital spaces, we conclude, is multifaceted and includes intercultural equity, participatory and relational equity, and semiotic equity, to name but a few of its dimensions”.

As online and on-site transnational, transcultural interactions continue to merge and blend in, the papers in this volume suggest that we should expect to see an upward trend in the number of multinational, multidisciplinary VE projects, VE pedagogies that draw on visual communication, and digital artefacts to overcome barriers in linguistic challenges, as well as research focusing on the training needs, expectations, and outcomes of both staff and students partaking in VE.

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