

Erasmus+

Virtual Exchange

INTERCULTURAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES



2018 *Impact Report*

More information on the European Union is available on the Internet (<https://europa.eu>).

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Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Impact Report 2018

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Executive Summary

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (EVE)¹ is a pilot project, part of the **Erasmus+ programme**, which provides an accessible, ground-breaking way for young people to **engage in intercultural learning experiences online**. Through a range of activities, Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange aims to expand the scope of the Erasmus+ programme through Virtual Exchanges (VE), which are technology-enabled people-to-people educational programmes, facilitated and sustained over a period of time. Working with youth organisations and universities, the project is open to any young person aged 18-30 residing in Europe and the Southern Mediterranean.

In 2017, the European Commission celebrated 30 years of Erasmus mobility, hailing Erasmus+ as its **most successful programme in terms of European integration and international outreach**. The 2019 impact study² reports that Erasmus mobility increases students' intercultural and interpersonal skills and competences, their self-confidence, ability to achieve goals, social and cultural openness, as well as their language skills. The Erasmus+ programme also has widespread political support, with the Council of the European Union supporting the extension of the scope of the programme to all levels of education and training, and for small scale or grassroots organisations³. There is nevertheless a recognition of the limits of mobility and the need to promote more inclusive programmes which make international and intercultural experiences accessible to people from a wider range of backgrounds and cultures.

Virtual Exchange is therefore **uniquely placed to expand the reach and scope of traditional intercultural learning programmes**, as a complement to traditional physical exchange actions. Utilising the power of technology, such programming can bring unprecedented numbers of people together in meaningful facilitated dialogue as part of their formal or non-formal education, including those young people who have traditionally been disconnected from a highly **relevant skill-building and transformative opportunity**.

The rationale for pioneering Virtual Exchange in the European context is underpinned by a number of interconnected European Union **policies, decisions and priorities**, both at the political and educational levels, including:

1. The **Paris Declaration**⁴ on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education. This declaration marked a recognition of the challenge in safeguarding pluralistic societies and calls for education systems and policies to promote greater social inclusion, non-discrimination and intercultural dialogue, including through the support of Erasmus+.
2. The **European Neighbourhood Policy**, revised in November 2015, which aims to foster stabilisation, security and prosperity, in line with the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy. The ENP has an important youth dimension including **youth exchanges** between the EU and partner countries, the training of young people and youth workers, partnerships and networks of youth organisations which foster inclusion and non-formal learning, as well as mutual understanding.
3. The European Commission **Digital Education Action Plan**⁵ which supports technology-use and digital competence development in education, and the European Parliament Report on Education in the Digital Era⁶,
4. The European Commission Communication on **European higher education in the world**⁷ which calls for "internationalisation-at-home" strategies - the integration of a global dimension in the design and content of all curricula and teaching/learning processes - to ensure that the large majority of learners are able to acquire the international skills required in a globalised world, the recommendations made by the European Parliament⁸ on the use of virtual exchange in the internationalisation of higher education, and the renewed EU agenda for higher education⁹ with its focus on building inclusive and connected higher education systems.

It should be highlighted that the initiative is also closely aligned with the **next Erasmus programme for 2021-2027**, which has a strong focus on inclusivity and innovative digital and virtual learning opportunities.

The impact report provides a comprehensive evaluation of the project activities which ran from 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2018, and the effectiveness of the different models of Virtual Exchange in meeting the objectives set by the European Commission (EC), which are to:

1 The abbreviation 'EVE' is used in this report in order to increase readability, even though it is not an official acronym for the project.

2 <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/94d97f5c-7ae2-11e9-9f05-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

3 <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13943-2018-INIT/en/pdf>

4 http://cache.media.education.gouv.fr/file/01_-/_janvier/79/4/declaration_on_promoting_citizenship_527794.pdf

5 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1554989352936&uri=CELEX%3A52018SC0012>

6 http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2018-0400_EN.html

7 <http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2013/EN/1-2013-499-EN-F1-1.Pdf>

8 [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/540370/IPOL_STU\(2015\)540370_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/540370/IPOL_STU(2015)540370_EN.pdf)

9 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1496304694958&uri=COM:2017:247:FIN>

- Encourage intercultural dialogue and increase tolerance through online people-to-people interactions;
- Promote various types of Virtual Exchange as a complement to Erasmus+ physical mobility, allowing more young people to benefit from intercultural and international experience;
- Enhance critical thinking and media literacy, and the use of Internet and social media;
- Foster soft skills development of participants, including the practice of foreign languages and teamwork, notably to enhance employability;
- Support the objectives of the 2015 Paris declaration to promote citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education;
- Strengthen the youth dimension of the EU neighbouring policy with Southern Mediterranean countries.

7,450 youth participants took part in the four main Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities – Online Facilitated Dialogues, Transnational EVE Projects, Advocacy Training, and Interactive Open Online Courses –, each comprising several sub-programmes. Moreover, 383 persons were trained to facilitate dialogues, 221 educators and youth workers were trained on how to develop a virtual exchange, and 168 persons were trained to become debate exchange team leaders, making a **total of 8,222 participants**. All activities share the common approach of bringing together young people across geographic and cultural divides by having them interact and collaborate through technology, although they differ in terms of design, teaching methodology, integration, duration, number of real-time online sessions and participant numbers.

A **robust and reliable process** was put in place to **monitor the project's results and assess its impact**, thanks to which measurable data showing the value of Virtual Exchange for young people could be generated. The study's research questions were aimed at exploring the impact of EVE in terms of change in participants' soft skills and attitudes, while the quality and effectiveness of EVE were evaluated by looking at participants' satisfaction with their Virtual Exchange experience and their self-reported perceptions of change in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes towards cultural others. This was supported by an analysis of challenges, strengths and weaknesses aimed at supporting and improving future implementation. A **mixed methods approach** to the study was adopted, including a pre and post-exchange survey, and qualitative data collection through interviews and focus groups.

The **main findings** of the research are the following:

- Positive results were achieved in three of four markers set out in the research aims as regards to changes in the perceived effectiveness in **intercultural communication**, impact on **self-esteem and curiosity**, and the belief in **strong relations** between European and Southern Mediterranean countries.

- Participant evaluations **were extremely positive overall**, and it can be concluded that EVE offers a stimulating and enjoyable learning experience for many young people and university students.
- Virtual Exchange is a **novel experience** for participants, in terms of **types of interactions, ways of using technology, topics, and type of interlocutors**.
- Many participants reported **building positive and meaningful relationships** with their peers, with some remaining in contact beyond the exchange itself. The majority told other people within their communities about their experience and said they would be interested in engaging in other Virtual Exchanges in the future.
- Participants perceived that Virtual Exchange had improved their **digital competences**, in particular as regards online communication, an important component in the European Commission's framework of Digital Competences.
- Most of them also believed that their experience in Virtual Exchange improved other soft skills such as **foreign language** (predominantly English), **teamwork and collaborative problem-solving**. Evidence of **critical thinking and media literacy** was found in some of the participants' reflections: participants showed insight into their learning process, and related it to the model of exchange they were participating in. Participants further showed understanding of intercultural issues, addressing the difficulties that arose in working across cultures, and some reported challenging media misrepresentation, another indicator of increased media literacy and critical thinking.
- Evidence of **increased tolerance** has been addressed in several of the sections of participant feedback, where it was observed that participants were positively affected by their exposure to people from different cultures, and responded well to the mechanisms of Virtual Exchange, especially active listening.
- Strong evidence of **intercultural sensitivity** was found in some of the participants' reflections. Their experience had led them to question some of their assumptions, reflect on their own beliefs and behaviours and see the complexity of intercultural relations rather than minimising difference, or seeing a binary relationship of 'us' and 'them'.
- The research also showed that building a meaningful relationship takes **sustained interaction**, and the **role of facilitators** is key in the process.

The research highlighted that **some of the main challenges faced by participants were related to connectivity**. While participants in Southern Mediterranean countries were more directly affected, it also had an impact on the broader group because it affected dialogue progress and group development.

The issue of **regular participation and attrition** from the programme also affected some groups. Several contributing factors were put forward by facilitators and Virtual Exchange coordinators, including the language proficiency of participants and their changing life conditions.

It should be noted that, due to the significant differences between the exchange models in terms of design, teaching methodology, format, and length, generalisations about Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange as a whole proved difficult. The study has allowed to highlight some of the strengths and weaknesses of the different models of Virtual Exchange, based on qualitative findings and linking these to the characteristics of each model. This in turn has shown that the models can cater to different needs and audiences. Lessons learnt and limitations identified through this research will be taken into consideration in the adaptation of the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) system and the project implementation going forward.

The strong body of research and key findings presented in this report clearly demonstrate the **value and positive impact of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange**, both in terms of developing crucial 21st century skills and bridging important cultural and social divides. This testifies to the project's success in reaching the objectives set forth by the European Commission and makes a strong case for future investment in the field. The study endeavours to inform the future decisions on **programmatic and geographic expansion** of the initiative beyond 2020.

Synthèse

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (EVE)¹⁰ est un projet pilote du **programme Erasmus+** qui permet aux jeunes d'effectuer un apprentissage interculturel en ligne de façon accessible et innovante. Les différentes activités du projet Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange ont pour objectif d'élargir la portée du programme Erasmus+ par le biais d'échanges virtuels, qui sont des programmes pédagogiques interpersonnels facilités, portés par la technologie et qui s'inscrivent dans une certaine durée. Ce projet est mis en œuvre avec des universités ainsi que des organisations de jeunesse, et est ouvert à tous les jeunes de 18 à 30 ans vivant en Europe et au sud de la Méditerranée.

En 2017, la Commission européenne a fêté 30^e anniversaire d'Erasmus+, et célébré ce programme comme son plus **grand succès dans le domaine l'intégration et le rayonnement international de l'Europe**. L'étude d'impact de 2019¹¹ signale que les échanges Erasmus favorisent les capacités interculturelles et interpersonnelles des étudiants, améliorent leur confiance en soi, leur capacité à réaliser leurs objectifs, leur ouverture d'esprit du point de vue social et culturel, et leurs aptitudes linguistiques. Le programme Erasmus+ a aussi bénéficié du soutien politique du Conseil de l'Union européenne concernant l'élargissement de la portée du programme à tous les niveaux de l'enseignement et de la formation, ainsi qu'aux organisations locales à échelle réduite¹². Néanmoins, et vu les limites de la mobilité, il est nécessaire de mettre en œuvre des programmes plus inclusifs facilitant l'accessibilité des expériences interculturelles et internationales à davantage de personnes issues de différents milieux et cultures.

Ainsi, les échanges virtuels sont **particulièrement bien placés pour élargir la portée et l'étendue des programmes traditionnels d'apprentissage interculturel**, en complémentarité avec les échanges physiques traditionnels d'Erasmus+. Portés par la technologie, de tels programmes peuvent permettre de réunir un nombre record d'individus autour d'un dialogue modéré dans le cadre d'une éducation formelle ou non formelle, y compris les jeunes qui n'auraient pas eu accès à une opportunité adéquate de développement de compétences et de transformation.

La logique du lancement de l'initiative Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange dans le contexte européen s'appuie sur différentes **politiques**,

décisions et priorités à l'échelle européenne, aux niveaux politique et éducatif, y compris :

1. La **Déclaration de Paris**¹³ qui promeut la citoyenneté et les valeurs communes de liberté, de tolérance et de non-discrimination au moyen de l'éducation. Cette déclaration reconnaît le besoin de sauvegarder la pluralité des sociétés et demande la mise en œuvre de systèmes éducatifs et de politiques favorisant une plus grande inclusion sociale, la non-discrimination et le dialogue interculturel, y compris avec le soutien d'Erasmus+.
2. La **Politique européenne de voisinage** (PEV), modifiée en novembre 2015, vise à améliorer la stabilité, la sécurité et la prospérité, dans le cadre de la stratégie globale de la politique étrangère et de sécurité commune de l'Union européenne. La jeunesse tient une place importante dans la PEV, y compris les **échanges de jeunes** entre l'UE et des pays partenaires, la formation des jeunes et des jeunes travailleurs, le partenariat et les réseaux d'organisations pour la jeunesse qui encouragent l'intégration, l'éducation non-formelle et la compréhension mutuelle.
3. La **Stratégie numérique pour l'éducation**¹⁴ de la Commission européenne qui encourage l'usage de la technologie et des compétences numériques dans l'éducation, et le rapport du Parlement européen sur l'éducation à l'ère du numérique¹⁵.
4. La communication de la Commission européenne sur **l'enseignement supérieur européen dans le monde**¹⁶ demande la mise en œuvre de stratégies d'internationalisation "sur place" – l'intégration d'une dimension globale dans la conception et le contenu des programmes et des processus d'apprentissage et d'enseignement – pour garantir qu'une grande majorité des étudiants soient capables d'acquérir les compétences internationales nécessaires dans un monde globalisé ; les recommandations faites par le Parlement européen sur l'usage des échanges virtuels dans l'internationalisation de l'enseignement supérieur¹⁷ ; et le nouvel agenda européen sur l'enseignement supérieur¹⁸, qui insiste sur la mise en œuvre d'un enseignement supérieur inclusif et numérique.

Il est important de souligner que cette initiative s'aligne également sur le **prochain programme Erasmus 2021-2027**, qui met un accent

10 L'abréviation 'EVE' est utilisée dans ce rapport pour faciliter sa lisibilité, mais ne représente pas l'acronyme officiel du projet.

11 <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/94d97f5c-7ae2-11e9-9f05-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

12 <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13943-2018-INIT/en/pdf>

13 http://cache.media.education.gouv.fr/file/01_-janvier/79/4/declaration_on_promoting_citizenship_527794.pdf

14 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1554989352936&uri=CELEX%3A52018SC0012>

15 http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2018-0400_EN.html

16 <http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2013/EN/1-2013-499-EN-F1-1.Pdf>

17 [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/540370/IPOL_STU\(2015\)540370_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/540370/IPOL_STU(2015)540370_EN.pdf)

18 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1496304694958&uri=COM:2017:247:FIN>

particulier sur une approche inclusive et sur les opportunités novatrices d'apprentissage virtuel.

Le rapport d'impact présente une évaluation exhaustive des activités du projet qui se sont déroulées du 1er janvier au 31 décembre 2018, et de la capacité des divers modèles d'échange virtuel à atteindre efficacement les objectifs fixés par la Commission européenne (CE), à savoir :

- encourager le dialogue interculturel et accroître l'esprit de tolérance grâce à des interactions interpersonnelles en ligne.
- promouvoir différents types d'échanges virtuels en plus de la mobilité physique d'Erasmus+, permettant à davantage de jeunes de bénéficier d'une expérience interculturelle et internationale.
- renforcer la pensée critique et l'éducation aux médias, en particulier dans l'utilisation d'internet et des réseaux sociaux.
- encourager le développement des compétences personnelles des participants, y compris la pratique des langues étrangères et le travail d'équipe, notamment pour améliorer leur employabilité.
- soutenir les objectifs de la déclaration de Paris de 2015 visant à promouvoir la citoyenneté et les valeurs communes de liberté, de tolérance et de non-discrimination par l'éducation.
- renforcer la dimension jeunesse de la politique européenne de voisinage avec les pays du sud de la Méditerranée.

7.450 jeunes participants ont pris part aux quatre principales activités Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange – les dialogues facilités en ligne, les projets EVE transnationaux, la formation au plaidoyer et les cours ouverts interactifs en ligne –, dont chacune comprend plusieurs sous-programmes. En outre, 383 personnes ont été formées à la facilitation de dialogues, 221 éducateurs et animateurs de jeunesse au développement d'échanges virtuels, et 168 personnes ont reçu une formation de chef d'équipe de débats, soit **un total de 8.222 participants**. Ces activités ont toutes en commun la même approche, qui est de réunir des jeunes d'origines géographiques et culturelles très différentes et de les faire interagir et collaborer à l'aide de la technologie, bien qu'elles diffèrent par leur conception, la méthodologie pédagogique employée, l'intégration, la durée, le nombre de séances en temps réel et en ligne, et le nombre des participants.

Un **processus solide et fiable** a été mis en place afin de **suivre les résultats du projet et d'évaluer son impact**. Il a ainsi été possible de générer des données mesurables relatives à la valeur de l'échange virtuel pour les jeunes. L'objectif des questions de cette étude était d'estimer l'impact d'EVE en termes d'évolution des compétences personnelles et des attitudes des participants. La qualité ainsi que l'efficacité d'EVE ont été évaluées sur la base de la satisfaction des participants suite à leur expérience d'échange virtuel, ainsi que de leur propre perception de l'évolution de leurs connaissances, de leurs compétences et de leurs attitudes envers les personnes issues d'autres

cultures. Une analyse complémentaire des difficultés, des forces et des faiblesses a également été réalisée, avec pour objectif d'appuyer et d'améliorer les projets futurs. L'étude repose sur des **méthodes diverses** : enquête avant et après l'échange et collecte de données qualitatives au moyen d'entretiens et de groupes de discussion.

Les **principales conclusions** de l'étude sont les suivantes :

- Les résultats ont été positifs dans le cas de trois indicateurs sur les quatre repris dans les objectifs de l'étude : efficacité perçue de la **communication interculturelle**, impact sur **l'estime de soi et la curiosité**, et **croissance dans les relations fortes** entre l'Europe et les pays du sud de la Méditerranée.
- Dans l'ensemble, les évaluations des participants ont été **extrêmement positives** et l'on peut en conclure qu'EVE constitue pour de nombreux étudiants et jeunes une expérience pédagogique agréable et stimulante.
- L'échange virtuel est une **expérience nouvelle** pour les participants en termes de **types d'interactions, d'utilisation de la technologie, des sujets abordés** et des **types d'interlocuteurs**.
- De nombreux participants ont rapporté qu'ils avaient tissé avec leurs pairs **des relations positives et authentiques**. Certains sont restés en contact après l'échange. La majorité d'entre eux ont parlé de leur expérience à d'autres personnes de leur communauté et seraient intéressés par d'autres échanges virtuels à l'avenir.
- Les participants ont estimé que les échanges virtuels avaient amélioré leurs **compétences numériques**, en particulier dans le domaine de la communication en ligne, qui est une composante importante du cadre de compétences numériques de la Commission européenne.
- La plupart d'entre eux ont également estimé que leur expérience d'échange virtuel avait amélioré d'autres compétences personnelles telles que la maîtrise des **langues étrangères** (surtout l'anglais), le **travail en équipe** et la **résolution collaborative des problèmes**. Des signes de **réflexion critique** et de **compétence médiatique** ont été relevés dans les commentaires de certains participants : ils avaient compris leur processus d'apprentissage et avaient établi le lien avec le modèle d'échange auquel ils avaient participé. En outre, les participants ont manifesté une compréhension des questions interculturelles et évoqué les difficultés du travail interculturel. Certains ont indiqué avoir remis en cause les déformations médiatiques, autre indicateur d'une amélioration de la compétence médiatique et de la réflexion critique.
- Des indications d'une **plus grande tolérance** ont été relevés dans les commentaires émis par les participants. Dans ce dernier domaine, l'équipe de suivi et d'évaluation a constaté que les participants avaient été influencés positivement par leur exposition à des personnes issues de cultures différentes, et réagi de façon positive aux mécanismes de l'échange virtuel, en particulier l'écoute active.
- Des signes forts de **sensibilité interculturelle** ont été repérés

dans certaines réflexions des participants. Leur expérience les avait amenés à remettre en cause certaines de leurs idées préconçues, à réfléchir à leurs propres convictions et comportements, et à percevoir la complexité des relations interculturelles plutôt qu'à minimiser les différences ou à développer une vision binaire des relations entre "nous" et l' "autre".

- L'étude a également révélé que pour bâtir une relation authentique, il faut une **interaction dans la durée**, et que dans ce processus **les facilitateurs jouent un rôle clé**.

L'étude a mis en évidence le fait que **certaines des principales difficultés rencontrées par les participants étaient liées à la connectivité**. Bien que les participants du sud de la Méditerranée aient été plus directement touchés à cet égard, cela a également eu un impact sur l'ensemble du groupe, car la progression du dialogue et le développement des groupes en ont été affectés. La question de la **régularité de la participation et de l'abandon** du programme a également touché certains groupes. Certains facteurs contributifs ont été cités par les facilitateurs et les coordinateurs des échanges virtuels, notamment le niveau linguistique des participants et l'évolution de leurs conditions de vie.

Il convient de noter qu'en raison des différences significatives entre les modèles d'échange en termes de conception, de méthodologie pédagogique, de format et de durée, il n'est pas facile de tirer des conclusions générales à propos d' Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange dans son ensemble. L'étude a permis de mettre en valeur certains des points forts et certaines faiblesses des différents modèles d'échange virtuel sur la base de résultats qualitatifs liés aux caractéristiques de chacun des modèles. Ce résultat démontre à son tour que ces modèles peuvent répondre à des besoins et convenir à des publics différents. Les enseignements tirés ainsi que les limites identifiées par l'étude seront pris en compte dans le cadre de l'adaptation de la méthode de suivi et d'évaluation et de la mise en œuvre du projet à l'avenir.

L'étude et les principales conclusions figurant dans ce rapport témoignent clairement de la **valeur et de l'impact positif de l'initiative Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange**, qui favorise le développement des compétences cruciales du XXI^e siècle, et atténue les clivages culturels et sociaux, permettant ainsi au projet d'atteindre les objectifs fixés par la Commission européenne. Il s'agit donc d'un argument solide pour favoriser les investissements dans ce domaine. L'étude s'efforce de façonner la prise de décisions futures concernant **l'expansion programmatique et géographique** de cette initiative au-delà de 2020.

1. Introduction

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange is a pilot project established under a contract with the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, financed by the European Union's budget. It 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 project is open to any young person aged 18-30 residing in Europe and the Southern Mediterranean. It is implemented by a consortium composed by Search for Common Ground, Sharing Perspectives Foundation, Anna Lindh Foundation, UNIMED, Soliya, UNICollaboration, Kiron Open Higher Education, and Migration Matters.

The EVE initiative aims to expand the reach and scope of the Erasmus+ programme through Virtual Exchanges, which are technology-enabled people-to-people dialogues sustained over a period of time. It provides an accessible, innovative way for youth in Europe and the Southern Mediterranean to engage in meaningful intercultural experiences online, as part of their formal or non-formal education.

This report provides a comprehensive evaluation of the project activities which ran from 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2018, the first year of this pilot project. It starts with a brief overview of Virtual Exchange and the rationale behind the project, outlines the research aims and the mixed methods approach adopted for monitoring and evaluation. After a presentation of empirical findings and a discussion on the study's impact and outcomes, it explores the tensions and challenges faced in this first pilot year and makes recommendations for the continuation of the project in 2019 and beyond.

1.1. Objectives of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange

The rationale for pioneering Virtual Exchange in the European context is underpinned by a number of interconnected European Union policies, decisions and priorities, both at the political and educational levels, including:

1. The Paris Declaration¹⁹ on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education. This declaration marked a recognition of the challenge in safeguarding pluralistic societies and calls for education systems and

policies to promote greater social inclusion, non-discrimination and intercultural dialogue, including through the support of Erasmus+.

2. The European Neighbourhood Policy, revised in November 2015, which aims to foster stabilisation, security and prosperity, in line with the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy. The ENP has an important youth dimension including youth exchanges between the EU and partner countries, the training of young people and youth workers, partnerships and networks of youth organisations which foster inclusion and non-formal learning, as well as mutual understanding.
3. The European Commission Digital Education Action Plan²⁰ which supports technology-use and digital competence development in education, and the European Parliament Report on Education in the Digital Era²¹,
4. The European Commission Communication on European higher education in the world²² which calls for "internationalisation-at-home" strategies - the integration of a global dimension in the design and content of all curricula and teaching/learning processes - to ensure that the large majority of learners are able to acquire the international skills required in a globalised world, the recommendations made by the European Parliament²³ on the use of virtual exchange in the internationalisation of higher education, and the renewed EU agenda for higher education²⁴ with its focus on building inclusive and connected higher education systems.

It should be highlighted that the initiative is also closely aligned with the next Erasmus programme for 2021-2027, which has a strong focus on inclusivity and innovative digital and virtual learning opportunities.

The EVE pilot project was launched with following objectives:

- Encourage intercultural dialogue and increase tolerance through online people-to-people interactions;
- Promote various types of Virtual Exchange as a complement to Erasmus+ physical mobility, allowing more young people to benefit from intercultural and international experience
- Enhance critical thinking and media literacy, and the use of Internet and social media;
- Foster soft skills development of participants, including the practice of foreign languages and teamwork, notably to enhance employability;
- Support the objectives of the 2015 Paris declaration to promote citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-

19 http://cache.media.education.gouv.fr/file/01_-janvier/79/4/declaration_on_promoting_citizenship_527794.pdf

20 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1554989352936&uri=CELEX%3A52018SC0012>

21 http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2018-0400_EN.html

22 <http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2013/EN/1-2013-499-EN-F1-1.Pdf>

23 [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/540370/IPOL_STU\(2015\)540370_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/540370/IPOL_STU(2015)540370_EN.pdf)

24 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1496304694958&uri=COM:2017:247:FIN>

discrimination through education;

- Strengthen the youth dimension of the EU neighbouring policy with Southern Mediterranean countries.

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange seeks to meet its objectives through the implementation of different models of Virtual Exchange, which are promoted on the [European Youth Portal](#). These activities are based on established models of Virtual Exchange and interaction which have their roots in different fields.

- *Online Facilitated Dialogue (OFD) (Activity 1)* – Virtual Exchange programmes connecting young people in non-formal discussions from various countries to each other for exposure to diverse views and cultures, language exchange and practice, and employability skills.
- *Transnational EVE Projects (TEP) (Activity 2)* – Exchange projects developed and implemented by university educators and youth workers who have followed a training course to develop a Transnational EVE Project (TEP) in order to enrich and expand existing programmes.
- *Advocacy Training (AT) (Activity 3)* – Online debate exchanges bringing young people from different backgrounds together to develop parliamentary debate skills with the support of a network of trained debate team leaders, fostering listening and understanding through advocacy training.
- *Interactive Open Online Courses (iOOC) (Activity 4)* – Open online courses across cultural contexts and national boundaries to learn with peers from diverse backgrounds using bite-sized video lectures, supported by skill building activities and facilitated intercultural discussions.

In parallel to these activities, an overarching activity is the **development of a community of trained Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange facilitators** who work across all Erasmus+ Virtual Exchanges.

1.2. Relevance of Virtual Exchange

The current global climate has deepened tensions and misunderstanding among communities of different identity lines, threatening social cohesion and intensifying polarisation. The ability to understand and appreciate differences has become more imperative than before, with workspaces and public spaces alike becoming more diverse, interconnected, and international. To succeed in the 21st century world and workforce, young people thus need soft skills and emotional intelligence as much if not more so than hard skills and technical knowledge. A meaningful intercultural experience can offer this skill-building opportunity and influence the way that young people deal with difference.

Physical exchange offered through higher-education (and, to a lesser degree, for youth in general) has been one powerful medium for young people to experience intercultural dialogue and build the skills to live and work in the modern world, with the Erasmus programmes being leaders in this field. Unfortunately, given the costs and geographic and administrative restrictions of physical exchange, most young people around the world are not able to access such an international experience as part of their education, leaving them, especially those who come from less affluent, or disenfranchised backgrounds, disconnected from a highly relevant skill-building opportunity. The current precarious state of global conflict and the uncertainty around government support for physical international exchange may further constrict the mobility of young people.

Virtual Exchange is a potentially more inclusive medium for connecting a greater number and diversity of youth to a space for dialogue and relationship-building with their global peers. Through facilitated, meaningful, and multilateral interaction, young people have the opportunity to build greater understanding of the relationship between different societies, expand their worldview and build critical 21st century skills and attitudes such as communication skills, self and global-awareness, critical and analytical thinking, curiosity, and media and digital literacy, which are also important for employability.

An online learning experience like Virtual Exchange has the potential to integrate smoothly into the online cultures of young people who, compared with their counterparts from previous generations, are more exposed to and connected with technology and can adjust to further digitalisation. Virtual exchange can be seen as a way of fostering positive contact in a safe environment that can fuel interest in further contact.

Recognising the limits of mobility and the need to promote more inclusive programmes, Virtual Exchange is uniquely placed to expand the reach and scope of traditional intercultural learning programmes, as a complement to traditional physical exchange actions. Utilising the power of technology, such programming can bring unprecedented numbers of people together in meaningful facilitated dialogue as part of their formal or non-formal education, including those young people who have traditionally been disconnected from a highly relevant skill-building and transformative opportunity.

2. Research aims and methodology

The aim of this research study is to evaluate the impact of EVE on participants and the effectiveness of the different models of Virtual Exchange in meeting the objectives set by the European Commission (EC). Specific research questions were developed to explore the impact of EVE in terms of change in participants' soft skills and attitudes:

- Did EVE have an impact on participants' perceived effectiveness in intercultural communication?
- Did EVE have an impact on participants' self-esteem and curiosity?
- Did EVE have an impact on participants' affect towards other groups?

The first question is related to assessing the impact the EVE activities have on the stated aim of encouraging intercultural dialogue. The second question relates to the aim of fostering skill development and enhancing employability, while the third question relates to measuring the impact of the activities on increasing participants' tolerance, another key project objective.

The quality and effectiveness of EVE were evaluated by looking at participants' satisfaction with their Virtual Exchange experience and their self-reported perceptions of change in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes towards cultural others. This was supported by an analysis of challenges, strengths and weaknesses aimed at supporting and improving future implementation.

- How did participants evaluate their EVE experience?
- Did participants feel they improved their digital literacies and soft skills?
- Did participants show evidence of critical thinking and media literacy?
- Can EVE promote citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through the building of positive relations and enhancing intercultural understanding?
- What challenges did participants, facilitators and coordinators face in this Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange pilot project and what improvements could be made.
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the different models of Virtual Exchange being piloted?

A mixed methods approach to the study was adopted. A prepost-exchange survey was developed to measure the impact of EVE on participants, with additional post-exchange questions for participants' satisfaction with the exchange and self-assessment of knowledge, skills and attitude development. Furthermore, qualitative interviews and focus groups were carried out to measure the extent to which participants felt their participation had enhanced their skills, and also to identify challenges that they faced in their exchanges and areas where the activities could be improved. The qualitative data collection also served to reveal aspects which were not captured in the surveys. Facilitators took part in separate focus groups and interviews which were carried out both at the beginning of the pilot project and at the

end of the year. A summary of the findings arising from these is also included in this report.

2.1. Developing a tool for measuring impact

The quantitative measurement tools for impact drew from instruments that the project promoters had already been using, which were based on the research literature that has grown around Virtual Exchange and studying abroad. The post-exchange questions were based on the key performance indicators (KPI) that had been established by the consortium with the support of the Advisory Board on the basis of the aims of the EVE project as defined by the European Commission.

Intercultural Communicative Competence

In order to answer our research question "Did EVE have an impact on participants' perceived effectiveness in intercultural communication?", a tool measuring intercultural communicative competence was needed. Intercultural communicative competence is understood to be "an individual's ability to achieve their communication goal while effectively and appropriately utilizing communication behaviours to negotiate between the different identities present within a culturally diverse environment." (Portalla & Chen, 2010). To measure this competence, Portalla and Chen developed the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale, consisting of 20 items. Given the impossibility of using them all, the two most important factors in relation to the activities were selected, namely Interaction Relaxation and Interaction Management. The interaction element is concerned with the procedural aspects that sustain an interaction and is dependent on continuous concern for the interest and orientations of others within an interaction. As such, it not only measures an aspect of intercultural communicative competence, but also measures a level of interactivity gained throughout the activities.

- I find it is easy to talk with people from different cultures.
- I am able to express my ideas clearly when interacting with people from different cultures.

These items were measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Transversal Skills

The Erasmus Impact Study (Brandenburg, 2014) showed the significance of transversal skills on employability and academic performance. The study used six factors: Tolerance of Ambiguity, Curiosity, Confidence, Serenity, Decisiveness, and Vigour. The Erasmus Impact Study did not provide the items on which this was measured,

but comparable scales are reported in van der Velden, Millner and van der Heijden (2016). As discussed above, measuring all items would be impractical considering the length of the survey, so the two factors deemed most appropriate were selected: curiosity and confidence. Curiosity is defined as the orientation toward seeking novel and challenging objects, events and ideas with the aim of integrating these experiences and information and is also considered as a relation between exploration and absorption (Kashdan et al. 2004). For our purposes the exploration subscale was deemed the most appropriate, as exploration is defined as the orientation toward seeking novel and challenging objects, events and ideas with the aim of integrating these experiences and information. The scale used for this measure is the Curiosity and Exploration Inventory-II (Exploration Subscale) (Kashdan et al. 2004). This factor consists of four items, of which the two highest loading questions were selected.

Confidence is defined as the trust one has in their own competence in the Erasmus Impact study. It is often measured in scales addressing confidence of specific types (Sander & Sanders, 2003). For the purpose of this evaluation, and considering the nature of transversal skills, a more general measure of confidence was sought. The definition of confidence is comparable to the definition of self-esteem, which is defined as a favourable or unfavourable attitude towards the self (Rosenberg, 1965). It was decided to measure self-esteem, instead of confidence, not merely because it allows for more general scales, but also because self-esteem has a well-established relation with academic performance (Lane et al., 2004). The single-item self-esteem scale developed by Robins et al. (2001) was chosen for this purpose.

The following items were therefore selected, the first two measuring curiosity, and the third measuring self-esteem:

- I frequently find myself looking for new opportunities to grow as a person (e.g., information, people, resources).
- Everywhere I go, I am out looking for new things or experiences.
- I have high self esteem

These items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Inter-group Affect

To measure the impact of the activities on the affection of participants towards “the other”, a measure consisting of a “feeling thermometer”, used to assess intergroup negativity (Choma et al., 2012; Paolini et al., 2004; Turner & West, 2012) was employed. As the different activities are aimed at divides across Europe and the Southern Mediterranean, refugees and non-refugees, national divides, to name a few, it was decided that questions would be

adapted on a programme basis, to address the divides within each programme. It became clear however, that comparative analysis of intergroup affect was impossible when measured as such. Since ethnicity and religious background were cleavages present in most programmes, the following questions were added:

- Indicate how “Cold” or “Warm” you feel towards people with a different ethnic background than your own
- Indicate how “Cold” or “Warm” you feel towards people with a different religious background than your own

This was measured on a 10-point Likert scale ranging from Very Cold/Unfavourable to Very Warm/Favourable. As the question was adapted halfway through the implementation of the different activities, it was unfortunately not possible to implement the questions across EVE activities.

In addition to measuring affect in the above stated manner, it was also sought to address the cleavage between participants across the Southern Mediterranean and Europe divide, with a specific focus on relations between youth from countries in those regions, in accordance with EVE objectives.

- I believe that strong relationships between youth in different European and Southern Mediterranean countries are possible

Self-assessment questions

Self-assessment questions are an essential part of post-programme evaluations. A series of questions aligned with the specific objectives of the project were developed and integrated into the post-exchange survey. Other questions were included, including measures of satisfaction with the programme, and interest in further engagement through Virtual Exchange. A full list of the questions is presented below, all of which were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

- I learned something positive about people from other cultures and places that I did not know before participating in this Virtual Exchange.
- I discovered that some of my stereotypes about people from other cultures were not true through participating in this Virtual Exchange.
- I have the confidence to communicate or work in a culturally diverse setting.
- I built positive/meaningful relationships with young people by participating in this Virtual Exchange.
- I have challenged media misrepresentation of other groups since participating in this Virtual Exchange.
- Participating in this Virtual Exchange helped me improve my teamwork and collaborative problem-solving skills.

- Participating in this Virtual Exchange helped me improve my knowledge and/or interest in global events.
- Participating in this Virtual Exchange helped me improve my digital competences (communication & collaboration online, and across cultures).
- Participating in this Virtual Exchange helped me improve my English (French/Arabic) skills.
- Participating in this Virtual Exchange helped me improve my knowledge about the relationship between and across different societies.
- I shared information about what I was learning with my friends and/or other people in my community about my experience in this Virtual Exchange.
- I am glad that I chose to participate in this Virtual Exchange.
- I am interested in having further opportunities to engage in dialogue through Virtual Exchange.
- Participating in this Virtual Exchange increased my interest in physical mobility.

2.2. Data-gathering

Quantitative data

Each project promoter was responsible for gathering the quantitative data for their own projects and anonymised data was transmitted to the M&E team, who analysed the data across the activities. Post-programme questionnaires were sent out after the programme was completed however, as programmes were of different lengths, the time between the pre and post-questionnaire submission differed significantly across activities (from 3 hours to 12 weeks). M&E protocols were set in place to ensure the smooth transfer of data. The table below shows the number of post-programme surveys per activity completed.

Activity	Number of post-programme surveys completed
OFD	1541
TEP	213
AT	220
iOOC	289
Total	2263

iOOC included two types of programmes: newly-designed interactive open online courses and enhanced Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) developed by adding a Virtual Exchange component to already-existing MOOCs. It proved difficult to maintain engagement in this model, which was reflected in the response rate of the post-programme surveys. As such, for the iOOC most data reflects the interactive open online course model, in which courses were designed completely by the consortium, and featured mostly synchronous exchanges.

Qualitative data

Volunteer interviewees were recruited by the project promoters and either put in touch with the M&E team or asked to contact the M&E team directly themselves. Due to changes in scheduling of activities, and challenges in recruiting interviewees after the first rounds of implementation in May/June, the majority of interviews and focus groups were carried out after the second rounds of implementation in the final quarter of the project, leaving less time for analysis of data (see appendix 1 for outlines).

The M&E team interviewed a total of 96 participants from all project activities and the main programmes implemented within these. (For a full list of biodata from interviewees see appendix 2). Additional types of qualitative data were obtained with the consent of participants and 'gate-keepers' (teachers, youth workers, project promoters). Some TEPs participants were asked open questions in the post-exchange survey, while others also produced specifically designed e-portfolios²⁵, which were shared with the M&E team. iOOC participants wrote reflective diaries and papers for some of the different programmes.

While interviews and focus groups were mostly carried out online, the M&E team also held several additional face-to-face and blended focus groups in a large HEI, the University of Padova in Italy. These were carried out to further explore the activity that the majority of overall EVE participants were involved in, Online Facilitated Dialogue. The researchers obtained the informed consent of interviewees through an electronic form. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and subsequently deleted to ensure anonymity. The intention is to follow up with some of these participants in 2019 to gather data for a more longitudinal study, and to carry out in-situ focus groups with participants in at least one large university with a high number of participants in a southern Mediterranean partner university.

Inevitably there was a positive bias in the data gathered, above all due to the fact that it is generally high performing and satisfied participants who volunteer for this type of research. To address this problem and

²⁵ An electronic portfolio (also known as an eportfolio, digital portfolio, or online portfolio) is a collection of electronic evidence assembled and managed by a user, usually on the Web.

to collect useful data for improving the programming and including hard to reach youth in the activities, the M&E team also carried out interviews with VE coordinators and youth workers to explore the issues of student attrition in higher education contexts, and the challenges of engaging youth and youth organisations in Virtual Exchange.

2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out throughout the year for purposes of tracking KPI performance, mostly based on the self-assessment questions asked in the post-exchange surveys. Analysis of the pre- and post-exchange questions took place in June 2018 and January 2019. The data gathered from all activities was collated into a single database, including variables such as the partner and which programme the survey data belonged to.

From the analysis it became clear that the data differs significantly between the different activities. On the self-assessment questions, the data for the TEPs and AT are particularly different from the data for the iOOC and OFDs. This can be explained by the fact that the iOOC and OFDs share many characteristics in terms of length and Virtual Exchange methodology. On the pre- and post-impact data one-way ANOVA analysis shows significant differences between the activities as well. It became clear that the differences between the activities were significant, and statistically modelling these differences to give the most accurate model for EVE as a whole is beyond the scope of this analysis. In order to account for the differences between some of the activities that could not be overcome at this stage, it was decided to report on the data on two levels: EVE wide, if warranted and per activity, if that meant a more correct and precise representation of the numbers. For all analysis, appropriate statistical tests were selected based on the structure of the data.

The interview and focus group data was entered into NVivo, a software tool that supports analysis of qualitative data, and was coded by the researchers who adopted a directed approach to content analysis. The codebook which provides definitions and themes for the codes that were identified can be found in appendix 2.

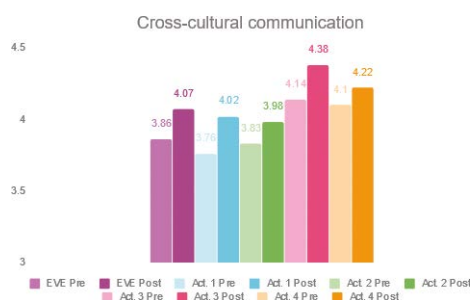
3. Findings

Descriptive statistics show that most of the data for analysis is not distributed normally. The appropriate statistical measures have been taken to compare the results of the pre- and post-programme surveys. Effect sizes will not be reported, as these are dependent upon a normal distribution.

3.1. Evidence of change

Intercultural communicative competences

The tool for measuring intercultural communicative competences was described above. In order to test the construct validity of intercultural communicative competences, the reliability was measured for the results of the pre-programme survey using Cronbach's alpha. The Cronbach's alpha for all activities together is 0.726 (N=4125), which is in the acceptable range. Considering the fact that these items are taken from a well-established scale of Confidence and Effectiveness in Intercultural Communication, the M&E team feels confident in the reliability score. The items for intercultural communicative competences were then combined in order to test the impact of EVE programmes.

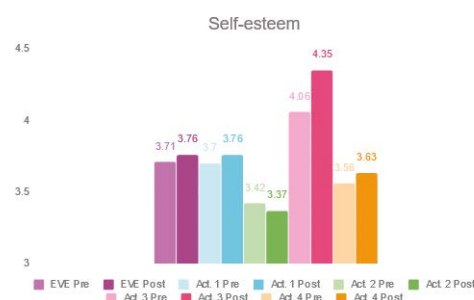


All activities together (N=2130)²⁶ show significant ($p=0.000$) growth with a mean of 3.86 for the pre-programme survey and of 4.07 for the post-programme survey. When individual activities are considered separately, the data no longer follows a normal distribution. A Wilcoxon Signed Rank test was therefore used to determine the impact of the activities, as it is the preferred test for non-parametric ordinal data. Significant growth was observed in OFDs, AT, and iOOC, while the TEPs showed non-significant growth²⁷. An important issue in using this type of tools for intercultural effectiveness is the assumption that a

high increase in perceived effectiveness indicates a positive result. In practice intercultural communication and collaboration is often much more complex than expected and takes time to develop. In line with the Dunning-Kruger effect (Kruger & Dunning, 1999), a limited change in students' self-assessment of this component, or even a reduction, may actually indicate greater awareness of the complexity of the process once they have actually engaged in it for a sustained period rather than the initial, 'idealised' conception of intercultural communication. This may explain the higher increase in Activity 3 which consisted of a single session as compared to the longer exchanges. Furthermore, the post-exchange survey was administered immediately after the activity, and just a few hours after the pre-exchange survey which may have led to a bias in the data as participants may have remembered their initial self-evaluations and thus wittingly indicated change, which is unlikely to be the case for other activities where several weeks passed between evaluations.

Transversal Skills

Self-esteem and curiosity development were measured in order to evaluate the impact of the activities on the development of soft skills related to employability. As self-esteem is measured on a single-item scale the team does not test for construct validity²⁸. For the full programme (N=2,263) significant ($p=0.000$, $Z=-6.337$) growth is once again observed, with a mean of 3.71 for the pre-programme survey and a mean of 3.76 for the post-programme survey²⁹.



As curiosity consists of two items taken from the same scale, its reliability for the pre-programme survey data is once again tested using Cronbach's alpha on the data of all activities (N=4,125). The

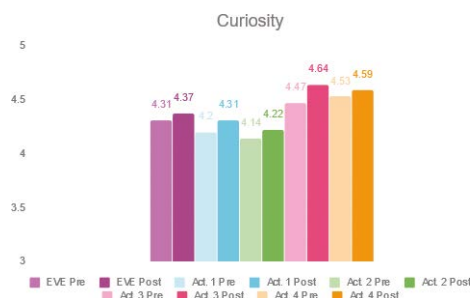
²⁶ All N's reported in this section are the total number of respondents who answered the question on both the pre- and post-questionnaire. Small discrepancies between the N's of activities are present where respondents might have skipped a question.

²⁷ All N's reported in this section are the total number of respondents who answered the question on both the pre- and post-questionnaire. Small discrepancies between the N's of activities are present where respondents might have skipped a question

²⁸ For a discussion of the construct validity, see Robins, Hendin, Trzesnieski (2001).

²⁹ OFDs (N=1541) show significant ($p=0.000$, $Z=-4.563$) growth (mean pre-programme: 3.70; mean post-programme: 3.76). AT(N=220) show significant ($p=0.000$, $Z=-7.565$) growth (mean pre-programme: 4.06; mean post-programme: 4.35). iOOCs (N=289) show significant ($p=0.079$, $Z=-1.756$) growth (mean pre-programme: 3.56; mean post-programme: 3.63). TEPs (N=213) show non-significant ($p=0.767$, $Z=-0.296$) decrease (mean pre-programme: 3.42; mean post-programme: 3.37).

Cronbach's alpha is 0,731, which is an acceptable reliability score, and as these items come from a well-established scale measuring curiosity, the M&E team can be confident that they do measure the same construct.



The two items were then combined into a single measure, and used a Wilcoxon Signed Rank test as the data does not follow a normal distribution. For all activities together (N=2,264) significant ($p=0.000$, $Z=-6.485$) growth is once again seen, with a mean of 4.31 for the pre-programme survey, and a mean of 4.37 for the post-programme survey. Significant growth was observed in OFDs and AT, while iOOCs and TEPs show non-significant growth³⁰.

3.2. Inter-group affect

Intergroup affect was measured to assess whether EVE achieved its aim to increase tolerance through online people-to-people interactions. As was stated in the tool development section, the items for this section were only added into the evaluation during the implementation, and thus data for these questions was only gathered for the TEPs and iOOC. The intergroup affect was measured across two lines, ethnicity and religious background. The first question analysed is the question how cold/unfavourable to warm/very favourable participants felt to people with different ethnic backgrounds than their own. As the data does not follow a normal distribution the team ran a Wilcoxon Signed Rank test. EVE-wide (N=351) there is a slight non-significant ($p=0.840$, $Z=-0.202$) increase with a mean of 8.51 for the pre-programme survey and a mean of 8.57 for the post programme survey³¹. When looking at the activities separately, there is a non-

significant decrease for TEPs and iOOC. The second question related to how cold/unfavourable to warm/very favourable participants felt to people with different religious backgrounds. Once again, the data is not normally distributed, therefore the team used a Wilcoxon Signed Rank test. EVE wide (N=351), there is a slight non-significant ($p=0.484$, $Z=-0.699$) decrease, with a pre-programme mean of 8.30 and a post-programme mean of 8.17. When looking at the activities separately, both the TEPs and iOOC show a slight non-significant decrease³².

Several explanations can be offered for these results, which deviate from the results of the other pre- and post-measures. While a possible interpretation could be that programmes did not have a strong effect on intergroup affect, this is considered unlikely when taking into account some of the results of the questions asked in the post-exchange survey. In particular, the question "I learned something positive about people from other cultures and places that I did not know before participating in this Virtual Exchange", which 72% of the TEP participants and 88% of the iOOC participants agreed or strongly agreed with, and "Participating in this Virtual Exchange helped me improve my knowledge about the relationship between and across different societies" which 74% of TEP participants, and 89% of iOOC participants agreed or strongly agreed with. While these questions are not perfect proxies for the intergroup affect items, they nonetheless relate to it, and it appears unlikely that someone would agree with them and not have a slight increase in favourable feelings towards people with different ethnicities or religious backgrounds. A second explanation can be found in the relatively high starting level of all participants, with 78% and 72% rating their affection at 7 or above for the ethnic background and religious background respectively. It could also be the case that the scale is too precise, especially when compared to the five-point scale used for the other questions. Another indicator that these results might not be representative is participants' belief in strong relationships between European and Southern Mediterranean countries.

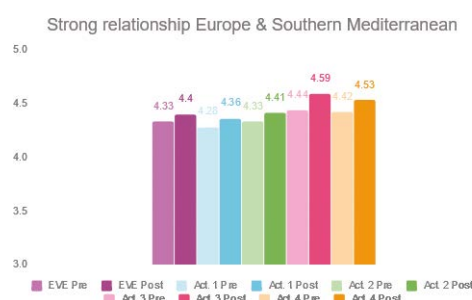
The belief in strong relationships between European and Southern Mediterranean countries is measured to assess whether participants feel increased tolerance across this important cleavage. As this belief is measured on a single-item scale, the M&E team did not test for construct validity. Since the data was once again not normally

30 OFDs (N=1,541) show significant ($p=0.000$, $Z=-5.950$) growth (mean pre-programme: 4.20; mean post-programme: 4.31). AT(N=219) show significant ($p=0.000$, $Z=-5.337$) growth (mean pre-programme: 4.47; mean post-programme: 4.64). iOOCs (N=290) show significant ($p=0.975$, $Z=-0.31$) growth (mean pre-programme: 4.53; mean post-programme: 4.59). TEPs (N=214) show non-significant ($p=0.899$, $Z=-0.127$) growth (mean pre-programme: 4.14; mean post-programme: 4.22).

31 TEPs (N=216) showed a slight non-significant ($p=0.606$, $Z=-0.515$) decrease (mean pre-programme: 8.76; mean post-programme: 8.68). iOOCs (N=135) showed a slight non-significant ($p=0.689$, $Z=-0.400$) increase (mean pre-programme: 8.29; mean post-programme: 8.40).

32 TEPs (N=216) showed a slight non-significant ($p=0.335$, $Z=-9.63$) decrease (mean pre-programme: 8.44; mean post-programme: 8.23). iOOCs (N=135) showed a slight non-significant ($p=0.896$, $Z=-0.165$) decrease (mean pre-programme: 8.17; mean post-programme: 8.09).

distributed, the team ran a Wilcoxon Signed Rank test. For the full programme (N=2,109) significant ($p=0.001$, $Z=-3.195$) growth is again observed, with a mean of 4.33 for the pre-programme survey and a mean of 4.40 for the post-programme survey. When analysed separately, OFDs, AT, and iOOC showed significant growth, while a non-significant increase could be observed in TEPs³³. Thus, a form of increased tolerance can be observed among EVE participants, specifically a belief that the cleavage between Europe and the Southern Mediterranean can be overcome.



Overview

In this section, it has become clear that EVE has, at least partially succeeded in its stated aims of encouraging intercultural dialogue, through improving participant confidence and effectiveness in intercultural communication. It has also succeeded in its aim to foster soft skill development, evidenced by the increases in self-esteem and curiosity. An increase in tolerance was not shown through these measures, but this does not necessarily mean it was not present, as is evidenced by the participants agreeing and strongly agreeing in overwhelming numbers that they learned something positive about people from other places and cultures that they did not know before. A significant increase in the belief in strong relations between European and Southern Mediterranean countries was also observed, indicating at least a form of increased tolerance among participants.

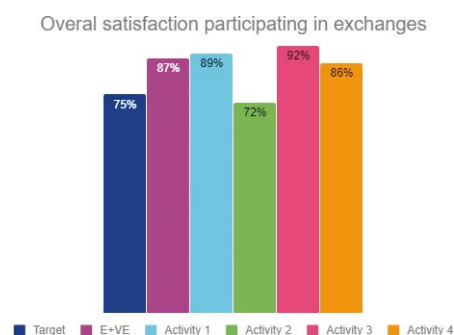
3.3. Participant evaluation of activities and impact

In the previous section we reported on impact by comparing scores on pre- and post-exchange questionnaire items. We now turn to participant evaluations of their experience and their perceptions of the outcomes of the exchanges through analysis of responses to

the post-exchange survey questions. This data is triangulated with the qualitative data gathered through focus groups, interviews and some of the diaries, e-portfolios and reflective papers generated by participants in OFD, TEPs and iOOCs.

A new positive, international and intercultural experience

Overall, respondents evaluated their EVE experience highly, with the majority of participants across all activities agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement "I am glad that I chose to participate in this Virtual Exchange". The overall response was well above the target established by the consortium and advisory board. It is worth pointing out that not all participants 'chose' to participate, for many (all in TEPs) it was a mandatory activity integrated into courses which highlights the positive nature of the overall results.



Virtual exchange was a new experience for almost all of the interviewees, many of which underscored its difference from other experiences they had on social media and also from their university or daily life experiences. The novelty factor varied for different interviewees: in some cases, it was because of the people they met through the exchange, for others it was the type of interactions that they had extended interactions mediated through technology on topics they do not necessarily discuss in their everyday lives:

- It is a kind of communication I don't experience in real life. In general it was very different compared to the conversations I have with other friends. (Female, German, 22, OFD)
- We discussed about gender issues and inequalities. And the situation in our countries. In the real life I don't talk about gender issues with my friends. (Male, Italy, 24, OFD)
- I never have had to work on a whole project and carry out a presentation with others with our sole interactions being over a

³³ OFDs (N=1,541) show significant ($p=0.036$, $Z=-2.096$) growth (mean pre-programme: 4.28; mean post-programme: 4.36). AT(N=219) show significant ($p=0.000$, $Z=-3.969$) growth (mean pre-programme: 4.44; mean post-programme: 4.59). iOOCs (N=135) show significant ($p=0.083$, $Z=-1.732$) growth (mean pre-programme: 4.42; mean post-programme: 4.53). TEPs (N=214) show non-significant ($p=0.868$, $Z=-0.167$) increase (mean pre-programme: 4.33; mean post-programme: 4.41).

screen and technology. In addition I have never worked on something with nearly every person being from a different country and university. (Female, Ireland, 21, TEP)

- Several respondents mentioned that through the Virtual Exchange they interacted with people who they 'would not normally meet'.
- it is the first time I met people from those countries. I didn't have clue about Libya, Tunisia. (Male, Italy, 24, OFD)
- This experience challenged our communication skills, and helped us through time to improve it. Also we gained new friends, very different from us and still I managed to cope with them easily, I learned to be more open to differences than I already am. (Female, Tunisia, 21, TEP)

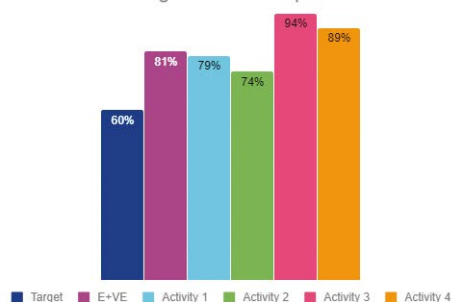
This illustrates that these exchanges are indeed seen as intercultural and international experiences by the participants, in line with the aims of Virtual Exchange set out in the beginning of this report. A number of participants also mentioned how they were slightly anxious at the beginning or felt shy as it is difficult speaking to people that they did not know. The facilitators were often mentioned as being key to making the participants feel comfortable in their online interactions with their peers and supporting them in their interactions with their peers.

- Before I would be scared a bit, I wouldn't feel that natural, and comfortable, but later I felt that it was like talk, about being engaged in the debates in the lectures. I personally was helped by this experience. (Female, Palestine, 20, AT)
- I appreciated the facilitator work. The bottom up approach fostered our interest about the topics. We tackled cultures, identity, family, religion, love, social media. The facilitator had to be really good to let the conversation start. (Male, Italy, 23, OFD)

Understanding relationships between societies

The majority of respondents indicated that they had developed greater understanding of the relationships between societies.

Increased knowledge of relationship between societies



Different activities addressed different types of knowledge, relationships and societies. OFD addressed above all the relationship between 'western' societies and predominantly Muslim societies and the groups were constructed in such a way as to include participants

from the different societies. Knowledge was constructed by participants through the dialogue sessions, using a learner-led and experiential learning approach.

- When I began this project I had an idea that scared me a bit. I thought I would have found people that are not progressive as I am, especially in reference to women rights. Everyone of us, despite their opinions, was discussing about how to change wrong habits, this helped demolishing stereotypes I had in my mind. Another example, when I talked about hejab that could be a free choice, that helped me to challenge this idea in the West that it is always something imposed. (Female, Italy, 21, OFD)
- As the participants were coming from different societies, there were both people from other Arab countries and other countries. For example, people growing up they have to move or stay with their families, in Italy they stay with their families, which is the same like us here and in the Arab region. For me this was new. (Male, Libya, 23, OFD)

IOOC addressed different themes, including the relationship between non-refugees and refugees in European society, newcomers and nationalisms, and in one programme addressed the negative relationships as expressed through hate speech. Interviewees and participants talked about the knowledge they acquired through the videos that were made available as well as through the facilitated interactions.

- it was a good experience, it is well prepared, especially the video lectures, they were helpful to discover the field, I am taking classes in immigration policies and this experience helped me a lot. (Female, Turkey/France, 22, iOOC)
- I can safely say that discussing Nationalism has made me really think about what it means to be a nationalist for example in my country where it is seen as a positive thing vs in Germany where nationalism is frowned upon because it is too closely associated with the Nazi party during the twentieth century. I feel proud of my country but will be more sensitive about how I voice it to people who come from a culture outside my own (Female, Ireland, 19, iOOC)

TEPs were generally bilateral though some had more countries involved. Participants exchanged information on specific topics, such as education systems, historic events and attitudes towards them, or more general cultural topics.

- I learned so much about our French partners culture, the way they behave and the way they perceive things (Female, Tunisia, 21, TEP)
- The difference between systems made it necessary to explain each other how different study programmes are. (Male, Germany, 20, TEP)

A few participants from exchanges that were intra-European or between countries from Southern Mediterranean countries felt

there was not much diversity between their societies and not a lot to discuss.

In AT, participants became aware of different perspectives about the debate topics, which allowed them to learn more about relationships between societies.

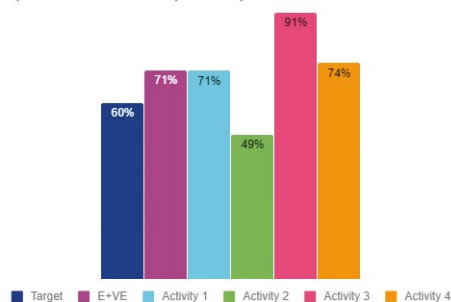
- Because the other people were from Jordan, it was not that mind broadening, but it is always good to meet other people, even of they live this close. You understand how things go differently in other country, this is eyes opening. For example, I lived very different experiences compared to refugees in Jordan. Here it is not difficult to study and find a job for a refugee, this is not the case in Jordan. This was the topic of one of the debates. This opened my eyes about how it is difficult for a refugee to find a job and daily got educated. (Female Palestinian, 20, AT)

This section thus shows, that although the intergroup affect measure proved to be ineffective, participants did indeed show increased tolerance, and many of them connected this directly their exposure to intercultural dialogue.

Building positive relationships

Intercultural dialogue is most effective when it is maintained, as a single good experience might fade, but prolonged exposure can lead to true change. The extent to which participants built meaningful relationships through the programmes was therefore assessed. Most of the survey respondents reported building positive relations with young people during the Virtual Exchanges, and overall the result was well above the 60% target. Nonetheless, as the graph below shows, there was considerable diversity between the different activities. Debate exchanges appears to be a positive outlier, which might reflect the participants' entry into the 'honeymoon phase' of intercultural development, a common reaction to initial cross-cultural contact where participants have a romanticised view of other cultures and their engagement with them.

Built positive relationships with peers from different countries



Some of the participants from OFD and iOOC activities talked about how they built their relationships over time, as it stated it was not

easy initially talking to strangers online, people they did not know, from different contexts. A considerable number of the interviewees mentioned also connecting on social media with some of their group members after the end of the project. Many participants also reflected on the time required to build a positive relationship.

- At the start I had my doubts about the exchange and its effectiveness at breaking down cultural barriers and engaging with difference. More so because the program was offered in an academic environment, with the prospect of educational credits at the end. Hence, at the beginning, my aim was purely functional to the attainment of the credits. My assumptions crumbled after one or two sessions. In general, my experience with virtual exchange was fantastic. I met people from all over the world and, although we could not be physically close to each other, we developed some kind of friendship. (Male, Italy, 23, OFD)
- Even if we were in a virtual exchange, there were good relationships between all of us, that's why we have decided to continue our commitment, we are trying to develop some ideas, now we did a group on Facebook. (Female, Italy, 30, iOOC)
- It was interesting, I met very nice people, serious people, who cares about details, about human issues, I feel better because the people are showing respect, we are still friends and we talk, time to time. (Male, Libya, 23, OFD)
- When we started our session on the forth and the last week we were all bittersweet because we could feel that we managed to build a strong connection between us, even though we were meeting only one time a week (Female, Russia/Italy, 22, OFD)

For some of the participants the interactions with their peers were also emotional and enriching experiences, which highlights the quality of the relationships they were building. A few interviewees mentioned planning to meet or actually meeting one another.

- it was a really good experience, we are still keeping in contact, I am happy to meet some of the people who were in my group, I was the only refugee in my group, I was especially interested in knowing how natives would see us, to hear about their opinion about this refugee crisis, so it was a very good opportunity, it is very emotional as I said, we are still in contact through a Facebook group, I am planning to see them anytime soon (Male, Germany/Nigeria, 27, iOOC)

A notable difference regards TEPs, in which considerably fewer respondents reported building positive relationships. This difference could be ascribed in part to the aims and also implementation modes of the different projects. OFD and some iOOC activities have relationship building and dialogue as the main focus of the projects, and participants have intense 2-hour dialogue sessions, which are the principle activity, sustained over a period of time (from 4 weeks to 10 weeks). TEPs, on the other hand, while also sustained

over time (on average 6 weeks), depend mostly on asynchronous communication which lacks the immediacy of synchronous exchanges and might therefore be perceived as less engaging. Furthermore, they were mostly integrated into academic courses, and focused on collaboration rather than on relationship building. The fact that students had to depend on one another to complete activities led to frustration in some cases, particularly when there were differences in communication patterns or difficulties in establishing when and 'where' to meet.

- It was with people from all over the world which was interesting, but made it hard to plan and schedule when we could work. I had to depend more on other people to do their part, which unfortunately not everyone did. In that sense it was more stressful. On the other hand, the content was more open and less controlled. (Female, Sweden, 24, TEP)

A TEP may be unsettling for the participants since it requires them to take responsibility for their learning and collaboration, and also makes them dependent on their international peers. In this sense, this model of exchange may be more suitable for participants who know how to and want to be in charge of their learning. Some of the TEP interviewees highlighted the fact that their objectives were to complete the activities they had been assigned by their teachers which required them to collaborate with peers but said they did not have interest or time for interactions which went beyond this activity. The majority, however, expressed a desire for more social interactions and engagement with their peers on intercultural issues, and several said they would have liked more facilitated sessions, and to have these sessions at the beginning of their exchanges.

Engaging with difference

Analysis of the qualitative data revealed different ways of engaging with difference and increased intercultural sensitivity, which has been defined as the "active desire to motivate themselves to understand, appreciate, and accept differences among cultures" (Chen & Starosta, 1998:231), and thus relates directly to stated aims of increasing intercultural communication and tolerance. It has also been defined as the ability to make complex distinctions among patterns of culture. While this was not explicitly tested beyond self-report, evidence of increased intercultural sensitivity may be found in many of the participants' comments and reflections. This is important because it is a prerequisite for increasing tolerance and reducing prejudice.

Several interviewees talked about surprise, while acknowledging assumptions they had made and reflecting on their origins. Others talked about reflecting on themselves, their own cultures, how they interact with others and the impact it had on them. This indicated

how the EVE experience had moved participants out of their comfort zones and fostered reflection on how engaging with others could also influence them.

- It was very eminent to notice that despite my ideas about the habits of people coming from Arab countries, the Tunisians ones, are really like our vision of life. I.e. there was a girl coming from the capital city of Tunisia who was studying at the university of Engineering with excellent outcomes. This fact gets totally my attention because of our hard preconceptions about the conditions of women's in those countries. A common prejudice fashioned on too reductive medias news. (Male, Italy, 23, OFD)
- As the participants were coming from different societies, there were both people from other Arab countries and other countries. For example, people growing up they have to move or stay with their families, in Italy they stay with their families, which is the same like us here and in the Arab region. For me this was new. (Male, Libya, 23, OFD)
- It makes you patient, you have to reflect on everything for a week. You need time to sit back and think about what happened. It explains my behaviors, why I said that, I tried to understand myself too. (Female, Iran/Italy, 24, iOOC)
- My takeaway from all the sessions is many-sided. I learnt how to cope with difference. I learnt how to work in a multinational team. I learnt we all strive for connection. I learnt asking personal questions is way less rude than assuming similarities. I learnt it takes a fair amount of courage to put yourself out there. (Male, Italy, 23, OFD)

Other interviewees recognised having explored further, while mentioning a need to be polite for fear of offending 'others' who are defined in broad categories like 'Muslim people'.

- I was open and polite, especially with Muslim people. We were discussing about sex before marriage. There were participants from Egypt, Morocco and Pakistan, they could have considered it as a potential threat, but they were open to answer to my questions. (Male, Italy, 23, OFD)
- In Russia we have a lot of Muslim people. I consider it normal. I try to be careful when I speak with girls from the ME. I try to be not offensive. They might be more conservatives. We had a girl from the region but other people were not asking questions (Female, Russia/Italy, 22, OFD)
- This experience was different than the other university experiences because I had the opportunity to talk with people from different backgrounds and beliefs. This experience challenged our communication skills, and helped us through time to improve it. Also we gained new friends, very different from us and still I managed to cope with them easily, I learned to be more open to differences than I already am. (Female, Tunisia, 21, TEP)

In some of the comments made by participants there was an ethnocentric stance, whereby they were judging 'others' by their own standards as to what is normal or not, and they made assumptions about behaviours without appearing to have explored them further;

- A girl was wearing a nikab. She never spoke, just wrote in the chat box. It was strange to see a girl of our age taking away her rights. (Female, Italy, 25, OFD)
- One of the participants was an app developer, I don't know how many in Libya do this. There was a girl who didn't want to show her face. It was strange. (Male, Italy, 24, OFD)

Listening was mentioned by several participants in the focus groups and in reflective papers from participants in the online facilitated dialogues. Listening is an important part of engaging with difference and also empathic understanding. Several interviewees mentioned the design of the platform and how it supported listening, but also the process of dialogue and how they learnt through the facilitators;

- We used to drive the conversation. You have to wait for the other person, don't have to interrupt, this makes you listening. In my group there was a Tunisian girl, she had all the time to express herself and we had to respond. (Male, Egypt, 21, OFD)
- Not being able to interrupt one another in the group chat also contributes to an even power dynamic. Usually I am a very talkative person and probably am a more dominant contributor to a conversation. I also sometimes catch myself interrupting someone in real life, because there is something I really want to say. Often then I only realize afterwards how disrespectful and impolite that was. Therefore, I was happy that I could train my listening skills in this conversation because I really didn't want to be rude. The facilitator also did a great job at trying to encourage everybody to contribute to the conversation, not only the ones who would naturally do so. (Female Germany/Italy, 22, OFD)
- For example, during the online meeting sessions, the members of the group (individuals from Finland, Morocco, Tunisia, Italy and Nigeria) learned about the "inner voice" or self-talk and how this might affect the ability to listen deeply and understand different perspectives. Such a capacity is fundamental to maintain a positive dialogue on-line. (Female, Italy, 23, OFD)

Employability and Skill-building

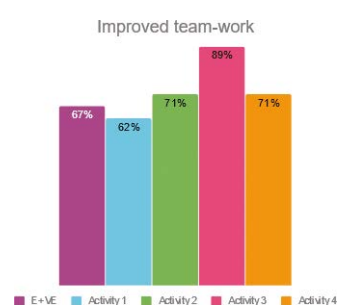
Employability skills have already been addressed in the section on evidence of change, but multiple measures were included in the self-assessment questions as well. Participants reported developing skills directly related to employability and noted how their Virtual Exchange offered them a 'real world' experience, different from other university experiences. Employability skills comprise both generic, transversal competences such as the ability to work in a diverse workplace,

language and communication skills, digital competences, teamwork and problem solving as well as specific competences and knowledge which are relevant for different fields.

Having the confidence to work in culturally diverse settings is regarded as an important attribute in terms of employability, and was evaluated very positively across all project activities, with 91% of participants agreeing they had such confidence.

- This experience was different than the other university experiences because I had the opportunity to talk with people from different backgrounds and beliefs. This experience challenged our communication skills, and helped us through time to improve it. Also we gained new friends, very different from us and still I managed to cope with them easily, I learned to be more open to differences than I already am. (Female, Tunisia, N.A. TEP).

67% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that participating in the exchange had helped them improve teamwork and collaborative problem-solving skills. The ability to work in teams was developed across all projects, as all of them required participants to collaborate with their peers, albeit in different ways. Teamwork was often found to be challenging, as many of the interviewees and participants mentioned, particularly when they relied on their teams to complete assignments, as was the case in several activities and programmes. But this is precisely why teamwork was included in the design of the exchanges.



The organisation and implementation of AT was widely considered to contribute to team building skills by participants. In the interviews one of the debate leaders said:

- To debate with others and take part in the group with people from different countries, it is a good opportunity to enhance your abilities, your team work, to be a good member, an active member in the team. I also found interesting to distribute the tasks for the other members of the team, it was very easy doing interactions with the others. (Male, Palestine, 26, AT)

TEP participants were required in many cases to collaborate intensively with partners or in small groups in order to complete specific tasks,

and without the successful collaboration with their peers they would not be able to complete assignments. Often communication and collaboration within their groups occurred outside of their regular study times and they had to organise this themselves. In particular, choosing which tools all felt comfortable with to organise their group work and finding a time when all group members could meet caused tensions for participants in some of the TEPs. The cultural diversity within the teams, even intra-European groups was also found to be a challenge by some participants.

- Different schedules, different needs, different interests makes it hard to get team to work together in the same objectives (Female, Finland, N.A., TEP)
- Fact that every member came from a different cultural background meant that range of challenges faced and unique nature of project was amplified. (Male, Ireland, 23, TEP)

Yet it is only in facing these challenges of finding the right tool for communication and dealing with cultural difference that participants can acquire these skills. Most of the respondents did in fact acknowledge the real-world value of this experience.

- Well firstly it was hard to manage time with others from different places and countries, harder to schedule and work. Of course it feel more really in context of communication in real work. (Female, Czech Republic, 24, TEP)
- I learned so much about our French partners culture, the way they behave and the way they perceive things. I gained more confidence when I communicate, I learned to be more open minded about other things and to be more understanding. Also team work is so beneficial and motivating despite some difficulties we faced. In my opinion this will help me and my friends to cope easily with different situations that we may face in the future. (Female, Tunisia, 21, TEP)

These findings regarding the difficulties participants faced in transnational and online collaborative group work are corroborated by research studies which have found that students tend to prefer working with peers from similar cultural groups (Moore et al, 2015; Mittelmeier et al. 2016). It could be argued that there is a need for more direction in organising participants into groups and selecting the tools for them, as indeed is the case in other EVE activities (OFD, iOOC and AT), where participants are assigned groups, timetables and use the assigned platform. However, as several TEP coordinators pointed out, it is also important for participants to negotiate their team communications, as this will help them acquire the skills that will be required of them when

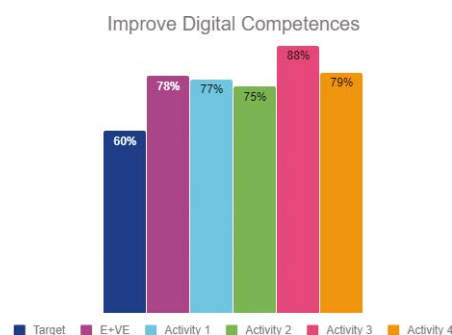
they enter employment. This difficulty in collaborating with distant peers was also experienced by participants in other activities.

- The only problem was when we had an assigned group of people, we had to prepare for a debate, it was really hard to have a convenient time for all the participants, the other problem is that we don't live in the same place, so we have to meet online and some people generally, for instance I had a pre-training for the debate and some people were not attending because they did not have stable internet connection and this made not possible for them to be trained for the actual debate. (Male, Algeria, N.A. AT)

One of the OFD programmes, Connect Collaborate, was found to be more challenging than the other dialogue programmes precisely because of this. The collaborative structure required everyone's presence and the coordinators suggested that it was best suited to more committed or mature participants.

Digital literacies and communication skills

One of the stated aims of EVE is to enhance the media literacy of participants. Specific focus is given in this section to the effect of EVE on digital media literacy. Through overcoming their fear and the challenges they faced, participants reported that they felt more confident about their abilities both in terms of digital literacies and intercultural communication. The European Commission's Digicomp framework³⁴ establishes a set of sub-skills in terms of digital competences, and Virtual Exchange specifically addresses online communication and collaboration. As amply discussed above, the type of communication participants were having online was quite different from other forms of online interaction and they became aware of this, thus understanding the importance and relevance of context in establishing what is appropriate communication³⁵.



³⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/digcomp/digital-competence-framework>

³⁵ 2.1 Interacting through digital technologies: To interact through a variety of digital technologies and to understand appropriate digital communication means for a given context.

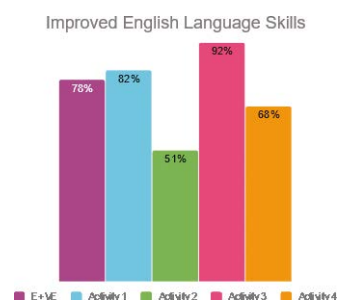
I did learn digital competences. Before I only had Instagram. With virtual exchange I had to use camera and talk. (Male, Egypt, 20, OFD)

- The big difference was that we did never meet in person and had to do everything virtually. In the beginning, conversation was rather difficult between the team members because we did not know each other and have not had common themes like being from the same university in the beginning. However, we developed as a team over time and over the weeks I could see a real progress in our team dynamics and reliability on team members that I had not seen in face-to-face teams before. (Female, German, 22, TEP)
- I was also doing some Skype interviews, I was in touch with organizations in Jordan and in London that wanted to collaborate with us and for sure it improved my digital skills, and I started to use two different platforms that I didn't know before Zoom. So, yes, as for my digital skills it was an improvement. (Male, Turkey, 29, AT)
- And it was beneficial for all participants. We all wanted to improve our communication skills. And our online virtual communication. It helped a lot, I think I had only one experience of doing virtual communication, it was in Finland, this is the second one, it is good that we can communicate from our desk, and from our room, this is really interesting. (Male, Morocco, 25, OFD)

The different models of Virtual Exchange, and the sub-programmes within activities supported the development of more specific digital competences. For example, the Connect Collaborate Programme had participants collaborate in the production of a poster addressing a global issue (competence 3.1 digital content creation), one TEP had participants collaborate in the design of teaching materials using specific technologies, another had participants collaborate in drafting a document³⁶. As mentioned above, teamwork online was challenging for many of these participants, but it was in facing and overcoming these challenges, which were often related to issues of digital competence, that participants learnt, and this is reflected in both the qualitative and quantitative data.

- It improved my digital skills. We had assignments to do, we had to do research, write them and share with the group. (Male, Tunisia, N.A. OFD)

Language skills



Improving their English language skills was an important result for many participants as it was considered an important employability skill. The fact that participants were interacting with peers in an authentic context was significant for them, as their focus was on the messages they wished to transmit rather than the accuracy of the form, which seemed to reduce their anxiety as they saw their messages were being understood and responded to by their peers. The percentage for TEPs is particularly low because some of the exchanges used other languages, a high number of respondents were native English speakers and from countries where English proficiency is high³⁷. When looking at the data, this pattern clearly holds up across activities as well. When divided into participants from E+ countries and Southern Mediterranean countries, there is a clear difference between the two groups, 71% of participants from E+ countries agree or strongly agree that the programme improved their English skills, while 86% of participants from South Mediterranean countries agree or strongly agree. This effect is more pronounced in the TEPs, as slightly under 7% of their respondents on this question are from Southern Mediterranean countries.

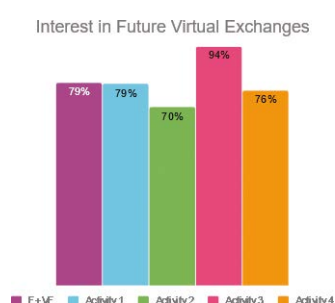
- I learned from other participants how to break the wall of speaking in another language, English is a second language in my country and it is difficult to speak English with people, they speak Arabic here. (Male, Jordan, 20, AT)
- I think that it is good to use English even if it is not the first language of the participants, if you don't use English wouldn't be that challenging. English gives you access to sources and terms facilitating the access to sources, I think this is good, more than if we only use our first language. (Female, Palestine, 20, AT)
- It was difficult to understand native speakers. We discussed about it. Some have never been in an international context, they were not used to discuss without a strong accent. (Female, Italy, 24, OFD)
- English for our group truly was a global language which allowed

³⁶ 2.4 Collaborating through digital technologies: To use digital tools and technologies for collaborative processes, and for co-construction and co-creation of resources and knowledge.

³⁷ These participants strongly disagreed with the question thus lowering the overall percentage.

people from 7 different countries to express their opinions and share their views. Since we all have a sufficient language level, we did not struggle that much with the language barrier. However, it was easy to notice some imbalance of power among the group members. Some people are just more talkative by nature, while others, like me, more reserved, so they tend to listen more than to speak. Sometimes it is also seen how some people are more passionate about the present topic, and in that way, they participate in the conversation more than their less engaged counterparts. (Female, Russia/Italy, 22, OFD)

Activation



In a society which, as mentioned in the rationale for this project, seems to be characterised by increased polarisation and ‘contact avoidance’, developing positive relationships with those who are different from ourselves and actively seeking opportunities for further engagement can be seen as important markers of activation. As seen above, many respondents reported positive relationships, which for some led to continuing interactions through other channels of communication once their exchanges had finished or even to travelling or studying abroad. How long they continue to interact is beyond the scope of the present study but will certainly be worth exploring in a longitudinal study. Some of the activities explicitly discussed activation with the participants, and the participants’ comments expressed a strong desire to contribute to change in society.

- It is a good way to share cultures, with people that have a common ground. It pushes you to talk to other people without fears. [...] Next time I will travel out of Egypt. It is easier to communicate with technologies. It is not a like face-to-face conversation. It is a first step in doing inter-cultural experiences. When I travel now there is more interests in finding out about countries cultures. It opened my eyes. (Male, Egypt, 20, OFD)
- Completing this course leaves me motivated to do more research on hate speech instances in a local context, and find targeted ways of dealing with them taking examples from the videos we watched. (Female, Cyprus, 25, iOOC)

The vast majority of respondents reported sharing information about what they were learning with their friends and/or other people in their

communities. This is an important indicator of participant activation as it expands the impact of the activity beyond the participants who were directly involved to the broader communities. In some activities (OFD and iOOC) this sharing of information was partly built into some of the exchanges, as participants were required to interview members of their community for a videologue project or a joint research project. Over 85% of respondents across EVE reported sharing information with people in their communities. The participants further reported not simply sharing what they learned, but reported challenging media misrepresentation, with 64% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they had done so since the beginning of the programme. This indicates that they not only engaged their offline community in their learning but did so in a critical manner.

Interviews and focus groups with participants were carried out too close to the end of the project to understand whether participants’ reported activation beyond telling other members of their community actually materialised. While they expressed interest in further engaging with Virtual Exchange, or in learning more about global issues and taking action, it is not possible to know as of yet whether they actually will.

The growing EVE facilitator community will be one of the indicators of this type of activation in the near future. Understanding the motivations that drive facilitators, and the work that they do, provides a good idea of what activation can in fact lead to.

Overview

Participant feedback is mostly very positive across all activities. The TEPs show lower scores (though by no means negative) on the participant feedback for some of the survey items, which can likely be explained by the fact that their participants were mostly required to take the course, thereby eliminating selection bias of both enrolment (as the other activities participants were mostly free to take part or not), and on the post-programme survey (where at the other activities unsatisfied participants might have already dropped the course). Also, in the TEP activities participants had to take on more responsibility in negotiating communication tools and times with their partners for collaborative project work. The other exchange formats arranged meeting places and times for participants’ interactions and supported them in relationship building with more sustained support of facilitators. According to the feedback received, participants do overall view the exchanges as a true intercultural and international experience that had positive effect on their soft skill development, their media literacy, and improved their language skills.

3.4. Perspectives from the EVE Facilitator Community

As the facilitators are transversal to EVE and involved in three of the activities and have been engaging with a large number of participants, their insights into the progress of the exchanges is fundamental. Since the facilitator community is key to the sustainable development of quality Virtual Exchange in the future, it is important for us to understand what motivates facilitators, what keeps them engaged and how they would like to see the facilitator community grow.

Several focus groups were carried out, with a total of 12 facilitators, 6 of whom participated in two rounds. The first round of focus groups explored how participants were progressing in the exchanges that were being implemented, whether the facilitators were seeing evidence of change and if there were any major challenges. The second round of focus groups, carried out in December 2018, aimed at exploring a wider range of facilitation experiences since some new programmes had been introduced. Facilitators were asked if they found any challenges related to the upscaling of the programmes, and how they perceived the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange facilitator community after one year of EVE.

Most facilitators had engaged in Virtual Exchange as part of their studies and were now working in a range of fields, (e.g. aid worker, university lecturer, youth worker, ...) or were students at post-graduate level as well as being facilitators. They had facilitated multiple groups in the course of 2018 and some were facilitation fellows, others were senior facilitators. One of the facilitators highlighted that many facilitators become involved when they are still students some may stop facilitation for a few years as they begin to work or engage in other activities but are often drawn back into this activity as opportunities arise, or their lifestyles allow for this type of activity.

Motivating factors

Several themes emerged in response to the question “what drives you as facilitators and makes you come back to facilitation?”. Some of the facilitators, in particular those who live in more homogeneous environments and have few opportunities to travel, view the opportunity to engage with a diverse group of people from a wide range of backgrounds and contexts as a strong motivating factor. The opportunity to support participants in engaging in dialogue about issues which are not usually talked about in everyday conversations is also a stimulating factor.

One of the driving forces was what was called ‘the tangibility of change’ in the coding scheme. Most of the facilitators said they had experienced Virtual Exchange as a transformative experience when they were participants, and it was the feeling that they were making a

difference, and witnessing this transformation in the participants that motivated them to continue facilitating

- “So why I facilitate is because I see the change I feel how the world is connected and how small it is and I like helping others to have that amazing wonderful feeling that makes me happy at least, and yeah this feeling of connection” (Female, Sweden)
- “It’s really great when you can be part of a change of someone else and at the same time you feel the change in your life” (Female, Morocco)
- Though the facilitators come from a range of backgrounds and life experiences, what is striking is the core values that they share their belief in the power of dialogue, of exchange to make the world a better place; for several it is conceived of almost as a ‘mission’. In the analysis of the first round of focus groups the team also found a sense of facilitation being a ‘compelling’ experience, something that the facilitators have difficulty keeping away from and which is constantly on their minds.
- “A humanitarian duty making the world a better place” (Male, Egypt).
- “And I found myself thinking about it even in another part of my life, [...] I’m working on a really separate thing but then I just got an idea how to make interaction in my group more meaningful and so yeah it made me think of new ways on how to really to see the impact of this experience on the students, so that’s why I’m loving it and I can’t help myself getting” (Female, Tunisia)

The second round of focus groups with OFD facilitators confirmed this motivation and dedication to the ideals and values of dialogue facilitation through Virtual Exchange. These appear to be much stronger motivating factors than the facilitator stipend or the Erasmus+ badges. A tension was also highlighted between the intense engagement during the semesters when exchanges are being implemented and the lack of activity when there are no exchanges taking place one of the facilitators used the metaphor of ‘withdrawal symptoms’.

All facilitators had been facilitating more than one group and found that their groups were very different from one another, each with its own dynamics and challenges. This heterogeneity across groups was not perceived as a problem but was on the contrary one of the driving forces for the facilitators. Indeed, they said it was precisely the unexpected factor brought by each group that led to their personal learning, for they had to find ways to creatively address the dynamics of the different groups and found that what worked for one group would not necessarily work for another.

Engagement and retention factors

The opportunities for professional development and growth offered through the facilitator community, as well as the support mechanisms, are deemed important and highly valued by those interviewed. These are one of the key factors which keep facilitators engaged in

facilitation. Virtual Exchange offers an opportunity to learn – from the experience of facilitation, from the participants in their groups and also from the facilitator community.

Learning was acquired from their peers as well as through the structured opportunities for professional development that are offered to facilitators. Another important element of the professional development is the different levels of engagement: from facilitator to senior facilitator and fellow, and the activities of observation, coaching and training which are seen to open a wide range of opportunities for growth.

With Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, the opportunity to facilitate for different types of activities is also of interest as this also expands their growth as facilitators. They also considered the focus group itself as an opportunity for professional growth and community building.

Facilitator community-building and cross-fertilisation

Some facilitators expressed a desire for more social engagement between semesters, and the ‘soft side’ of the community. They felt that, particularly with the increased pressure due to the growth of the programme, there was little time to get to know other facilitators and build relationships, and that more could be done for community-building between the implementation of the programmes. They did realise that this would require more resources, and that not all facilitators would necessarily be interested in this.

Some facilitators underscored the need to engage in social interactions with the community, because their facilitation role requires them to remain multi-partial and not express viewpoints during dialogue sessions. Since the topics are of interest to them, they would also like to engage in dialogue about these issues with this global community, in order to develop their own knowledge and understanding of the issues at stake.

A strong sense of community was highlighted within the different activities, but a cohesive EVE-wide facilitator community will need to be reinforced. While there was a better understanding of the EVE project at the end of the year than in April 2018 when the first focus groups were carried out, they felt that there was not yet a strong transversal Erasmus+ community of facilitators. Opportunities to facilitate for different activities were not yet clear to all of them but there was a strong interest in supporting the further development of an EVE facilitator community, excitement about the potential for more cross-fertilisation across projects and exchanging experience with facilitators from other activities.

Several factors led to an increased understanding of the broader EVE project, including the focus groups themselves. The facilitator training programmes were seen as particularly important for cross-fertilisation,

and led the facilitators interviewed to understand more about the implications of EVE. Trainee facilitators in the second half of the year were EVE participants from all four EVE activities who shared their experience with other trainees. EVE facilitators previously involved in more than one activity also play an important role in sharing information to the broader facilitator community and are providing valuable input in the development of further training materials across EVE activities. They will be key in the future as they have a nuanced understanding of the opportunities and challenges of the different activities and can offer important advice on training enhancement.

OFD is the activity which has the highest number of facilitators, followed by the iOOC. Facilitators who ran the sessions for TEPs all had experience of facilitating for either OFD or iOOCs. This pilot project also saw the introduction of online facilitated sessions in TEPs, which are predominantly asynchronous Virtual Exchanges developed by partner teachers or youth organisations. This experimentation of a new approach was deemed successful by the facilitators involved and most of the participants, and can hence be seen as a successful cross-fertilisation between activities. While this added to the development of the facilitator community, it did not come without difficulties. Challenges included establishing the aims of the sessions with educators and youth workers, clarifying roles, educators wanting to participate in the facilitated sessions, logistical difficulties in establishing timetables and groups.

3.5. Challenges and tensions

The challenges reported by participants were also explored, as well as those mentioned by facilitators, Virtual Exchange coordinators and youth workers since there is convergence on many areas.

Connectivity

One of the issues participants repeatedly mentioned was that of connectivity. This did not only affect those who were directly experiencing this issue but also those with whom they were supposed to be interacting. Whilst this raised awareness of inequalities in terms of access to Internet, as mentioned by several participants, it is one of the major barriers to the implementation of Virtual Exchange as an inclusive practice.

- At that time my internet connection was very bad. So, this was a problem and I solved it. It has been a very good mean to be connected and debate online (Male, Palestine, 26, AT)

Several Virtual Exchange coordinators mentioned limited Internet access as a reason for some participants dropping out, especially those who could not access from their accommodation, or at universities where there was limited connectivity. This was particularly the case

for refugee participants, and for those coming from more remote or conflict-affected areas. Finding a suitable place to connect from was also an issue for some participants as not all universities were equipped with dedicated spaces. Facilitators reported an issue with some students connecting from 'unsuitable locations', such as Internet cafes, from mobile phones whilst travelling or doing other activities, or more than one student connecting from the same computer or tablet. This had a negative impact on the interactions because participants were not fully engaged in the interactions and others could not hear them well. It is important for students to connect individually from a computer, laptop or tablet, connected to Internet, in a quiet setting where they are also able to speak, using a headset with microphone. Although Virtual Exchange coordinators are given clear instructions about these minimum requirements, their importance is perhaps not clear yet to new coordinators, or this type of setting is not always easy to find in universities or youth centres.

Language

Whilst few of the participants mentioned language as a challenge or barrier, this is no doubt a bias in the data gathered, for the interviewees were self-selected and all of them successfully completed the activities. However, several participants did not complete their exchanges, and focus groups with facilitators and Virtual Exchange coordinators suggested that language was a barrier for some participants who started the Virtual Exchange but dropped out because they were not able to interact.

The limited language competence of some participants was also mentioned by some of the facilitators as a challenge in some of the groups that they facilitated, though some found useful strategies such as typing, using flexible approaches to language, translation when they were able to, and having participants support one another.

Language was also a barrier in the recruitment of participants as reported by some of the youth workers interviewed. Nonetheless, when exchanges in French and Arabic were discussed, some of the interviewees expressed concerns, for example the comprehensibility between different dialects of Arabic and the implications they felt this could have for diversity of groups.

Participation, attrition and completion

Levels of participation sometimes had a negative impact on participants' experience across all activities, albeit in different ways. Irregular participation in facilitated OFD and iOOC sessions affected the diversity of the group, its dynamics, and the level of trust and engagement over time. Although this was not an issue for all groups, some interviewees mentioned frustration at their group members not always being present or arriving late for sessions. Some debate

leaders interviewed also raised this issue, as participants they had recruited did not always appear for the sessions. In the case of TEPs, partners' and groups' limited participation as well as the difficulty in collaborating with them were perceived as a problem.

It is worth pointing out that the issue of student retention in online education has been documented in the research literature. This not only depends on the design of the online course/activity but also on individual factors. MOOCs for example are well known for their high attrition rates, and a recent report of 221 MOOCs found that completion rates (which were defined as the percentage of enrolled students who completed the course) varied from 0.7% to 52.1%, with a median value of 12.6%. A literature review of retention in online courses reported that the attrition rate was between 40 and 80% and found that contributing factors were misconceptions about the workload, cognitive challenges, participants general expectations, as well as online educators' lack of training, difficulties in sustaining interactive and dynamic collaborative climates.

The issue of attrition was discussed in focus groups with both coordinators and facilitators. University coordinators highlighted that students and participants from less advantaged backgrounds had the greatest difficulty in completing their activities due to often precarious life circumstances. Facilitators suggested that participants sometimes had not been fully prepared for the Virtual Exchange, which may be due to their coordinators not having a full understanding of Virtual Exchange and what is expected from the students. This was confirmed by some of the coordinators themselves, in particular those for whom it was a new experience. This difficulty was perceived as stemming from the growth of Virtual Exchange through Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, with a large number of new partner institutions for established models of Virtual Exchange (OFD and iOOC) and the introduction of new experimental models for example the integration of facilitated dialogue within TEPs.

Mandatory or non-mandatory

Whether the Virtual Exchange was a mandatory experience for university students or not was also mentioned by facilitators as sometimes being a factor influencing participant dynamics. When this issue was explored in some OFD focus groups, it appeared that most of the participants who took part because it was a mandatory component of a course were pleased that they did, although they initially were not happy about this and sceptical in some cases. However, a small number of participants reported that they did feel resentful at having to take part in the project and felt they did not learn anything from the exchange. One of the students who had taken part in an Erasmus mobility felt that he had already had 'experienced diversity' and had plenty of rich experiences, and therefore did not need any more as there was nothing more for him to learn, while others expressed

ambivalent or contradictory attitudes. However, the majority of international students or those with experience of study abroad found it enriching and positive.

- Overall, I believe I had at least a taste of what difference really is. Even though the city I live in offers multinational and multiethnic experiences, I had not yet engaged in a project which involves exchanging opinions, thoughts and sharing to others your culture, lifestyle, favorite activities, etc. I must admit most of the time my opinions were not challenged by ideas coming from my colleagues.
- I have many friends from my Erasmus in France. It was like to have an Erasmus online. At the end I was happy that it was mandatory. It was my first online experience. It was the first time, I speak with people from different cultures. We discussed about how we feel about Muslims. I felt comfortable with myself, in my group we were really open minded. We spoke without any prejudice.

4. Concluding remarks

The first year of EVE saw 7,450 participants take part in Virtual Exchange through four different activities, each with several sub-programmes. While all activities share the common approach of bringing together young people across geographic and cultural divides by having them interact and collaborate through technology, they differ in terms of design, teaching methodology, integration, duration, number of synchronous sessions and participant numbers. This makes generalisations about Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange as a whole difficult. Nevertheless, the findings presented in this report demonstrate highly positive results, which in turn testify to the project's success in reaching the objectives set forth by the EC

Positive results were achieved in three of four markers set out in the research aims as regards to changes in the perceived effectiveness in intercultural communication, impact on self-esteem and curiosity, and the belief in strong relations between European and Southern Mediterranean countries, with large differences across results for some activities.

Participant evaluations (including those from participants with prior international experience) were extremely positive overall, and it can be concluded that EVE offers a stimulating and enjoyable learning experience for many young people and university students. It is also a new experience for participants, in terms of types of interactions, ways of using technology, topics, and type of interlocutors. Many participants reported building positive and meaningful relationships with their peers, with some remaining in contact beyond the exchange itself. The majority told other people about their experience and said they would be interested in engaging in other Virtual Exchanges in the future.

Participants perceived that Virtual Exchange had improved their digital competences, in particular as regards online communication, an important component in the European Commission's framework of Digital Competences. Most of them also believed that their experience in Virtual Exchange improved other soft skills such as foreign language (predominantly English) and the ability to work in teams and solve problems. Evidence of critical thinking and media literacy was found in some of the participants' reflections: participants showed insight into their learning process, and related it to the model of exchange they were involved in. Participants further showed understanding of intercultural issues, addressing the difficulties that arose in working across cultures, and some reported challenging media misrepresentation, another indicator of increased media literacy and critical thinking.

Evidence of increased tolerance has been addressed in several of the participant feedback sections, most notably in the section engaging with difference, where the M&E team saw that participants were affected by their exposure to people from different cultures, and responded well to the mechanisms of Virtual Exchange, especially active listening.

Strong evidence of intercultural sensitivity was found in some of the participants' reflections (elicited either through the interviews and focus groups, or in other data they agreed to share such as portfolios or diaries). This was particularly the case in reflections on the activities which were focused on dialogue and relationship building (OFD and iOOC). Their experience had led them to question some of their assumptions, reflect on their own beliefs and behaviours and see the complexity of intercultural relations rather than minimising difference, or seeing a binary relationship of 'us' and 'them'. It is clear that building a meaningful relationship takes sustained interaction, and the support of facilitators.

The research highlighted that some of the main challenges faced by participants were related to connectivity. While participants in Southern Mediterranean countries were more directly affected, it also had an impact on the broader group because it affected dialogue progress and group development.

The issue of regular participation and attrition from the programme also affected some groups. Several contributing factors were put forward by facilitators and Virtual Exchange coordinators, including the language proficiency of participants and their changing life conditions. Piloting facilitated synchronous sessions for TEPs, which entailed adding a new component to an already established model of Virtual Exchange based on predominantly asynchronous communication (Dooley, 2017; O'Dowd, 2017), presented some challenges, but it was felt by most of the facilitators, trainers and coordinators that overall the impact was nonetheless positive, and steps are already being taken to support a better integration of this component.

As has been underlined throughout this report, the differences between the activities were significant, which makes us question the appropriateness of drawing direct comparisons between them based on the quantitative data. Nevertheless, several observations may be made on the strengths and weaknesses of the different models of Virtual Exchange based on qualitative findings and linking these to the characteristics of each of the models.

OFD and iOOCs, which share an emphasis on sustained synchronous dialogue supported by facilitators were strong in supporting participants in building positive relationships with their peers, as evidenced by the greater willingness to engage with their peers outside of the activity. Many interviewees reported having learnt about active listening through the programme. These exchanges led to deep levels of engagement with difference, and critical thinking for some of the participants. What could be seen as a weakness is sustaining participation over the length of the exchanges, as there was attrition from some of the programmes, nonetheless low in comparison to that of MOOCs or other online courses.

AT was strong in terms of respondents' highly positive evaluations

across most quantitative measures. Interviewees mentioned the development of online communication and English language skills. Several of them reported this online experience as something quite new for them and noted that virtual debate has expanded their experience of debate from a skill-building experience with peers in their own country to an international intercultural experience. Having to collaborate with distant peers in preparing for an online debate, with limited time for preparation was initially daunting for some, however most reported that it was unproblematic other than problems of connectivity in quite a few cases. While interviewees said they enjoyed the experience and reported building positive relationships, few said they would get in touch outside the context of the debate which is understandable given that the activity is not sustained over time.

TEPs were strong in terms of developing participants' employability skills, in particular team work and digital skills. What emerged most strikingly from the interviews is how participants were taken out of their comfort zones and presented with the challenges of collaborating with peers, having to arrange some of their communications themselves. It was in facing these 'real world' difficulties that the participants felt they developed the skills to solve them, and several mentioned the direct relevance to future employment. The exchanges took a great deal of time and work on the part of the teachers for whom there was little or no recognition from their institutions. However most of those interviewed saw it as a motivating and learning experience also for themselves. The integration of facilitated sessions in TEPs was welcomed by most of the participants and teachers, and lessons learnt from this year of experimentation will feed back into the training for future iterations.

5. Lessons learnt from the research approach

Lessons learnt and limitations identified through this research will be taken into consideration in the adaptation of the EVE M&E system going forward. The diversity between some activities and sub-activities (programmes) in terms of design and duration make it difficult to generalise across results. A more detailed analysis of the data regarding individual activities and programmes is necessary to explore each of these in greater depth and the various factors which may contribute to the results.

Further data exploration is required, with special regards to the difference between European and Southern Mediterranean participants. Furthermore, the focus groups and interviews carried out in parallel with the collection of post-exchange questionnaires could have elicited data to answer specific questions generated from the quantitative data, had they been carried out after the analysis. As a consequence, sequential approach will be adopted in the future: quantitative data will serve as a starting point and will subsequently be validated and enriched with emergent themes through the gathering of qualitative data.

Recruiting volunteers from the different activities for interviews and focus groups proved difficult, and interviewing participants from all the different sub-programmes was impossible. Since participation was entirely voluntary, few agreed to take part and several participants who had did not turn up for the interviews or focus groups. The youth sector was particularly under-represented in this data. As volunteers were generally participants who had completed the activities and were satisfied, a strong bias could also be observed. Organising focus groups in institutions/organisations with large numbers of participants may prove more productive.

Many of the Virtual Exchange activities generated a great deal of rich qualitative data (such as reflective diaries, portfolios, reflection papers, and online interactions) which should become an integral part of the research design as this would provide a more complete picture of the exchanges, and more complex reflections than those elicited in focus groups and interviews. For students, a portfolio has been developed and experimented in some TEPs, for youth in non-formal education a reflection tool will be developed in collaboration with youth workers. Moreover, a more ethnographic approach will be adopted, with case studies and longitudinal studies of individual facilitators and participants. The M&E team will seek collaborations with some of the partners with the aim to enrich the evidence-base for Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Outline for focus groups and interviews

Focus groups

How have you engaged with Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange?

How would you evaluate this experience?

Why did you get involved with virtual exchange? what attracted you to it?

What topics did you discuss during your sessions? Who decided these topics?

How do you feel about using video conferencing for communication?

In what ways (if any) are these exchanges different from other communications you have online or offline

In what ways (if any) are these exchanges different from other university experiences?

What did you learn through the project in terms of skills?

What knowledge do you feel you acquired through the project? Are you satisfied with this knowledge or have you tried to look for further information about these issues?

What challenges did you face in the project?

What would you change or improve in the project?

How do you see VE as relating to physical mobility?

Was language an issue?

Are you still in touch with people

In what ways (if any) has this project changed your views on yourself or your own 'culture' (however you would define that)?

Interview questions

How have you engaged with Erasmus+ virtual exchange?

How would you evaluate this experience?

Did you build positive and meaningful relationships with young people by participating in this virtual exchange? Make examples

Did participating in this virtual exchange help you improve digital competences? Make examples

Did participating in this virtual exchange help you improve knowledge about the relationship between and across different societies? Make examples

Do you have interests in having further opportunities to engage in dialogue through virtual exchange?

Did you face any difficulties?

Was the language a barrier? Did you use other languages than English?

Facilitator focus groups

First round

A little bit of information about your backgrounds and why you started to facilitate. How many years?

Experiences of physical mobility? Before or after becoming facilitators?

How are your virtual exchanges progressing? How do you see the learning of participants, are they progressing?

How do you see the value of VE for students?

What makes a 'good' facilitator in your view?

What keeps you engaged as a facilitator? Why do you continue to facilitate?

How do you feel about the badges and recognition system introduced for Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange?

Do you transfer the skills acquired facilitating to other contexts? Some examples

How do you see an Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange facilitator community?

How do you feel language proficiency affects participation? What do you understand by 'linguistic flexibility'? What strategies do you use to support understanding when related to language proficiency? How do you see offering virtual exchange in French and Arabic?

If you were to market EVE to young people how would you do it? Would you do it differently for different regions? Types of people (students vs youth)? How would you reach out to youth organizations?

Round 2 (December)

How have you been involved in Erasmus+ this year? What have you been facilitating?

How has your experience been this second half of the year?

Do you have any comments on the report on focus groups with facilitators that was submitted earlier this year? Is there anything you feel that was missing from that report or that was misrepresented?

What do you feel has changed for you since then - if anything? Have you thought any more of any of the issues discussed?

What do you see as the differences (in terms of impact) between the programmes you facilitated? For example between the 4 and 8 week Connect Programme?

We have now finished this year of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange - now that you have engaged more with this project what do you know about the overall project (outside your direct facilitation experience)?

How do facilitators view EVE and the idea of an Erasmus+ Facilitator Community? How would you like to see it evolve?

How do you perceive issues related to language (competence and participation, translation, EVE in French and Arabic)

Appendix 2: Codebook from focus group and interviews with participants

Code	Description	Example
New experience		
International and intercultural experience	The novelty factor is the international and/or intercultural experience	I'm usually in group projects with people from my own country and so no new cultures are learned. In this project I worked with people from two different cultures
Discuss new issues	The novelty factor is related to the topics discussed, not what usually talked about with friends or peers	We discussed about gender issues and inequalities. And the situation in our countries. In the real life I don't talk about gender issues with my friends.
Different from other social media use	The novelty factor was the new way of using technology as compared, for example, to social media use	Before I only had Instagram. With virtual exchange I had to use camera and talk.
Employability	Explicit references to future work - subcategories do not necessarily include these references but relate to recognised employability skills	Well firstly it was hard to manage time with others from different places and countries, harder to schedule and work. Of course it feel more really in context of communication in real work.
teamwork	Mentions of acquiring the ability to work in teams	You have to deliver and understand a message in the clearer way, this build the team work, you have to put yourself in the other person side, that helps a lot with teamwork.
language skills	Mentions of using or improving English	I think that it is good to use English even if it is not the first language of the participants, if you don't use English wouldn't be that challenging. English gives you access to sources and terms facilitating the access to sources, I think this is good, more then if we only use our first language.
Communication		
dialogue	Specific reference to dialogue as form of communication	For example, during the online meeting sessions, the members of the "Group x" (individuals from Finland, Morocco, Tunisia, Italy and Nigeria) learned about the "inner voice" or self-talk and how this might affect the ability to listen deeply and understand different perspectives. Such a capacity is fundamental to maintain a positive dialogue on-line.
debate	specific reference to characteristics of debate as form of communication	at the end there was stuff that I had to consider, both sides have to have arguments, you cant put something that everybody agree, the motion that you want to suggest should be doable for both sides

Code	Description	Example
listening	specific references to the ability to listen	The way the [VE] was designed was useful. I tended to talk. And it is good that you cant interrupt. I like dialogues and discussions. We discussed about death penalty, listening and not judging.
Challenges		
poor Internet	mention of connectivity issues	The main difficulty was to have a stable internet connection – this didn't happen to me but to other participants, so sometimes we had digital problems. Some participants were also having some difficulties in joining the platform or the audio was very bad. However, we got over all these problems.
group attendance	mention of participants not attending sessions	the program aim was to put refugees, non refugees, in our group a lot of people didn't attend, we were six normally, that is why it wasnt diverse.
collaboration	mention of challenges of collaborating with peer	Different schedules, different needs, different interests makes it hard to get team to work together in the same objectives (Female, Finland, N.A. TEP)
time taken	mention of time-related issues	Very time consuming,
Engaging with difference		
finding similarities	Talks about similarities with peers or other cultures	I understood that with girls from Morocco or Jordan we like almost the same things: same music, a similar life
relationship building	mentions the actual building of relationship, not just statements of making friends or liking others	When we started our session on the forth and the last week we were all bittersweet because we could feel that we managed to build a strong connection between us, even though we were meeting only one time a week
new perspectives	mentions acquiring new perspectives on an issue or culture	In the last meeting, we discussed about "Global society". I was very surprised seeing that middle-east students held the stronger optimistic attitude on globalization while me, as a European student, I have always owned a sceptical one.
knowledge of other cultures	mentions specific information acquired	
deep listening	listening as a form of engaging with difference and improving understanding	We started talking about women, how it works different between men and women, it was about listening without judging.
group diversity	mentions diversity of group - or lack of diversity	Because the other people were from Jordan, it wasnot that mind broaden, but it is always good to meet other people, even if they live this close.

Code	Description	Example
ethnocentrism	comment that reflects ethnocentric attitude, judges others according to own culture and values	
challenging stereotypes	mentions assumptions that were challenged	Another example, when I talked about hejab that could be a free choice, that helped me to challenge this idea in the West that it is always something imposed.
Activation	Any reference to being sparked to do something after the end of the virtual exchange and/or beyond the virtual exchange itself (eg. Outside community)	Completing this course leaves me motivated to do more research on hate speech instances in a local context, and find targeted ways of dealing with them - taking examples from the videos we watched.
continued contact with group members	Mentions getting in touch with group outside of VE	I am still in contact with some of the participants within my group. In particular, I became friend of an Italian participant within my group and we are still in contact.
travel abroad	mentions travelling abroad	It pushes you to talk to other people without fears. [VE] gave me the opportunity to talk with locals. Next time I will travel out of Egypt.

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