



European  
Commission

# Erasmus+

## Virtual Exchange

*INTERCULTURAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES*



## *2018 Achievements*

*A groundbreaking project to allow youth in Europe and the South Mediterranean to engage in meaningful intercultural learning experiences online as part of their formal or non-formal education*



## In a Nutshell

### “Harnessing the Power of Technology To Shape Real Human Connection and Dialogue”

In today's world, technology is revolutionising our capacity to communicate with one another, and we are globally connected in unprecedented ways. At the same time, our diverse societies and communities continue to trigger polarisation and divisions, pointing to the need to invest in dialogue between the young people at the heart of our future. In this context, Virtual Exchange is a concrete demonstration of modern technologies' power to bridge divides and build intercultural understanding. By launching the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project in 2018 as a means to expand and enrich its Erasmus+ programme, the European Union is piloting and testing the most effective approaches to Virtual Exchange to complement physical exchange actions.

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange offers an accessible, ground-breaking tool for young people to engage in intercultural learning, through online people-to-people interactions moderated by facilitators. These meaningful cross-cultural experiences have a profound impact on the way in which young people engage one another across lines of perceived or actual difference. In doing so, participants in the exchanges gain 21st century skills that allow them to succeed in a globalising world, and also improve cross-cultural understanding for more positive interactions with their peers from different countries.

## About Virtual Exchange

Virtual Exchange is different from other forms of online learning:

- 1 It is **technology-enabled** and uses the broad reach and scope of new media technologies to bring geographically distant people together.
- 2 The focus is primarily on **people-to-people** real-time dialogue in which participants learn from each other, as opposed to content-driven learning.
- 3 Face to face interactions are **facilitated** by trained facilitators or educators to ensure they are meaningful and explicitly address the intended learning outcomes of intercultural understanding.
- 4 The exchange is **sustained** over time, designed as a pedagogical process.

In short, it provides a virtual learning space where young people from Europe and Southern Mediterranean countries are encouraged to share experiences, build relationships, and collaborate.

## What Makes it Unique

### Scalability and inclusivity

→ Expanding the reach and scope of physical exchange programmes.

### Experiential learning

→ Building and enhancing intercultural competencies by experiencing first-hand communication and collaboration with people with different ideas and backgrounds.

### Community of trust

→ Providing a safe space where young people feel heard and respected, and develop the confidence to think critically about their own perspectives.

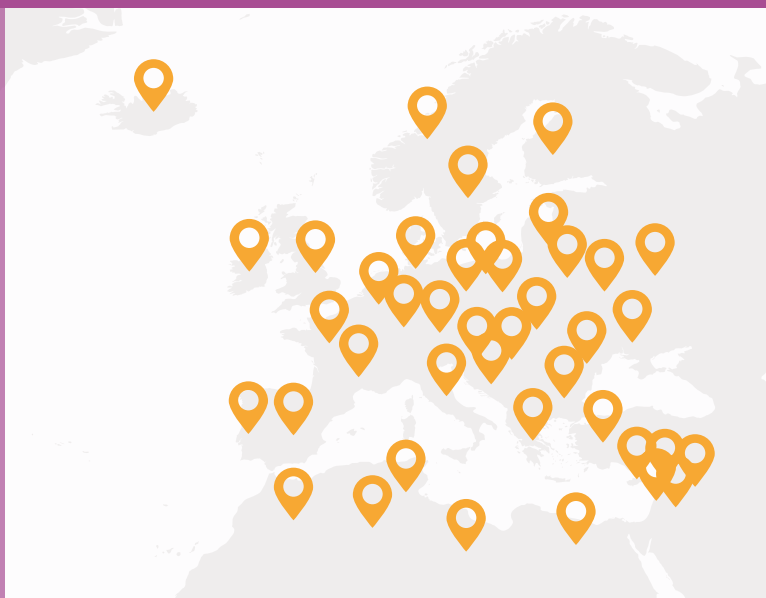
### Learner-led approach

→ Empowering young people to lead the dialogue, seek mutual understanding and co-create knowledge, based on their own experiences.

## Who the Project is Reaching

The exchange activities are open to any **young person between 18 and 30 years old**, from European countries part of the Erasmus+ programme and the Southern neighbourhood of the EU.

The initiative is also intended for **educators, youth workers and higher education representatives** who wish to offer or design virtual exchange activities for young people in their institution or organisation.



## Opportunities for Engagement

### Exchanges

- Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange proposes different models of exchange programmes to suit the needs of interested participants, such as interactive open online courses, online facilitated dialogues, or debate exchanges.
- They differ in format, duration, time investment, thematic scope and number of participants.
- Some exchanges are open for young people to sign up directly, while others are designed to be integrated as part of existing curricula or activities offered by universities, vocational schools or youth organisations.

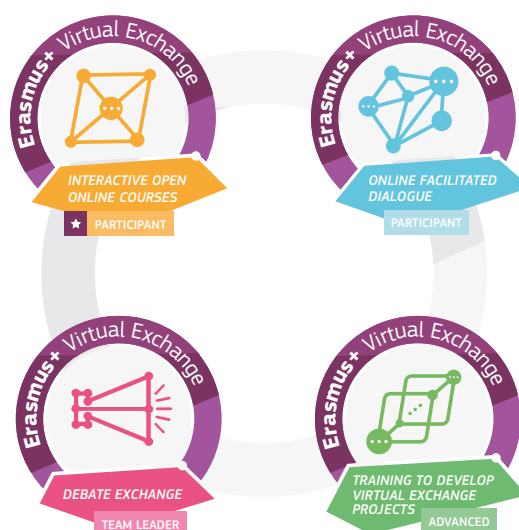
### Training

- In addition to offering these learning experiences to youth, the project also builds capacity within the education and youth sectors to design and facilitate virtual exchange projects.
- Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange provides training and support to teachers or youth workers to implement their own grassroots exchanges, usually between two or more partners.
- As part of the project, facilitation training is also being offered to individuals who wish to become part of the community of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange facilitators.

Find Out More and Get Involved [www.europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual](http://www.europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual)

## A Recognised Experience

To recognise the successful participation in an Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activity, special Open Badges have been developed. Upon completion of activities and meeting the criteria, participants are eligible to receive a specific Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Open Badge. The concept of a badge is similar to badges that scouts receive for skills they acquire or activities that they have taken part in and display on the sleeve of their uniform or on their backpacks. Each of the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities has one or more badges that participants can earn for successfully completing the activities. Participants can showcase their newly-acquired skills and knowledge by displaying their badge on social media and online platforms such as e-portfolios or LinkedIn, or sharing a link on their online CV.



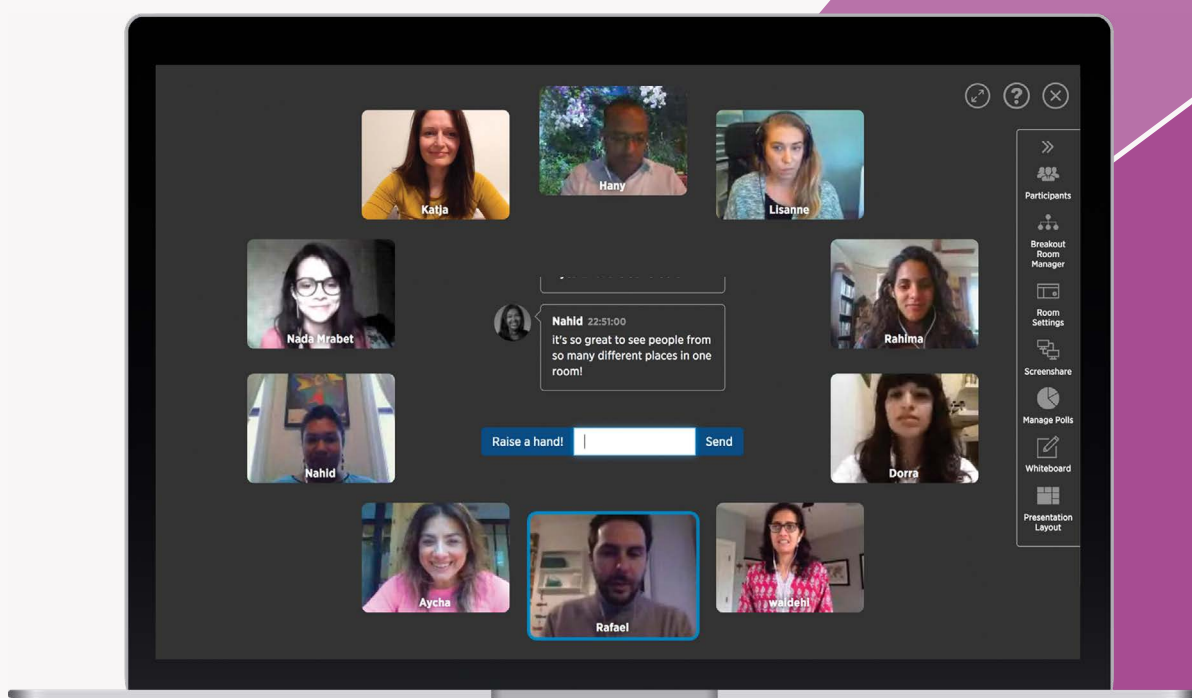
## Why it Matters

The success of physical exchange programmes to build cross-cultural skills, empathy and international cooperation amongst participants is widely recognised. The European Union set ambitious objectives for the Erasmus+ programme to support 4 million young people between 2014 and 2020, a number which the European Commission has proposed to bring to up 12 million in the period 2021-2027. The Erasmus+ programme also evolved to integrate the EU priorities of social inclusion, tolerance and integration of migrants across all the Erasmus+ fields of action.

Nevertheless, mobility programmes that rely on physical travel remain limited, and the largest proportion of those - being intra-European - do not bridge the most important cultural divides. Virtual Exchange therefore is uniquely placed to expand the reach and scope of traditional intercultural learning programmes. Utilising the power of technology, such programming can bring unprecedented numbers of people together in facilitated dialogue as part of their formal or non-formal education.

### The Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project aims to achieve the 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 intercultural 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.



# The Impact of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange

From design to implementation, monitoring the impact of the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project has been key to evaluate its efficacy in reaching the objectives set forth by the European Union. Mini-web surveys, pre- and post- participation questionnaires, interviews and focus groups, have been used to measure the impact of programmes. These clearly demonstrated high performance, showing its potential to develop an even more ambitious future.

The participants provide vital support in project evaluation through their feedback. Satisfaction rates remain very high with 87% of young people and 99% of facilitation trainees being satisfied or very satisfied with their experience in general.

**87%** Of young people      **99%** Of facilitation trainees

Are satisfied or very satisfied with their Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange experience



**91%**

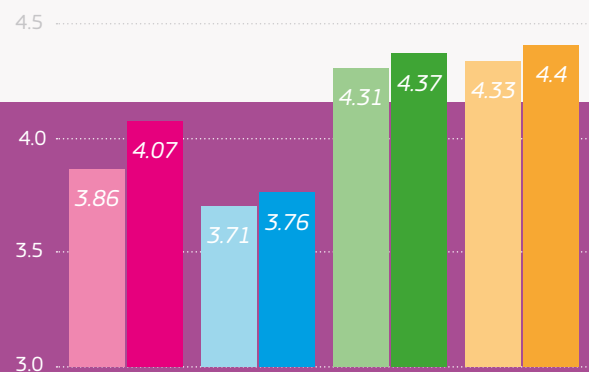
Agreed that virtual exchange had a positive impact on their ability to work in a culturally diverse place

## Building 21st Century Skills Across the World

Part of working and living in the modern world is effectively being able to communicate ideas through digital spaces and across cultural divides. Across the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities, there was a demonstrated increase in comfort levels and management of interactions cross-culturally. The project activities also increased participants' self-esteem, contributing to a more confident and effective group of students able to tackle challenges relevant to them.

**78%**

Agreed the programme helped them improve their digital competencies



Skill Development and Attitude Change\*

Cross-cultural communication (before, after)  
Self esteem (before, after)  
Curiosity (before, after)  
Belief in strong relationships (before, after)

\*Measured on a five point scale

## Providing the Building Blocks for Intercultural Understanding

These online exchanges have demonstrated real-world impact on young people's attitudes towards others from different cultures and sets of experience. Through composite scores developed to test how the programme shifts attitudes and interests of participants towards positive interaction, an increase was measured across the activities in curiosity and in the belief in the possibility of building strong relationships between youth in Europe and the Southern Mediterranean.

**71%**

Agreed that they built positive/ meaningful relationships with peers from different countries/ regions through participation in a project activity

**62%**

Agreed that they increased self-awareness about stereotypes/ biases they hold about another group post participation in a project activity

**86%**

Reported sharing information about what they learned through their participation in a project activity with others in their community

# 2018 Results

8222

Persons engaged in Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange training and exchanges

7450

Young people participated in exchange activities

221

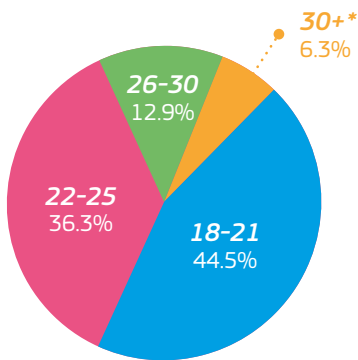
Educators and youth workers trained on how to develop a virtual exchange

168

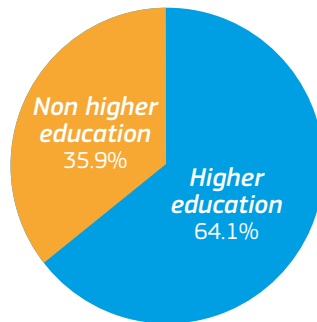
Persons trained to become debate exchange team leaders

383

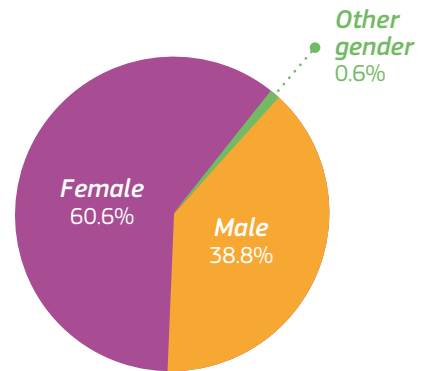
Persons trained in dialogue facilitation



Breakdown of Exchange Participants by Age



Participants reached both inside and outside of Higher Education



Breakdown of Exchange Participants by Gender

117

Partnerships created with institutions and organisations

15

Transnational projects supported

2551

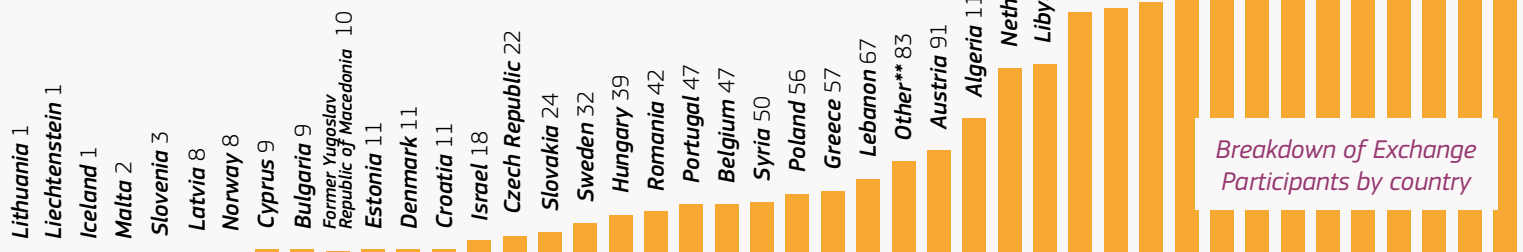
Real-time online moderated sessions around various themes

215

Members of the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Facilitator community

42

Countries across which connections were built



Breakdown of Exchange Participants by country

\*A number of participants above the age of 30 were exceptionally accepted as part of a larger group or to take part in the Interactive Open Online Course on Dialogue Facilitation, which was open to applicants above 30 for facilitation recruitment needs. \*\*These participants took part in the Interactive Open Online Course on Dialogue Facilitation, which was open to applicants from all countries for facilitation recruitment needs \*\*\*This designation shall not be construed as recognition of a State of Palestine and is without prejudice to the individual positions of the Member States on this issue.



## On the Horizon



16,000

Total participants  
by year end 2019



200

New facilitators  
trained

In 2019, the project will pursue the overall goal to allow as many young people in Europe and South Mediterranean countries to engage in a meaningful cross-cultural experience as part of their formal or non-formal education. An additional 8,000 people will be engaged in training and exchanges by the end of 2019, bringing the total of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange participants to 16,000.

Project implementation will take place alongside focused work to strengthen project quality and impact, with a view to lay the groundwork for future scaling and sustainability of Virtual Exchange. A focus will be placed on greater inclusivity of the initiative by bringing in more diverse participants, including marginalised and vulnerable youth. Increasing the accessibility of the project by offering additional activities in Arabic and French is another key priority for 2019. Finally, efforts will be exerted to enhance awareness and recognition of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange across all eligible countries, by working closely with Erasmus+ National Agencies and Offices.

We know virtual exchange is effective in building skills and shifting attitudes, but what aspects work best, and how does this impact young people in the longer term? In the coming year, the Erasmus Virtual Exchange+ project will collect further data on how this field shapes perspectives of participants, and begin to record the long term impact of these projects through follow-up after participants complete the exchange programme. It will also identify key factors that make virtual exchange successful, and those factors that hinder success, for continued improvement of the field. As a pilot project, Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange will provide valuable lessons for the future Erasmus programme.

# Youth Voices

The broad variety of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities are attracting a rich and diverse group of youth that engage in the project. Participants can be students in higher education, but also young people preparing to integrate into the workforce and young professionals eager to learn new skills. Whether it was through engaging in challenging

Debate Exchanges, addressing global issues in an Interactive Open Online Course or exchanging ideas in Online Facilitated Dialogue, the virtual exchanges have proven to have a powerful impact on the youth participating in this project.

## Ana Maria, 26, Romanian

*Participant in the Interactive Open Online Course 'European Refugees: Cultivating diversity together'.*



After finishing her formal education, Ana Maria was eager to learn more about current affairs surrounding refugees. She was looking for an opportunity to hear perspectives not necessarily represented in the media. During the ten-week Interactive Open Online Course, she watched inspiring bite-sized video lectures and met weekly with her peers from other countries for a two-hour online discussion on issues relating to migration.

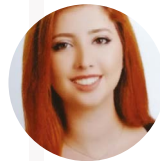
"This experience was very different than learning things in university. You are in a

different space, a virtual one, the informal atmosphere we are all in is a cosy place to make you feel relaxed and then have a conversation with people. It was striking for me when I understood that I could really change my opinion through people I have never met before.

Virtual Exchange is really promising. You are in a safe space, you have the chance to express some issues without constraints about the others. You can include a lot more people who were previously excluded from those experiences, especially in developing countries. They can share perspectives about what it is going on in Europe and elsewhere. This is revolutionary and can improve communication among young people."

## Sara Al-hmoud, 21, Jordanian

*Participant in the Online Facilitated Dialogue 'Connect Programme'.*



Sara participated in Online Facilitated Dialogue as part of a course at her university. For eight weeks, she met with the same group of peers for a two-hour, weekly session to discuss topics like identity, religion and culture. In addition to free-flowing dialogue moderated by a trained facilitator, these sessions included activities and exercises to build skills such as critical thinking and self-reflection.

"It felt enriching and relieving for me to find a place to discuss things important not only to me but to many around the world. Before, I did not prefer having conversations using technology but rather sitting with the person. With this activity, I broke this barrier and became aware that Virtual Exchange could be the solution to students like me who do not have the chance to travel at the moment, but want the intercultural communication experience.

I think Virtual Exchange could be our new portal into each other's worlds. We need to share our experiences directly with each other rather than from filtered sources, develop a better view rather than to stereotype. Participating in Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange made me want to strive towards more engagement with young people in order to have an impact on this world."

## Jakub Zientala, 30, Polish

*Participant in the Debate Team Leader Training and Debate Exchanges*



Jakub had little experience in debating when he got convinced by friends to join the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Debate Exchange Programme. He participated in the Debate Team Leaders Training, and subsequently attended two online debates. Debating teams were given motions on which to research, exchange and debate together with peers from other countries, around the themes of freedom of speech and the applicability of the Western democratic model to Arab contexts.

"The model adopted for the online debates, I think is the best part of the exchange. Un-

like the competitive debates it creates a friendly atmosphere and encourages co-operation. Normally, I am easily stressed yet during the online debates I never felt anxious. Each debate is unique. People coming from different countries and different cultures have always in store some surprising arguments. Something that will come as unexpected, also the research sessions with a partner, teach you to treat people like individuals.

Not only I would recommend everyone to join the Debate Exchanges, but I would make them mandatory for every high school and university student. In the digital era, almost everyone has access to the internet. The potential of how such exchanges can change person's life is tremendous."



# Building a Global Community of Facilitators

Facilitators are an essential part of the success of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities. They are multi-cultural and neutral process leaders, seeking to elicit self-group awareness and understanding, by providing a safe and effective learning environment. They have been trained in small online group sessions on the necessary dialogue facilitation tools, the use of technology, and conflict resolution skills to guide and deepen cross-cultural conversations.

Their ultimate goal is to equip participants with tools to hold effective intercultural dialogue where participants learn about one another and themselves and are inspired to take this understanding beyond their participation in the project and into their communities. These highly motivated and talented facilitators can be deployed across Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities. Thus, an Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange facilitation community is being built.



**Bilal, 30, Syrian**

Bilal is a Syrian architect, who also holds a Post-Graduate Certificate in Post-conflict Transitions and International Justice. He currently lives in Turkey and started facilitating with Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange in 2018 for the Interactive Open Online Course 'Newcomers and Nationalism: Exploring Challenges to Belonging in Europe'.

His positive experience as a participant in an Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Interactive Open Online Course motivated him to apply to become an online dialogue facilitator.

"Participating in the Advanced Facilitation Training was a turning point for me; the trainers were more than great and very experienced. They worked hard for me to gain new skills and tools.

All the people all over the world need to connect with each other, to understand and know more about each other. We are sharing the same world and facing almost the same challenges, so exchanges of ideas and skills are one of the easiest ways to go forward and solve our problems.

When you are looking for a small window to see the real world and you find this magic window into multicultural communities and diverse people from many backgrounds, this is not a usual thing that happens every day. Virtual Exchange is a unique opportunity."



**Philipp, 31, German**

Philipp is an Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange facilitator. He facilitates groups of youth workers, educators, youth and students that are taking part in different Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities.

"Every group is different and every facilitation experience is different. Sometimes you have more challenging group dynamics than other times.

Virtual Exchange offers a great experience on many different levels; you build knowledge and learn how this is also dependent on dif-

ferent perspectives and life experiences of people. I also see that it is a good opportunity for people to network across borders!"

What Philipp enjoys most about facilitating online dialogue is seeing other people stepping out of their comfort zone and putting themselves in someone else's shoes.

"As a facilitator you see others broaden their horizon. Being able to create the safe space for people to do this is amazing. And the participants recognise this and actually show gratitude for this. Not to me, but to each other! Being a part of this process is the most rewarding thing."



**Diana Adela, 31, Romanian**

Diana is a project manager and trainer, involved in Erasmus+ projects for more than eight years already.

She participated in the Advanced Facilitation Training during the summer of 2018. As soon as she completed the training, she started as a co-facilitator in an Online Facilitated Dialogue programme where she teamed up to facilitate a group of international participants throughout their participation in the eight week programme.

"The best part of facilitating is that you can basically login from anywhere and you get to explore so many cultures and topics through their discussions. I have learnt to embrace my own facilitation style, to maximise my strong points and be aware of the opportunities for growth.

What motivates me is the opportunity to support youth from different parts of the world and with various backgrounds to use the digital tools in order to engage in a meaningful intercultural dialogue, as well as to become active actors in their communities, bringing a positive change."



256 individuals having received advanced training and 215 active facilitators in 2018

# Engaging Higher Education Institutions

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange provides opportunities for universities to enhance their internationalisation-at-home strategy with a portfolio of experiences that are freely available to students and staff. Universities can select among a wide range of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities to offer to students as optional courses through which they develop transversal skills such as intercultural competence, digital literacies and communication skills.

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange also aims to build capacity within universities by training educators to develop and integrate their

own Virtual Exchange programmes in collaboration with partner teachers. This results in enhancing digital competences of educators as well as modernising and internationalising course curricula. These virtual exchanges can be designed for any discipline and become an integral part of already existing courses. Students are thus exposed to different perspectives on their course content and have the opportunity to interact and collaborate with international peers. Virtual Exchange within universities is particularly successful when it becomes part of a university's strategy, with the support of high level decision-makers.



## Principal Abdelwahed Mokni, Tunisian

*President of The University of Sfax, Tunisia*

"The University of Sfax is engaged in the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project, a strategic action of the European Commission that is supporting different kinds of virtual exchanges among young people from the two shores of the Mediterranean, widening the impact of the Erasmus+ mobilities. Our participation develops through a number

of international exchange projects and through the engagement of students in online dialogue activities.

"I firmly believe that virtual exchange is a powerful way to increase the competences of our students as well as their understanding of different cultures.

In this frame, I am encouraging all the staff of the university to be active in these activities, and I am convinced that this cooperation will develop and thrive for the benefit of our students and our societies."

## Margarita Vinagre, Spanish

*Associate Professor, Autónoma University of Madrid, Spain*



Margarita's participation in the Advanced Training to develop Transnational Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange projects resulted in two virtual exchanges between Universidad Autónoma de Madrid and the Universities of Clermont (France) and Limerick (Ireland). These exchanges involved students preparing for study abroad in one of the partner countries and provided opportunities for improving language skills and developing intercultural awareness.

"The impact has been extremely positive in many ways. The students' became more aware of cultural differences, improved their speaking skills and are feeling more confident about their capacity to communicate with speakers of the foreign language. After participating in the facilitated session, four of my students (that I know of) have applied to become facilitators themselves.

I believe that in order to prepare our students for the 21st century, Virtual Exchange offers a unique opportunity to foster their employability and life-long learning skills in a way that would be impossible in the traditional face-to-face classrooms we find in most educational settings in Spain."



## Amani AL Mqadm, Palestinian

*Head of the International Relations Department, Islamic University of Gaza*

As the university coordinator for students from the Islamic University of Gaza who participated in the Interactive Online Open Course 'Newcomers and Nationalism', Amani recognises the invaluable character of the programme.

"This project opens new international gates without travelling and crossing borders. The students were introduced to new

knowledge and topics from different countries. Therefore, the students were able to discuss cases from different and diverse perspectives.

As a result, the students gain the intercultural exchange experience without travelling. Furthermore, the students got the chance to enhance their English language.

I do recommend all professionals to get involved in Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange because this will widen their expertise and enable them to initiate ideas for new intercultural exchange experiences."

In 2018, 88 higher education institutions from 28 different countries have been involved in the project



# Collaborating with Youth Organisations and Training Centres

Youth organisations, vocational and training centres working with young people aged 18-30 can offer Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities as an opportunity for their beneficiaries or members to develop essential employability skills and engage in a transformative experience with peers from around the world. Requiring limited time-investment, a youth worker or instructor is generally assigned to coordinate and follow youth participation throughout the exchange. The platform and technical support are provided for the young people's online engagement, as well as the curriculum and facilitation for the exchange.

If youth organisations already collaborate with international partners in projects or wish to do so, their staff can also follow training to design or develop transnational virtual exchange projects of their own. Such exchanges can be combined with mobility and volunteering projects adopting a blended approach. Flexible and customised support is provided to involve young people from partner organisations in non-formal educational activities, including online dialogues with their distant partners under the guidance of trained Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange facilitators.

## Jan Lai, Italian

*Youth worker specialised in intercultural non-formal education, Associazione Interculturale NUR*



Jan Lai was developing a professional intercultural course involving 13 international partners. Looking for innovative tools to bring participants together in alternative ways to residential training, he registered for the training on developing Transnational Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Projects. His participation resulted in enriching the project "Pathways to youth leadership" with virtual exchange. The 24 youth from the partner organisations had regular online sessions with the support of a facilitator to continue developing their relationships after their residential training and share progress on their youth work in the phase of community practice.

"Virtual Exchange is a perfect complement to residential activities. The blended outcome can make our projects more effective. The participants are very engaged and we see a level of interest and engagement in the project that in other long-term training courses are not so common. This tool is very much what we needed to reach more young people. We are proud to have pioneered a Transnational Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Project in our specific youth field."

Jan subsequently participated in the Facilitation Training to further integrate Virtual Exchange in the future projects he will develop.

## Rachid El Machehour, Moroccan

*English Language Teacher, Language Center Tangier*



Rachid coordinates the participation of students from the American Language Center in Tangier in the Online Facilitated Dialogue 'Connect Programme'. He sees the students benefiting from the opportunity to develop important transversal skills through Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange.

"The programme also has been an occasion for our students to appreciate and increase their awareness of other cultures by going

beyond their regular sphere. In fact, students have become leaders able to cope with and find tweaks to any misunderstanding that beset any communication that involves cultural encounter either at work or in a different context.

The impact has been tremendous on the personality of the students as they started to act not individually but in a communal way in a world that is full of social imbalances. Being aware of such new identity, students have not only become connected to their communities but they have become confident and active social citizens with high self-esteem."

## Shoukrie I. Shoukrie, Libyan

*Project Coordinator Assistant, Moomken Youth Organization*



Shoukrie oversaw the participation of 29 Libyan youth in an eight week Online Facilitation Dialogue programme during the autumn of 2018.

"Under the horrors of the Libyan civil war, it was extremely difficult for civil society organisations to provide meaningful exchange opportunities for youth, in order to gain the necessary exposure to diverse perspectives. Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange

gave us an innovative approach to reach marginalised youth across the struggling country, and enabled them to overcome the barriers and restrictions imposed by the war. Participants, for the first time, had the chance to interact with their peers in other countries, exchange knowledge and transfer the culture of dialogue into their local communities as a contribution to the peace-building and reconciliation process.

We look forward to reaching more underprivileged youth and scale up the transformative impact of this programme in the future".



In 2018, 29 youth organisations and vocational centres from 14 countries have been active in the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project.

## GET INVOLVED

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange is seeking partnerships with Higher education institutions, Civil society organisations and Youth organisations  
There are many ways for you to get involved in Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange .

**Participation is free of charge.**

Find out how you can get involved

**[www.europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual](http://www.europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual)**

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