Erasmus+
Virtual Exchange
INTERCULTURAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Handbook for
Youth Organisations

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1. About this handbook

We compiled this handbook to provide youth organisations with all the information they need in order to engage their youth members in activities offered under Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange. This pilot initiative launched in 2018 by the European Commission aims to enable as many young people as possible to participate in meaningful intercultural experiences online.

The handbook starts with a **Background section** that focuses on what Virtual Exchange is and on the characteristics of the European Commission's Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project. Then, it presents the **benefits of getting involved** in the project, together with some guidelines on the opportunities the project offers, and the way youth workers can get involved and engage young people. To exemplify this, we provide some **practical examples** of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities, followed by some ideas on **how to integrate Virtual Exchange activities** in the youth organisation's non formal educational activities. Finally, we propose some **practical steps** that youth organisations can take to engage in the project.

The handbook aims to answer all your questions related to the project. In case you have further questions, please contact **adurand@sfcg.org** .

2. Background information

What is Virtual Exchange?

Developed over the past 30 years from experience in the field of educational exchange and study abroad, and evolving rapidly with the growth of ICT, Virtual Exchange is defined as **technology-enabled, facilitated, people-to-people education programmes sustained over a period of time**. By employing a wide variety of technologies and educational pedagogy, Virtual Exchange makes it possible for every young person to have meaningful, transnational and intercultural experiences.

Education exchanges and study abroad programmes are among the best means to prepare young people for our contemporary world, increasing their inclination and capacity to deal effectively with difference and to communicate and collaborate across cultures. But only 3.7 percent of youth populations in Europe participate in international exchange programmes, and fewer than 1% of young people worldwide. Virtual Exchange is uniquely placed to expand the scope and reach of traditional physical exchange programmes, thanks to its inclusive and scalable character.

How is Virtual Exchange different from other forms of online learning and from Virtual Mobility?

Virtual Exchange distinguishes itself from other forms of online learning in several ways:

- The focus is primarily on **people-to-people interaction** and dialogue whereas the primary focus in many e-learning programmes is on content.
- Learning is **experiential**, with participants experiencing first-hand how to communicate and collaborate with their peers from different backgrounds and cultures.
- The learning goals or outcomes include **soft skills** that are key for employability and that are often not formally recognised, such as the development of intercultural awareness, media and digital literacy, teamwork, etc.
- It is primarily **learner-led**: following the philosophy of dialogue where participants are the main drivers of knowledge.

Virtual Exchange also differs from Virtual Mobility, since Virtual Mobility does not necessarily include people-to-people dialogue. Furthermore, Virtual Mobility usually refers to distance and eLearning courses, where university students attend a course offered by another institution remotely, and earn international credits recognised through a learning agreement between universities. While Virtual Exchange should not be confused with Virtual Mobility programmes, nor with Massive Open Online Courses, these two forms of online learning can be enhanced and enriched through the addition of a Virtual Exchange component.

What is Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange?

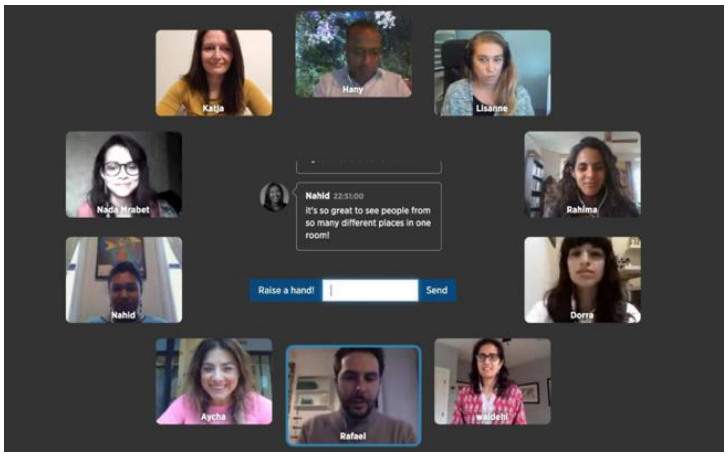
Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange is a new initiative by the European Commission that aims to **expand the reach and scope of the Erasmus+ programme through virtual exchanges**. The project is providing a ground-breaking way for young people to engage in intercultural learning, and is open to any young person aged 18-30 residing in Europe and the Southern Mediterranean. It proposes different Virtual Exchange programmes of varying duration and thematic scope for young people. It also offers training opportunities for educators to develop innovative online teaching methods. **All project activities are totally free of charge**. More information at https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual.

Since its launch in January 2018, the project engaged over **18,000 participants from 44 European and Southern Mediterranean countries**. It showed a strong impact on the development of employability and interpersonal skills among participants, and on changes in their attitudes. Young people developed key competencies such as intercultural communication, critical thinking, curiosity and self-esteem, became more aware of stereotypes they held, and built meaningful relationships with peers from other cultures.

Download and read the brochure detailing 2018-2019 Achievements, or read more about the project's impact in the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange 2018 Impact Report.

How does it work in practice?

Virtual Exchange activities can take different forms; however, the different models share a same approach, **combining cultural exchange with online learning**. They vary both in terms of **duration** – ranging from a session to 10 weeks – and **thematic scope**. Each week, participants meet the same small group in real time during **facilitated dialogue sessions**. During these two-hour discussions, they have the opportunity to share their point of view with peers from different backgrounds, learn about other perspectives, and develop their critical thinking, curiosity and empathy, among others. Depending on the type of Virtual Exchange activity, discussion topics may be defined by participants themselves, or focus on an activity-specific theme. These dialogues may be based on or complemented by video lecture series, readings, and interactive assignments.



Facilitated dialogue sessions can take place on the **Exchange Portal**, a dedicated online platform specifically designed to offer participants an optimal experience. In addition to video-conferencing rooms for facilitated dialogue sessions, it includes a stream section where participants can post messages to engage asynchronously, as well as a wide range of resources.

Figure 1: Screenshot of a Virtual Exchange session on the Exchange Portal

3. Why and how to get engaged

Why should my youth organisation get involved in Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange?

There are many reasons for your youth organisation to get involved in Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange:

Increase

Increase contact with young people from other countries and backgrounds, by enabling as many young people as possible to have an international and intercultural experience thus promoting a great level of inclusion.

Equip

Equip your young people with much-needed soft skills that improve employability, including the ability to work in a virtual and intercultural environment

Enhance

Enhance competencies of your youth workers to work in an intercultural and international setting, also by adopting innovative ICT tools.

Enrich

Enrich your organisation's mobility offer, by implementing pre-mobility activities devoted to outgoing/incoming volunteers / youth exchange participants prior to their departure so as to deepen their intercultural and language preparation and also as a way to enhance reflection.

Youth workers speak about the project'

In ICY Intercultural Competence for Youth workers project, we decided to test the power of Virtual Exchange after our last transnational training visit. The results were great! Participants felt engaged, re-inspired and more connected with their peers all around Europe. From our organization's standpoint, virtual exchange was simple to arrange: people used their mobile phones or laptops, and the whole process took only a few hours while providing meaningful interaction for participants. In our project, the exchange was designed by UNICollaboration #ErasmusVirtual to cover the topics of cultural competence and impact of cultural identity in youth work.

There is great potential in Virtual Exchanges both as supportive activity (before and after transnational exchanges) and as stand-alone learning platforms. You can't always travel, but the technology is already there to make multinational virtual learning events possible! ***Tiia, Training Manager, YMCA Helsinki / ICY Erasmus+***

What activities does the project offer?

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange offers two categories of activities to youth organisations:

Virtual Exchanges. These are ready-made Virtual Exchange programmes, that can be integrated in different ways in your organisation's programmes (more information in Section 5). The duration of these exchanges varies from 2 to 10 weeks. Exchanges are available in English, French, and Arabic.

Virtual Exchange Training. These training courses target youth workers who want to learn how to create their own international Virtual Exchange project. The aim of this six-week, project-based learning course is to introduce youth workers to Virtual Exchange through project based and experiential learning. No previous experience is required, although trainees must be supported by a youth organisation, as an integral part of the course is creating a project and implementing it.

What can youth workers do through Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange?

Youth workers can get involved in the project in two ways:

1. Involve their members or beneficiaries into ready-made Virtual Exchange activities (more information here) . Under this option, the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project team will be in charge of programme implementation and will provide the youth organisation with detailed feedback on their members' participation and performance. Section 4 provides some examples of a successful integration. Some of these activities are also accessible to young people wishing to join individually (see next section).
2. Engage in an online training on Virtual Exchange with the objective to set up their own international Virtual Exchange project in collaboration with one or more colleagues from another country. This option implies a higher time commitment on the side of the youth workers but gives the possibility of tailoring the Virtual Exchange to their organisations program and projects, the skills they are teaching, and partnerships they already have (see Section 4 for some examples). Youth workers may also choose to join the facilitation training offered by the project.

Virtual Exchange Training (only open to youth workers and youth organisations' team members).

Available in English and Arabic, this training is addressed to youth workers who wish to learn how to create their own Transnational Virtual Exchange project. This training lasts 6 weeks (with a commitment of 2-3 hours per week), and combines asynchronous activities with one or two Virtual Exchange sessions.

Following the training, youth workers can create transnational partnerships with other youth organisations and develop their own Transnational Exchange Project.

Our dedicated youth team supports youth organisations through this process. TEPs can include 2 or more organisations and can range from small projects (3 weeks) to longer durations. It is also possible to integrate TEPs into other projects such as youth exchanges under Erasmus+ Key Action 1, European Solidarity Corps deployments and other transnational initiatives.

TEPs can also be developed outside of the training: if youth organisations want to integrate Virtual Exchange in one of their existing initiatives, a project specialist will be allocated to support them through the process.

Facilitation training (open to all aged 18+): Facilitators act as third parties who help groups have constructive, respectful and authentic dialogue and learning process. Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange offers comprehensive training to all individuals interested in gaining facilitation skills. This extensive training offers an opportunity to get hands-on experience facilitating cross-cultural dialogue. Two formats are available to those interested: the "Introduction to Dialogue Facilitation", and the "Advanced Facilitation Training".

Can young people get involved directly?

The project offers a number of activities to which young people can sign up independently without the need to involve youth workers. The opportunities are well suited to be promoted and offered in your network. Activities where young people can apply directly are Social Circles, Interactive Open Online Courses (such as "Youth, Peace and Security", "Countering Hate Speech", "Sustainable Food Systems", or "Cultural Encounters") the Debate Team leader Training and Online Debates, and the Facilitation Training.

Is there a recognition scheme for Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities?

Every participant, trainee, and coordinator (both young people and youth workers) who successfully completes an Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activity will gain an Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Open Badge. Open Badges are verifiable, portable digital badges with embedded metadata about competencies and achievements. Furthermore, they will become part of an international network of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange alumni.

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange badges provide evidence of your participation in virtual exchange activities. They are awarded on completion of an activity and carry hard coded metadata which links back to the evidence of your success. Once issued a badge can be displayed on your Open Badge passport profile and shared on your website and social media sites in order to make your skills visible to others. You can use your Open Badge Passport account to connect to further opportunities and a network of badge holders. The badges help to reveal a wider ecosystem of skills, knowledge and attitudes developed through virtual exchange, providing pathways to further development.

"I got my first badge for taking part in a TEP about Cyberbullying and because I loved the process so much, I trained to become a facilitator. I display my badge on my CV, LinkedIn and email signature and people often ask me about it. I think the digital badge makes me stand out from other applicants when I'm applying for jobs." ***Aleksandar Dimitrov, Bulgaria***

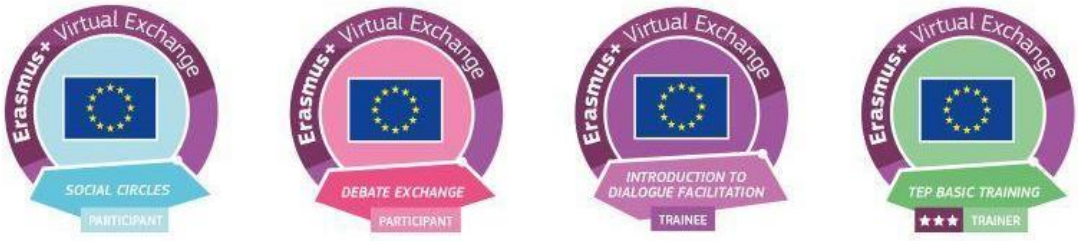


Figure 2: Examples of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Open Badges

4. Examples of Erasmus+ Virtual exchange activities

*Young people enrol in **Social Circles***

"Social Circles" give young people the opportunity to discuss key issues that matter to them during short dialogue exchanges.

Over 12 days, including 2 online live group meetings, activities and assignments, participants get to know each other and discuss the theme of the Social Circle of the month. The live online sessions are led by trained **online dialogue facilitators** and take 2 hours each. Youth organisation leaders can take part in their individual capacity and/or offer the activity to their membership at large.by sharing the application link with eligible youth and ensuring their timely enrolment.

*Members of a Youth Organisation joins the **Debate Exchange** activity*

In 2019, 12 of the 40 members members of the Azzawiya "Debater club" (Libya) took part in a **Debate Exchange** either as Debate Team Leaders , or Debaters. In August 2019, 6 members joined the first Online Euromed Debate Competition, engaging with peers from Europe and the Southern Mediterranean on motions focusing on democratisation, international development, youth employability, migration, and artificial intelligence. They reached the semi-finals debates and lost only to the competition champions. The skills they acquired thanks to Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange helped them to win the national debate competition organised in the city of Misrata (Libya) that year. The club members continue to practice and develop their advocacy and leadership skills using virtual debates with peers from across Libya.

*An organisation integrates the **Connect Programme** in its activities*

In 2019, the Damascus chapter of the Junior Chamber International Syria (JCI) integrated the Connect Programme in its programming, offering the activity to 33 young people. Based on this positive experience, JCI Syria will continue its involvement in Spring 2020, with discussions underway to include its Aleppo, Homs, and Lattakia chapters. JCI Syria was established was established in 2004 as the youth economic commission of the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) Syria. It has since then grown to become the leading organisation for empowering youth and spreading volunteerism in Syria. JCI members share the belief that in order to create lasting positive change, we must improve ourselves and the world around us.

Another successful integration of the Connect Programme was implemented by the Moomken Youth Organisation, in Libya. Shoukrie, the Project Coordinator Assistant in charge of this programme, speaks about his experience: *"Under the horrors of the Libyan civil war, it was extremely difficult for civil society organi- sations 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".*

A Youth Organisation offers an ***Interactive Open Online Course*** to its members

An organisation promotes the "Cultural Encounters" course to its participants

The 10-week Virtual Exchange course "Cultural Encounters" was offered by an organisation working on a range of development issues in the Mediterranean region. After initial partnership talks, the organisation found that the learning and transversal skillbuilding goals in "Cultural Encounters" aligned with their E-inclusion as well as their Education for Development programming. The organisation promoted the activity, recruited participants for the course, and helped them to register timely online. The organisation later received reports about their participants' progress from the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange team.

Youth Organisations offer the "Countering Hate Speech" course to their members

The 5-week Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange course 'Countering Hate Speech' was developed in collaboration with transnational civil society organisation 'European Alternatives'. Combining a video lecture series on the topic with online facilitated dialogue groups and skillbuilding assignments, resulted in an interactive online exchange course attractive for youth with an interest in human rights, fighting racism, discrimination and legalities. Advocacy and youth organisations in the field have offered the course amongst their networks. By doing this youth in their networks got the chance to participate in an easily accessible intercultural learning experience related to the organisations thematic scope.

*Youth Organisations develop a **Transnational Exchange Project***

Example 1: A consortium of youth organisations encourage more intercultural preparation before deploying young people in a European Solidarity Corps project

Organisations from Spain, Romania and Turkey wrote a volunteering project where young people spent 3 months in Uganda volunteering in an orphanage.

To support in the process of pre departure training and post project reflection, they incorporated a Transnational Exchange Project into the project: participants worked asynchronously on activities about preparing to live abroad, culture shock, intercultural competences and also met the young people that they would be living with online for an online facilitated dialogue session.

After the project, the group came together for a further online facilitated dialogue session to support their reflection of the volunteer deployment.

Example 2: A consortium of youth organisations working on an Erasmus+ Key Action 2 project connect young people together to reinforce the intercultural competence outputs of their project

As part of a KA2 project about Intercultural Competences, a consortium of youth organisations from Finland, Spain, Belgium and The Netherlands decided to support several of their youth members to take part in a Transnational Exchange Project. During this project, the young people met for an online facilitated dialogue session on the topic of Intercultural competence and different situations in their countries.

Example 3: A group of youth organisations developed a virtual exchange project about Cyberbullying.

A group of youth organisations developed a short – and successful – Transnational Exchange Project titled "Keeping Yourself Safe from Cyberbullying", following the 3/3/3 format (3 partners, 3 participants

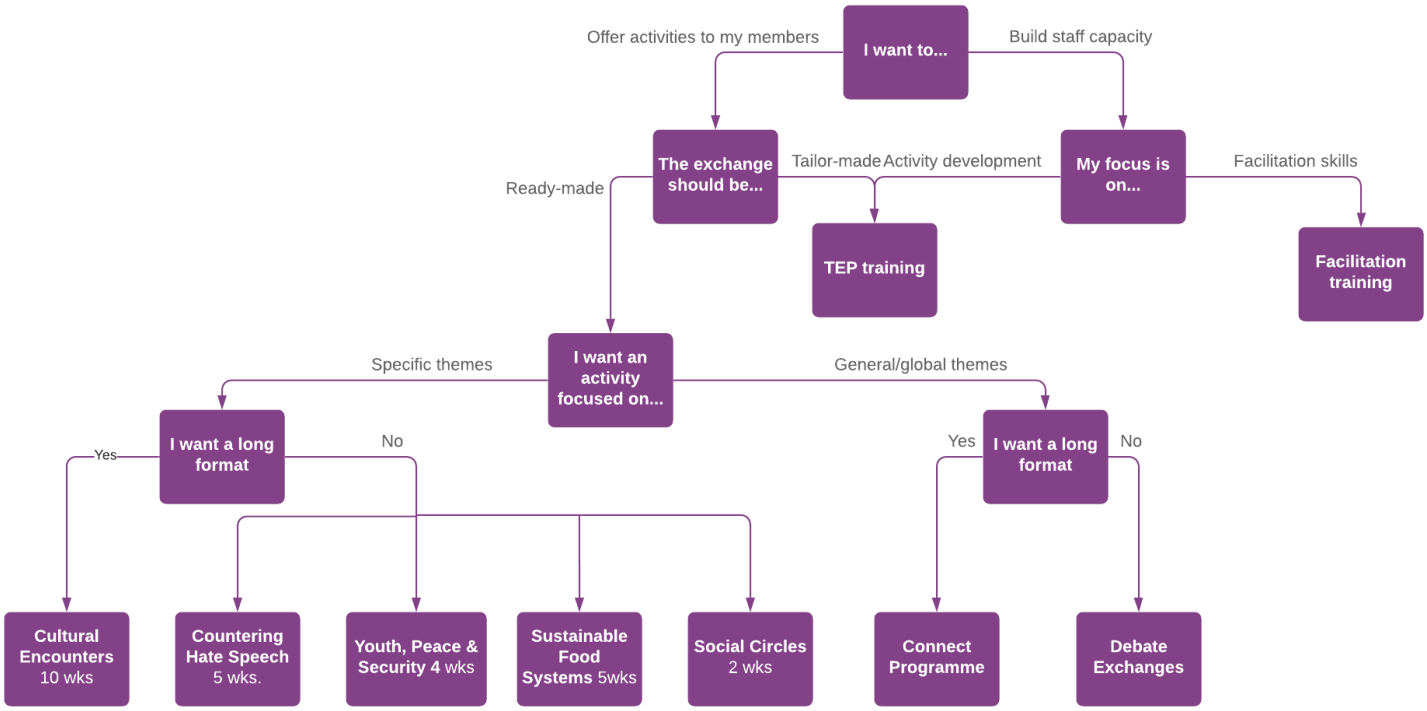
per partner, 3 weeks) Using Google Classroom, young people were provided course content ant completed a number of activities, in addition to attending online facilitated dialogue sessions on the theme of cyberbullying how to keep oneself safe online. Paula Bolaños Martinez, Youth Work Coordinator with the “Asociación Cultural Social y Educativa Segundas Oportunidades” reflects on the project:

“We have been working with the topic of cyberbullying for several years now and have delivered lots of training courses, youth exchanges and created toolkit and research on the subject. When we became aware of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, we were very keen to explore this approach to connecting young people, especially as the topic is internet based.

The feedback that we got from the young people was great, they really enjoyed the process and got to know young people from other countries. Our organisation has benefited through the training and support that was given to us and we continue to develop Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities.“

5. Take action: practical steps

Step 1: Decide what you want to do



Step 2: Speak to your team, network and members about the opportunities

This could be:

- **sending** a message to all members with links to the opportunities available for them
- **presenting** the project during a youth meeting (an Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange PowerPoint presentation is available in Section 7 of this document).
- **organising** an awareness raising event in the youth organisation or community – the project team will be happy to support you with this if needed, by attending in person or virtually (see Section 7 for a youth flyer).
- **promoting** the project through your organisations website and via social media using #ErasmusVirtual and your project's #.
- Printing out the brochure and/or youth flyer (see Section 7) and distributing to beneficiaries/ members.

Step 3: identify individual youth workers to be engaged

Another step you should take is to **identify a number of youth workers in your organisation** that you think might be interested in planning and coordinating Virtual Exchanges activities. These would typically

be innovative youth workers who might want to explore new activities with their youth members, or who are active in international activities already.

Once you have contacted these youth workers and they have expressed interest, you can put them in touch with the project team (by using the email adurand@sfcg.org) and we will take care of guiding them through the different project options.

Step 4: follow up and assess impact

We will stay in touch to make sure that you and your team have all the tools and support they need to engage their organisation in the project, and to learn from our collaboration activities.

6. Tools

The Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange newsletter

Please subscribe to the project newsletter here.

Drop In Sessions

You can join us online every first and third Monday of the month to ask questions and meet the team. Please register here to join the next session.

The Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange PowerPoint presentation

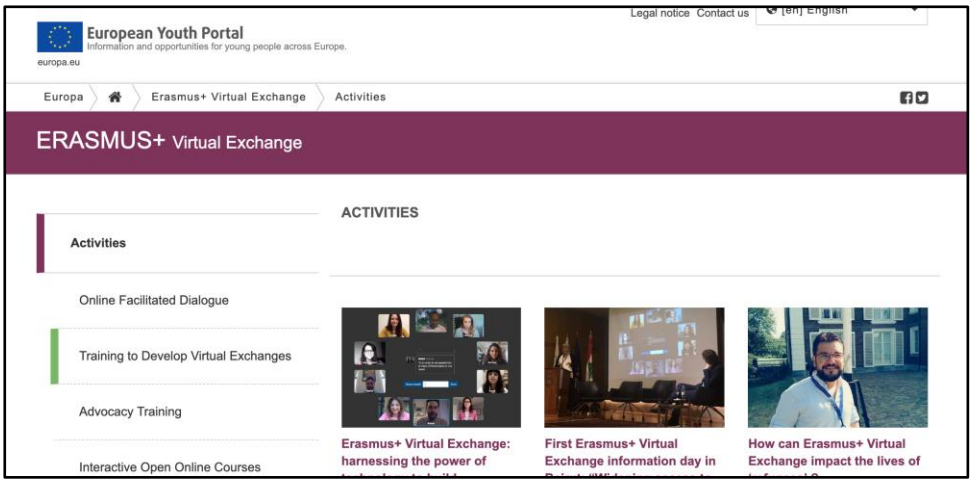
Please download the project's latest general PPT presentation here.

The Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange brochure

Please download the project's latest brochure here.

The Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange youth flyer

Please download the project's flyer here, and share it with young people electronically, or print and distribute it to your members and beneficiaries.

The Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Hub

All the updated information on the project is available here: https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual.