



Virtual Exchange as a Sustainable Approach to Intercultural Learning

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to provide insight into Virtual Exchange, a relatively underdeveloped tool for the internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that offers a sustainable, easily-accessible opportunity to enhance students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Several studies have reported a lack of authentic intercultural learning and skills in university students who come back to their home institution after a study abroad experience (Batardière in *J Virtual Exchange* 2, 2019, [1]). With this in mind, it has been argued that students need a preparatory phase to reflect and acquire skills to cope with the difficulties of studying abroad and the knowledge to fully benefit from the stay. In addition, students whose financial or personal situation does not allow them to go on exchange should also have the chance to become interculturally aware and skilled. This paper examines the sustainable component of virtual exchange (VE) and presents a newly designed model of exchange for undergraduate students of the EURECA-PRO alliance. This project is underway at the Universidad de León and is one of a few recent examples of online pre-mobility that can be found in Europe. It is a multicultural free programme, firmly committed to a sustainable accessible-to-all education that fosters the development of intercultural sensitivity, transversal or soft skills, democratic citizenship, foreign language learning, and collaborative learning. The results of the research will be expressed at a later time when data have been gathered and analysed.

Keywords: Telecollaboration · Virtual exchange · Sustainable education

1 Introduction

Can international programmes be more sustainable? Can students become interculturally aware while at the same time minimising the environmental impact of traditional study abroad experiences? International mobility programmes such as the Erasmus + Exchange have been on the rise in the last decades but the Covid-19 pandemic brought a new reality to the sphere of international education. One of the drastic changes that we underwent is the shift into a more digitized education. Videoconferencing tools became a widely-used instrument to confront this new reality but researchers had already been exploring this tool for decades. One of the most effective educational uses we can give these is the development of students' intercultural awareness, collaboration and communication skills by creating a virtual space where they can interact with people from

other countries. Virtual exchange (VE) is an innovative practice whereby students who are geographically separated or belong to different cultural backgrounds collaborate and interact online to carry out tasks, activities or project work with the help of educators or facilitators [2]. Not only is VE a suitable option for those students who cannot afford to study abroad or those who are interested in multicultural contexts but it is also an environmentally-friendly option whose single resource is a stable internet connection. It allows HEIs to create a free, accessible-to-all option for their students. Virtual exchanges allow students to acquire the skills required to communicate in intercultural situations without travelling abroad. It certainly is not a replacement for physical mobility but it is an opportunity to learn and be sustainable.

2 Background

VE has been implemented in various forms. The most frequent VE implementation is as part of a university course or module for which students receive a certain number of credits or part of a grade. They have also been put into practice as programmes that aim at preparing students for physical international mobility under the name of pre-mobility [1, 3]. For decades, experts have argued that sojourners who embark on an exchange such as Erasmus + come back to their home institution without having really acquired the intercultural awareness, knowledge and skills that were expected from them and this, research shows, is due to a lack of preparation [1]. I argue here that pre-mobilities could be part of the solution. Not only do such programmes benefit students who need training for a study abroad but also offer an international experience to those who cannot afford to go on exchange for financial or family reasons, which students say are their main barriers [4].

The most recent implementation of this sort of exchange is the Gear Up! Virtual Exchange, designed by the Universidad de León to respond to the current needs of the institution: to prepare students for their study abroad experience, help participants develop transversal skills for the labour market and offer a free sustainable opportunity for undergraduate students who cannot study abroad to develop their intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Byram described ICC as having five skills, or *savoirs*: intercultural attitudes such as those of interest or open-mindedness, to decentre our own culture (*savoir être*), knowledge about one's own culture and that of the interlocutor's (*savoirs*), interpreting and relating skills (*savoir comprendre*), discovery and interaction skills (*savoir apprendre/faire*) and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*) [5]. This virtual approach to intercultural and language learning enables students to acquire a wider awareness of their own perspective of the world and that of others, as they are exposed to authentic intercultural interaction and negotiation of meaning with members of other cultures [6].

Other projects whose objective is to prepare students for intercultural interactions have been implemented at universities in Spain, Ireland, and Belgium. These are the I-Tell project [7], the VIP project and the Ready, Mobility, Go project [1]. This virtual preparatory phase seems to be a valuable option to increase the number of students who can experience and enrich their intercultural learning. The European Commission expects a minimum of 20% of European students to have a study abroad experience and

we are still far from this number [8]. Although VE does not replace this form of mobility, it helps students towards acquiring a more intercultural, globalized, tolerant perspective of themselves and their society in one of the most sustainable forms possible.

Research shows that the benefits of participating in a virtual exchange are manifold. In addition to its sustainable component, VE offers a space where students can engage in interdisciplinary collaborative learning, allowing for the establishment of wider, more comprehensive networks and facilitating career advancement [9]. In view of the fact that participants are in contact with diverse nationalities and cultures and are forced to question their beliefs, they are more likely to develop a global mindset and critical thinking [9]. This educational strategy is also a tool to develop the communicative and intercultural spheres of their foreign language, thus helping participants to build a broader sense of self. Instead of developing their linguistic competence to, later on, become tourists, virtual intercultural exchange could help them to build confidence in a foreign language and reflect on their encounters with people from other countries [10].

3 The Sustainable Component in Virtual Exchange

Studying abroad is beneficial for most students and it can be a life-changing experience. However, this is an expensive form of education that not all students can afford for diverse reasons. Furthermore, when students go on exchange to improve a language or develop skills they would not acquire within their comfort zone, they are also contributing to climate change. It is inevitable that we contribute to the pollution of the air when we travel abroad, whether it be as part of university studies, business or leisure. This is not to say that traditional mobility programmes should disappear or decrease but we believe there is space for new, socially and environmentally sustainable, accessible-to-all options, like VE [11]. Not only can this tool help students develop their intercultural, communicative, linguistic and transversal competencies but if implemented appropriately, it is likely to enhance any physical international mobility. It can be implemented in a myriad of ways, based on discipline, skills to be developed, a foreign language to improve or even on the different educational levels (primary, secondary, etc.).

Nowadays there is a demand for greener methods and options to reduce our carbon footprint. There is a need to reduce emissions of waste and pollutants and implement low-carbon and climate-friendly strategies, as our traditional habits and industries are taking a high toll on our planet. The internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is an area where sustainable measures can be of use. Educational videoconferencing can help to reach this goal. Nothing can compare to travel and its benefits but with the ever-increasing climate change we are undergoing, we must think of sustainable options that can complement this educational tool, be sustained in time and suit all students' necessities. VE is often based on video conferencing, which, in addition to saving travel time, cost and fuel, also helps save carbon emissions [12]. VE allows students to maintain an ecological balance and avoid the depletion of natural resources in the long term while providing a space for intercultural learning.

Besides travel expenses and the issue of carbon footprint, international mobility programmes require that students pay for accommodation, thus increasing the cost of their experience and decreasing the number of students who can afford these stays.

VE seems to be the perfect opportunity to help reduce these costs and increase the number of students who can afford intercultural learning, but it is no substitute for physical mobility, as both practices offer different benefits and life experiences [13]. Implementing intercultural online exchanges offers social equity, as every student can acquire new skills and valuable knowledge that they can benefit from regardless of their financial or personal situation. It caters for all and a larger number of learners. VE is an opportunity for universities to increase learners' awareness of sustainability and the impact of travel and environmental-friendly strategies on our planet.

It is worth mentioning that this practice has become more prominent since the Covid-19 global crisis, which challenged traditional modes of mobility and intercultural learning. VE can, in such cases where physical mobility is not possible, be also effective. Other groups of students who can take advantage of this educational tool are learners who are not sure they want to participate in such an experience and want to try it out beforehand or students whose language level or skills are not enough to face the challenges and demands of studying abroad.

Some already regard this sustainable approach as a proactive alternative that can suit some students whose necessities and affordances differ from those who embark on traditional mobility programmes [14]. This educational strategy can be maintained in time and afforded by most institutions and learners. So, why not consider it as an option either to prepare students for mobility, and thus increase study abroad experiences' value, or as a sustainable opportunity for students to benefit from intercultural learning?

4 A Sustainable Path to Intercultural Learning at the Universidad de León

One of the most recent implementations for the internationalisation of the Universidad de León is the Gear Up! Virtual Exchange for study abroad. This VE aims at preparing students for a study abroad experience and to offer an easily accessible opportunity for those students who cannot afford it or who are in their last year and whose chances are over. In this eight-week online intercultural exchange students are teamed up to collaborate and complete six different tasks related to the theme of study abroad and multicultural contexts. Participants must be undergraduate students of any discipline who want to study in another country or are eager to learn about other cultures. The vehicular language employed is English and students are guided and assisted by educators and facilitators to improve their communication and linguistic skills. Although the focus of this set of tasks is on intercultural interactions and language skills development, we also seek to help students enhance their transversal or soft skills, such as networking, teamwork, digital literacy, critical thinking, online communication, problem-solving or time-management skills. These competencies are highly esteemed in twenty-first century's labour market, will upgrade participants' employability prospects and correspond with the vision and demands of the EURECA-PRO alliance [15].

The European University on Responsible Consumption and Production [16], whose values align with those of the exchange, offers the Universidad de León a chance to recruit undergraduate students from universities that belong to this institutional partnership. Gear Up! provides institutions with an opportunity to become more intercultural, to

create an international network that alumni can benefit from even after the interaction, and a chance to develop a virtual and integrated European campus [16]. It contributes to the alliance's goal towards an inclusive, sustainable, interdisciplinary community that is compromised with the future of our planet and the career prospects and skills of alumni. Students participating in this VE will be required to work on six telecollaborative tasks based on the progressive exchange model of telecollaboration [6]. This model generally asks students to complete tasks where they have to exchange information about their cultural background and perspectives, or discussions about shared texts [17]. The tasks cover the themes of cultural differences and stereotypes, useful tips for studying abroad, university life, public transport and health systems or accommodation across countries.

This online intercultural exchange will start in October 2022 and run until the end of November 2022, when data will be collected and analysed. Using a mixed-methods approach to research, we intend to examine the qualitative and quantitative data that will be gathered in various forms. Firstly, we will carry out pre and post-tests to delve into students' concerns, fears and knowledge of how to act in intercultural online contexts. The data from these tests will be analysed following a mixed-methods approach. We will also examine students' reflective e-portfolios, collected after their VE interactions. These data are complemented by short face-to-face interviews conducted with the vice-rector for Internationalisation and staff from the office of International Relations at the Universidad de León before designing the exchange model. All qualitative responses will be interpreted according to the principles of Thematic Analysis (TA) [18]. This qualitative analysis will be supported by a brief quantitative analysis with the tests and pre and post-exchange surveys that will be sent to all participants. We also intend to examine students' perspectives and attitudes after taking this VE and participating in a physical international mobility programme.

5 Reflections

With the many advantages that research on VE and telecollaboration has proven and the recent developments in the field [19], not putting this tool to good use would be a mistake. In the years to come, we hope to see virtual exchanges such as Gear Up! become an integral part of the curriculum, not only in foreign language classrooms, where this practice is more prominent but also in other disciplines where the internationalisation of education and the intercultural awareness of students seems to have been long forgotten and reduced to a privileged minority, as it is the case with medical students, for example [20]. Given the significance that international relations have in our modern, globalised society, virtual exchanges are now, more than ever, an opportunity to become cosmopolitan, open-minded, democratic citizens of the world while respecting the environment and being inclusive. VE is an innovative, sustainable and economical strategy to reach institutions' objectives of internationalisation. However, we must remember that its successful implementation requires the involvement and collaboration of diverse institutions and university departments.

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