

“Virtual Exchange can teach important skills for the international labour market”



By working online together with partner classes in other countries, students can develop their collaborative skills, intercultural and competences as well as foreign language skills

With the “DAAD Research Briefs”, the DAAD offers a publication series that aims to make current academic findings comprehensible and usable for higher education practitioners. In the fourth issue, Dr Robert O'Dowd, Associate Professor for English as a Foreign Language and Applied Linguistics at the Universidad de León in Spain, reports on the possible uses of Virtual Exchange formats in international higher education and their benefits from the perspective of students and teachers.

Mr O'Dowd, could you first briefly explain again what exactly is meant by Virtual Exchange and what the difference is to Virtual Mobility?

I define Virtual Exchange as an umbrella term which refers to the many different online learning initiatives and methodologies which bring students together in online collaborative learning with partners from different cultural backgrounds as part of their study programmes. So, the emphasis in Virtual Exchange is very much on person-to-person communication and exploring how students can develop different competences and achieve learning objectives by collaborating together online. By working online together with partner classes in other countries in carefully designed projects, and by receiving the necessary mentoring and support from their teachers, students can develop their collaborative skills, intercultural competence, digital competence and, of course, their foreign language skills.

Virtual Mobility is quite a different activity. This term is used to talk about how students from one university follow online courses which have been organised at a partner institution in a different country. For example, during the COVID pandemic many students at my university in

Spain could not take part in their Erasmus mobility programme. However, some of them could register online with the partner university and follow the classes online and do the exams at the end. This could be described as a Virtual Mobility programme. But many scholars are very critical of this approach and suggest that physical mobility programmes are much more than simply following a course online and then doing an exam. The benefits of physical mobility programmes emerge from the people you meet on campus and the encounters you have outside of class time. I agree with them, but I still think that Virtual Mobility could be combined with Virtual Exchange activities in order to make international learning accessible to a much bigger cohort of students.



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How can universities use Virtual Exchanges in their curricula in a meaningful way, which application scenarios are particularly relevant or useful here?

The activity can be used essentially in three ways in universities– as an activity for preparing students for study abroad (pre-mobility), as an activity which is part of a blended mobility programme, or as integrated part of a normal university course. Students and teachers would benefit from all three approaches. To help universities use Virtual Exchange projects as successfully as possible, I have developed four lines of action that should be taken into account when introducing Virtual Exchange elements into study programmes.

First, carry out research to gain evidence of the impact of Virtual Exchange on student learning. Practitioners should be encouraged to evaluate their own programmes in order to improve them but also to demonstrate the value of Virtual Exchange to colleagues and to university management. Second, make sure that students' and teachers' work is recognised when they take part in Virtual Exchange. That means that students should receive credit in some form for their successful participation in exchanges and that teachers' effort in engaging in the activity should also be rewarded in some way. Third, break down institutional silos. The successful integration of Virtual Exchange depends on the capacity of members of different faculties and support offices within universities to communicate and collaborate successfully together. Fourth, organize top-down national and international support. Apart from the recognition of its value by both university management and teaching staff, the success of online collaborative learning initiatives will also depend on the support it receives from national and international organisations. For example, I believe that the way in which the DAAD provides funding for Virtual Exchange projects will be key to its further development here in Germany.

From your point of view as a long-time researcher on this topic: What effects of Virtual Exchanges could be proven by research, what are therefore the best reasons for implementing Virtual Exchanges?

I mention various large scale research studies in the "DAAD Research Brief" article which have shown how Virtual Exchange contributes to aspects of intercultural competence development, foreign language learning as well as 'soft skills' such as collaboration,

teamwork, problem solving and so on. When exchanges are well structured and when teachers take an active role in developing effective tasks and in supporting students during the collaborative experience, the learning outcomes can be very impressive indeed. However, the research also shows us that students report learning most from Virtual Exchange projects when they are forced to overcome communicative or cultural challenges. It appears that it is when collaboration becomes challenging and when communication breaks down that students notice difference, are forced to find compromises in order to get their work done. That's when they are developing the skills and attitudes of intercultural competence and online collaboration.

Virtual Exchange can be unsettling for both students and teachers. When you bring students into contact together with partners in other countries it is impossible to know how relationships will develop and how conversations can go. But that 'human' aspect is exactly what makes this activity so relevant as it provides students with first-hand experience of what working in the 'real world' will be like. Many of our students will go on to work in international teams and they will have to communicate in online environments. Virtual Exchange prepares them for that experience.

Interview: Dr. Jan Kercher (21 July 2022)

ABOUT THE PERSON

Dr. Robert O'Dowd comes from Ireland. He teaches EFL and Applied Linguistics at the University of León, Spain. He has taught at universities in Ireland, Germany and Spain and has published widely on the application of Virtual Exchange in higher education. He has coordinated three Erasmus+ projects on the integration and upscaling of Virtual Exchange.

FURTHER LINKS

- [DAAD Research Brief: Introducing Virtual Student Exchange in international university education](https://static.daad.de/media/daad_de/pdfs_nicht_barrierefrei/der-daad/analysen-studien/daad_forschung_kompakt_4_odowd_en.pdf) [https://static.daad.de/media/daad_de/pdfs_nicht_barrierefrei/der-daad/analysen-studien/daad_forschung_kompakt_4_odowd_en.pdf]
- [Reading and Resources for Virtual Exchange \(compiled by Robert O'Dowd\)](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fbQ1xpPM_HHBiOlulk_mISN0MkgBrM0/edit#) [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fbQ1xpPM_HHBiOlulk_mISN0MkgBrM0/edit#]
- [DAAD digitalisation programmes and projects](https://www.daad.de/en/the-daad/what-we-do/digitalisation/) [<https://www.daad.de/en/the-daad/what-we-do/digitalisation/>]