



# VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

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UNIC TEACHING GUIDE  
FOR UNIVERSITY EDUCATORS

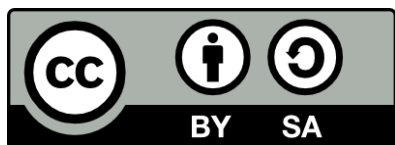
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## IN A NUTSHELL

**Virtual Exchange** (VE) has achieved benefits promoting intercultural competence, language learning, and global awareness among participants. It has also supported students in engaging in authentic, real-world interactions with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds, fostering mutual understanding and empathy. To implement Virtual Exchange, it is essential to focus on good communication and partnerships, task design and support for your students. Resources as the UNIC *Teaching and Learning* Checklists can help you.



## What is Virtual Exchange?

Virtual Exchange (VE) is a form of virtual mobility characterised by particularly intensive interaction between teachers and students involving classrooms in at least two countries. The concept is part of technology-enabled, people focused education programmes or activities in which formative communication and interaction takes place between individuals or groups who are geographically separated and/or from different cultural backgrounds. All of this is supported by and guided by educators and/or facilitators. The practice is supported by and well documented in academic research.

Apart from collaboration with peers around the world, VE involves the use of digital tools and platforms to facilitate cross-cultural communication, interaction, and learning. It also incorporates different technologies, which could include videoconferencing, online forums, Skype, blogs, wikis and virtual worlds like Second Life, and social media to facilitate interactions between students from different parts of the world.

Through virtual exchange teachers can unite students from different universities and set them up virtually in collaborative tasks and support them in the discussion of specific topics, the exchange of ideas or the joint generation of a product and its presentation.

Virtual Exchange is embedded in regular teaching activities, i.e. each teacher teaches a regular course at their own university, but the two (or more) courses are linked with each other by the use of digital tools. Elements of Virtual Exchange can shape a course over an entire semester or enrich only particular parts of it. Virtual Exchange is an activity always recognized by both institutions, worthy of study credits or part of a broader activity that is ascribed study credits (O'Dowd 2018; Helm, 2018; Baroni et al., 2019).

Beyond the academic exchange, an explicit or implicit element of Virtual Exchange is the students' reflection about their experiences in the intercultural collaboration (Helm, 2018; Baroni et al., 2019).



## What benefits does Virtual Exchange provide?

Barbosa and Ferreira-Lopes (2023) highlight the following benefits for VE: promotion of language skills development, intercultural communicative competence, and multiple literacies; development of key graduate employability skills, such as intercultural competencies; engagement of learners in an organised partnership; presentation of language learners with access to native speakers; development of students' intercultural communication skills and sense of global citizenship through different cultures collaboration and joint work online; the exchange of academic knowledge and development of key digital competences. Virtual Exchange is also one of the more inclusive and accessible ways of internationalizing a study programme.



## How can I realise Virtual Exchanges in Higher Education?

To realise a class-to-class Virtual Exchange in higher education teaching settings, there are some variables to consider. Robert O'Dowd (2020) describes six key elements of Virtual Exchange. These **are partnerships, tasks, technology, mentoring and support, integration and recognition**. In particular, the first four aspects are aimed at teachers. More information on these six key elements to implement virtual exchange in a study programme are all detailed in the Handbook on Virtual and Physical mobility (Tan et al. 2023).

To integrate VE into higher education, Lewis and O'Dowd (2016) propose different ways:

1

It can be considered as an independent activity not linked to a specific subject, such as Teletandem, which is when two people from different countries and cultures contact each other through technology autonomously.

2

It can also be integrated into the curriculum as part of the syllabus and enable students to receive a grade or a number of credits for their participation.

3

It can be integrated into the overall academic structure. In this way, VE is a strategy officially adopted and recognized by the institution, thus receiving more support and resources.

Regarding the methodologies used in VE, one of the most widely used methodologies is task-based learning, which O'Dowd and Ware (2009) divide into three categories.

**Icebreaker.** This requires learners to introduce themselves to their virtual peers and talk about their interests and cultures.

**Comparison of cultural products.** It happens when learners use some cultural artifact (newspapers, books, theories, etc.) to compare specific culturally shaped views.

**Students producing something together** (blogs, wikis or projects of a different nature).

1

2

3

## Virtual Exchange in 10 steps

Even if Virtual Exchanges imply challenges on different levels for teachers and students (Barbosa & Ferreira Lopes 2021), these can be taken as learning opportunities and contribute to intercultural competence development. Mentoring activities of the VE teaching partners are effective measures to support the learning of the participating students and help them to develop digital and communicative competencies to deal with intercultural situations (Gutierrez et al. 2021).

**The following 10 steps might also help educators to organise a Virtual Exchange activity and structure the co-planning process.** They have been extracted from the UNIC Handbook on Physical and Virtual Mobility (Tan et al. 2023, 42-43). The steps “illustrate a process how a Virtual Exchange project could be designed. Depending on the particular project, not all steps must be gone, or some steps might be treated simultaneously, or in another order.

1

**Have a look at your own courses.** Where could an international perspective enhance students’ learning? Write a short abstract on your ideas. The checklists for Virtual Exchange teachers might help you.

2

**Find a partner.** This will need some time. Partners for VE activities are mostly found in research networks, contacts of colleagues who have been abroad, internet research, via the universities’ networks. Within UNIC, internationally organised teacher trainings are an occasion to get in contact.

3

**Get to know your partner.** Exchange material you use in your teaching, schedule a virtual meeting and talk about your points of interest, give each other guest lectures in your mutual courses, if possible, meet physically (e.g., by Erasmus teaching mobility) and have guest lectures and/or interaction with your respective students. The Agreements with your partner teacher – Checklists might help you.

4

**Agree on the timeline.** When do you want your activity to take place? How long should it be? Academic calendars and preparation of the implementation may differ significantly from one university to another

5

**Agree on common learning objectives.** What are the teaching and learning methods as well as tasks to reach these, and which results of the students' collaboration would you aim for? How could you support your students to succeed in the task as well as in the intercultural communication and collaboration?

**Talk about assignments and workloads you want to attribute to the activity.** This must not be similar for both groups, but keep in mind that different workloads might lead to different motivational positions. How many ECTS should your students receive? Do you want to grade the VE activity, or will there be another assignment outside of the VE activity?

6

7

**Prepare an explanation** (at best in written form) about the activity for your students. This can be a kind of guide with descriptions on what, when, with whom, until when they have to do.

**Conduct your activity.** Be in good contact with your students and with each other and talk about how your students are coping with the task and their international peers. Discuss with each other on mentoring strategies for your students.

8

9

**Reflect on your VE activity.** Let your students evaluate the VE and do an evaluation and reflection also among the teachers' team. What went well? What went wrong? Where is adaptation needed? What should be different next time? What have you learnt?

**Plan the next event.**

10



## Who is my partner?

Partners are crucial. To implement VE a university or higher education institutions should invest and organize sustainable relations with cooperation partners (other universities or higher education institutions). Partners will always be external. Within UNIC, you can find partners via the [UNIC Virtual Campus](#), via your local UNIC managers, and via participation in [UNIC events](#), like e.g. the [UNIC InterTeach workshops](#) for professional development of university teachers.

Beyond UNIC, the network [UNCollaboration](#) has a matchmaking service, and the [COIL connect network](#) does also display partner inquiries. Both networks are also organising partner fairs.

When working together with a partner, there are helpful resources that can support your collaboration, e.g. checklists for VE teachers (see UNIC Handbook on Physical and Virtual Mobility), that help to get an overview of the different organisational settings like academic calendars, and to align approaches to teaching and learning.



## Where can I get help?

Centres for Teaching and Learning support in matters around the learning design of the Virtual Exchange activities, as well as with partner requests. In UNIC, all CTL contacts can be found at the [UNIC CTL Information Hub](#).

The UNIC CTL is also offering workshops for university teachers in the framework of the UNIC InterTeach programme, where you can learn more about Virtual Exchange and meet interested colleagues from the other UNIC universities.





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