This paper is about Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (E+ VE), a pilot project launched by the European Commission in 2018 to provide an accessible medium for intercultural learning. In this paper we introduce the concept of virtual exchange (VE) and its theoretical underpinnings. We then briefly outline the aims and objectives of the pilot project. After outlining the ways in which E+ VE complements Erasmus mobility, we outline two of the main models of virtual exchange, providing concrete examples of how they have been implemented in higher education institutions (HEIs) through case studies. Highlights from the recent impact study will be presented, followed by recommendations for HEIs wishing to implement VE as a strategic part of their internationalisation portfolios.

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1. Introduction

Education exchanges and study abroad programmes are at the heart of internationalisation in higher education (Brandenburg et al., 2014; Gérard & Sanna, 2017; de Wit, 2016). They are seen as 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 (UNESCO, 1999).

Mobility has been found to improve students’ employability and the development of transversal skills such as interpersonal and intercultural skills and competences, self-confidence, the ability to achieve goals and social and cultural openness. Moreover, such an experience “not only opens [students’] eyes about the world but plays a considerable role in fostering their incipient occupational identity”, exposing students to new career fields and possibilities as well as global connections (Kaufman, 2014). It has also been reported that study abroad helps develop skills that foster social cohesion, such as learning to get along better with people from different cultures and taking a stand against discrimination or intolerance (European Commission, 2019).

Mobility is also important for HEI staff. The Erasmus+ Impact Report showed that after mobility, teaching staff use more innovative teaching methods and work in multidisciplinary groups. Furthermore, the perceived impact on intercultural, social and transversal competences is high (European Commission, 2019, p. 130). Relationships built between individual teaching staff and researchers can provide a basis for strong partnerships between universities (Sutton, 2016).

2. Limitations of Mobility Programmes

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the limited reach of mobility (European Commission, 2019), which is accessible to only a minority of students and staff. Furthermore, there is limited diversity among the youth who undertake or participate in study abroad as well as among the host regions for international students: the majority of youth who participate in international exchange come from families with higher social status and institutions in metropolitan cities (Gérard & Sanna, 2017). Anglophone countries are the most popular for study abroad, as well as specific European countries such as Luxembourg and Austria amongst the OECD countries (https://data.oecd.org/students/international-student-mobility.htm).
The most common barriers to student mobility in the Erasmus+ programme are financial (reported by two thirds of non-mobile students) and personal, which may be linked to family and personal relationships and/or physical and mental disabilities making an extended stay abroad impossible. For staff, an additional barrier is work commitments (European Commission, 2019).

It is also important to highlight that mobility does not necessarily lead to intercultural learning. Research studies have found that international experiences can even lead to an increase in ethnocentric attitudes and less willingness to interact with cultural ‘others’ (Jackson, 2018; Jackson & Oguro, 2017). Educational interventions are needed to encourage domestic and international students to develop meaningful relationships and to move beyond cultural stereotypes (Alred, Byram, & Fleming, 2003; Beaven & Borghetti, 2016; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019).

3. Internationalisation of the Curriculum and Virtual Exchange

In recent years there has been a growing interest in internationalising the curriculum (Leask, 2015). Doing so often involves adding ‘global perspectives’ (Landorf, Doscher, & Hardrick, 2017), and HEIs and educators have approached this in many ways, such as by inviting guest lecturers and introducing reading texts, international case studies, or practices which offer a range of perspectives on the subject matter or issues addressed in courses, as well as looking at ethical issues in globalisation related to social justice and equity. Virtual exchange can also contribute to internationalisation of the curriculum by promoting student-to-student interaction and learning across geographically and culturally distant locations.

Virtual exchange is defined as technology-enabled, facilitated, people-to-people education sustained over a period of time. It entails the use of technology to bridge students across cultural and geographic boundaries and from different contexts.

Virtual exchange can provide an international and intercultural experience to students and teaching and non-teaching staff. It also supports the development of ‘global citizenship’, the sense of belonging to a community that extends beyond national borders (Bosio, 2019). However, as is the case for mobility programmes, intercultural learning is not automatic; virtual exchange needs to be designed and based on a sound pedagogy and principles of mutual learning and reciprocity.
The field of virtual exchange has developed over the past 30 years with insight and influence from the fields of educational exchange and study abroad, conflict resolution and peacebuilding, foreign language education, and new media (Helm, 2018; O’Dowd, 2018). Practitioners in these fields have harnessed the use of the communications technology to develop programmes that can offer high-quality educational experiences and increase the scope and accessibility of their work. Researchers have found that virtual exchange can improve students’ communication skills, intercultural competence and digital literacy (Guth & Helm, 2010; O’Dowd & Lewis, 2016; The EVALUATE Group, 2019), intergroup relations (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012) and the ability to work in global virtual teams (Lindner & O’Brien, 2019; O’Dowd, 2019).

4. Theoretical Underpinnings of Virtual Exchange

Contact hypothesis

Virtual exchange is based on the understanding that a meaningful cross-cultural experience can improve how people engage across lines of perceived or actual difference. Research building on the ‘contact hypothesis’ (Allport, 1954) in social psychology suggests that interactions between members of ‘opposing’ groups should be promoted to reduce prejudice and improve intergroup relations (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kapit, 2003). Work carried out at MIT’s Saxelab, which focuses on social cognitive neuroscience, i.e. how the brain processes the social world, further supports the theory, concluding that “intergroup contact is effective in reducing intergroup hostility and negative stereotypes” (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012). The self-other overlap—or the feeling of having commonalities with those of a different identity—that results from intergroup engagement has been shown to “amplify compassion-related responses to others” and make people “more willing to forgo personal rewards to alleviate the suffering” of those from other groups (Oveis, Horberg, & Keltner, 2010). This has traditionally been understood for physical contact; recently studies have shown that virtual contact, both instead of and in addition to physical contact, is effective in building intergroup trust and compassion. Virtual contact that is face-to-face and sustained over a period of time, rather than one-off, has demonstrated potential to “dramatically expand the scope and extend the reach of intergroup contact” as well as “enhance or maintain the effects of direct contact before or after the initial experience” (Bruneau, n.d.).

Reducing hostility

Social theories of learning

Virtual exchange is grounded in social theories of learning. Social constructivist and sociocultural theories (Vygotsky, 1978) view learning
and knowledge as a collaborative process of making meaning. Based on these theories of learning, collaborative and networked pedagogies have been developed since the 1990s. Many are centred around collaborative critical inquiry in which students are encouraged to engage with and reflect critically on experiential and social issues (Cummins & Sayers, 1995). They also highlight the need to understand the social and political embeddedness of technology and to examine its biases and assumptions (Hauck, 2019).

In the practice of intergroup dialogue, facilitation plays a key role. Facilitators who are trained in neutrality and multi-partiality ensure that all participants, regardless of differing backgrounds or power dynamics, feel represented and respected in the group. The idea of perspective-giving, that is voicing one’s thoughts and feeling heard, is precisely what researchers suggest can counter the risk of non-dominant groups feeling more disempowered after interacting with dominant groups (Bruneau & Saxe, 2012) and is embedded into virtual exchange curricula (Tyszblat, 2019).

5. Increased Recognition of and Demand for Virtual Exchange

Recently there has been an increased interest in virtual exchange programmes from policy makers in various parts of the world, including the United States, Japan and Europe.

In 2016, the State Department in the United States launched the Stevens Initiative as “an international effort to build career and global competence skills for young people in the United States and the Middle East and North Africa by growing and enhancing the field of virtual exchange: online, international and collaborative learning” (Stevens Initiative, 2019).

In 2018, the American Council on Education (ACE), sponsored by the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo and coordinated in partnership with Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), launched a two-year pilot project to “expand higher education ties between the United States and Japan” through COIL, or Collaborative Online International Learning (American Council on Education, 2019). The COIL model of virtual exchange, which was developed at the State University of New York in 2004 (http://coil.suny.edu/page/brief-history-suny-coil-center), brings together educators in two or more geographically or culturally diverse contexts to learn from one another.
In January 2018, the European Commission launched the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange pilot project which aims to expand the reach and scope of the Erasmus+ programme through virtual exchanges that link young people (aged 18 to 30 years) in Europe and the Southern Mediterranean. These exchanges use online learning activities and technology-enabled solutions to strengthen people-to-people contacts and intercultural dialogue as well as employability and citizenship (https://europa.eu/youth/node/54451_en). The aim is to reach 25,000 young people by 2020 through different models of virtual exchange. The project is being implemented by a consortium of organisations.

**Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange** was established under a contract with the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, financed by the European Union’s budget, and it is implemented by a consortium composed of Search for Common Ground, Anna Lindh Foundation, UNIMED, Sharing Perspectives Foundation, Soliya, UNICollaboration, Kiron Open Higher Education and Migration Matters.

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### 6. Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange

There is both a political and an educational dimension behind the European Commission’s decision to pilot virtual exchange (PPMI & Demokratie & Dialog Youth Policy Labs, 2017; Helm, 2018).

**Divided societies**

In 2015, the Education Ministers and the European Commission adopted the Paris Declaration (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/cwt/files/dp_mobilisation_europeenne_20150317.pdf), promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education. This was a response to the terrorist attacks in Paris and in other European cities and a recognition of the increasingly divided nature of European societies. It marked a recognition of the importance of education in addressing societal divisions and equipping young people with the tools to counter the spread of fake news and hate speech on social media.
In the current context of increasing global interdependence, young people need to know how to interact and collaborate across borders and differences, as it is only through multilateral efforts that today’s global challenges will be met. Yet as studies have shown, not all students are equipped with or have the opportunity to develop the skills and attitudes for constructive engagement across differences, such as intercultural communication, empathy, critical thinking and global awareness (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009; Ragusa, 2014).

The rise of nationalist and populist tendencies, terrorist attacks and the spread of hate speech on social media all reflect a fracture in social cohesion and a need for improved intergroup relations. Further, the prevalence of fake news, divisive narratives and echo chambers on the internet, that is the repeated exposure to information that reinforces people’s existing views, make clear the need to promote media and digital literacy and critical and analytical thinking, especially in young adults.

Undoubtedly education plays a key role in preparing young adults to navigate the unique landscape and challenges of the 21st century by building global competence and interpersonal and intercultural skills; however, more needs to be done within education to ensure that a greater number and diversity of students have access to such skill-building opportunities.
OECD definition of Global Competence

Global competence is the capacity to examine local, global and intercultural issues, to understand and appreciate the perspectives and worldviews of others, to engage in open, appropriate and effective interactions with people from different cultures, and to act for collective well-being and sustainable development (OECD, 2017).

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange for HEIs

Two models of virtual exchange

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange includes two main models of virtual exchange that are particularly suitable for HEIs: ‘ready-made’ virtual exchanges which have been developed and are managed by organisations with extensive experience in virtual exchange, and ‘grassroots’ exchanges which are developed by teaching staff at HEIs following intensive training provided by organisations with expertise and experience in professional development for virtual exchange.

‘Ready-made’ dialogue-based exchanges

Institutions can integrate ‘ready-made’ exchanges into existing curricula or offer them as stand-alone ‘general courses’ for students to develop transversal skills. These ‘ready-made’ programmes were designed by pedagogical experts at organisations that specialise in virtual exchange that is based in facilitated dialogue. The core component of these programmes is thus live dialogue led by trained facilitators. During weekly, two-hour facilitated sessions, participants meet in real time to discuss a variety of themes with peers from different cultural backgrounds, learn about the viewpoints of others while critically reflecting on their own, and improve their language and communication skills as well as their confidence, empathy and curiosity. These sessions take place on the Exchange Portal, a video-conferencing platform custom-designed for virtual exchange, based on best practices in conflict resolution to optimise intercultural communication among participants (Tyszblat, 2019).
The University of Bordeaux in France is developing a strong portfolio of virtual exchange as part of their internationalisation at home policy. The vice-president for internationalisation has organised several workshops for staff to introduce them to the concept and different models of VE available. The ten-week ‘ready-made’ Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange called Cultural Encounters is offered to students of chemistry and physics as a component of their advanced English course. Student numbers for this exchange have doubled since the programme was first implemented, with strong interest from students and also department directors.

In this model of virtual exchange it is teaching staff at HEIs who design a virtual exchange in collaboration with one or more international partner educators to integrate intercultural perspectives into their course while still meeting their specific course objectives. After following a training course in which they develop a shared curriculum they are ready to implement a transnational Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project (TEP). This exchange becomes an integral part of their courses over which the educators have full control. Through this international collaboration both educators and students are exposed to different perspectives on the subject they are studying—whether it is history, business, health sciences—and they learn to communicate and collaborate with their international peers through technology.

Andra and Dana, lecturers of history in Romania and Hungary, respectively, followed the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange training programme and jointly developed a virtual exchange. The exchange, called “Hungary and Romania 100 Years Later”, involved students in online collaborative activities that explored the different perceptions and interpretations of the historical events which resulted in the Treaty of Trianon. They created presentations so each side could explore the different perspectives. Andra and Dana then introduced a number of real-time virtual sessions to their project with the help of trained Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange facilitators. This allowed students to come together online in a safe space where they could learn from each other and discuss their different viewpoints. Following the online sessions, both lecturers found institutional funding for physical mobility. The students visited each other in Romania and Hungary and continue building upon their ‘virtual’ relationship, thus taking the project forward.

Recognition Framework

An ecology of badges has been developed for the recognition of virtual exchange activities within Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange. This is based largely on existing frameworks for digital and intercultural competences such as the European Commission’s Digital Competence Framework 2.0. Educators and students who complete virtual exchange activities and meet the necessary criteria are awarded online badges, which can be displayed on social media and LinkedIn profiles as well as downloaded and printed.
Evaluation of the Pilot

A mixed methods approach

Erasmus+ VE activities are monitored and evaluated by a research team, who are using a mixed methods approach to analyse the impact of the programme. Participants are asked to complete pre- and post-exchange surveys. The data gathered is analysed to measure the impact in terms of change in participants’ perceived intercultural effectiveness, curiosity and self-esteem, and intergroup affect, which refers to one’s feelings toward ‘the other’. Participants’ satisfaction and self-reporting of skills and attitudes development are also measured. In addition, each year 100 participants, facilitators and educators who participated in the exchanges or training are interviewed or take part in focus groups.

Participation

In the first 24 months of the pilot project, 16,210 young people took part in exchanges. Moreover, 1,364 persons were trained in dialogue facilitation and 723 educators and youth workers were trained on how to develop a virtual exchange. 47.6% of all the participants in exchanges were from Erasmus+ countries and 51.8% from South Mediterranean countries; 60.5% of them were female. The countries with the highest number of participants in 2018 and 2019 are Tunisia and Italy (see graph).
Participants evaluated their Erasmus+ Virtual Exchanges very highly. 84% of the participants in the first 24 months of the pilot were satisfied or very satisfied with their experience. In data from post-exchange surveys for the 2 years, 71% of the respondents reported building positive relationships with peers from different countries and 78% increased knowledge of the relationships between societies. 84% reported improved knowledge of global events and 76% improved digital competences through their participation.

Data from 2018 showed that in pre- and post-exchange measures, there was a significant growth in participants’ confidence and intercultural effectiveness, curiosity, and self-esteem. There was also a growth in participants’ belief in the importance of building strong relationships between European and Southern Mediterranean countries (Helm & van der Velden, 2019).

Virtual exchange was found to be a novel experience which allowed participants to engage with issues that they do not normally talk about with their friends. Many reported meeting people they would probably not have the opportunity to get to know.

There was a strong increase in participants’ knowledge of the relationship between their societies. The experience allowed them to build positive relationships, especially for those who participated in exchanges that included multiple sessions of online facilitated dialogue. Many interviewees reported still being in touch with participants from their groups and a few had even arranged to meet physically.

“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 programme 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 years old).

The majority of the respondents reported improvement in their ability to work in a team, problem-solving skills, confidence to work in a culturally diverse setting, foreign language proficiency and comfort, and digital competences, in particular communication and collaboration skills.¹

“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 years old).

Engaging in Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities moved many participants out of their comfort zones and fostered reflection on how engaging with others could also influence them. Several interviewees talked about assumptions they had made and reflected on their origins. Others reflected on themselves, their own cultures, how they interact with others, and the impact that the experience had on them. The importance of listening to others was also acknowledged by many interviewees who had taken part in facilitated dialogue. Participants’ increased capacity and willingness to engage positively with difference, particularly in tandem with their newly honed interpersonal skills, can imply strengthened emotional intelligence and theory of mind, which is the ability to understand that others have different beliefs and desires.

“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 behaviours, why I said that, I tried to understand myself too” (Female, Iran/Italy, 24 years old).

Educator evaluations of training

Educators who have taken part in training to develop transnational virtual exchanges have reported high overall satisfaction. Areas in which they felt they developed most were active listening, digital competences and intercultural awareness. The majority of participants reported sharing what they were learning through the training with colleagues, friends and/or family and were interested in taking part in more Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities.

7. Challenges

Virtual exchange ‘ticks the right boxes’ in terms of meeting universities’ internationalisation and values-based agendas. Though demand for virtual exchange has certainly increased in recent years, it is still far from being a core part of universities’ internationalisation portfolios, despite the strong evidence base supporting the practice and its limited costs in comparison to physical mobility (O’Dowd, 2018). There are several possible reasons for this.

Lack of understanding

There is still a lack of familiarity with the term and concept of virtual exchange. A recent baseline study sought to map the current state of the art in terms of the adoption of virtual exchange in higher education. Only 13% of the 128 respondents to the survey had a clear idea as to what purpose virtual exchange served (Jager, Nissen, Helm, Baroni, & Rousset, 2019). There was also confusion in some of their responses.

2 Respondents fell into these four categories: policy makers/managers, international relations officers, educators, and educational support staff.
with other forms of online learning, such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) and the broad field of virtual mobility, which generally prioritises access to diverse learning content through online tools rather than focus on people-to-people interaction that virtual exchange promotes.

Virtual exchange lies at the interface of internationalisation and teaching and learning, which are often the concern of quite separate centres within universities. Staff working in internationalisation offices generally have little to do with teaching and learning. Those working on professional development for teaching staff may be concerned with pedagogy and the use of technology for teaching and learning, but rarely with internationalisation.

Educator-led virtual exchange projects require considerable time from educators who have to follow training, co-design their international curriculum with colleagues and then engage in the sometimes messiness and unpredictability of virtual exchange. The increasing numbers of educators working on precarious contracts, in multiple universities with many teaching hours (Vatensever, 2018), do not have time or resources to invest in this kind of activity.

A further cause for the limited interest may be the fact that virtual exchange does not bring immediate benefits in terms of revenue, which for many institutions has become a priority (Collini, 2017). Nor does it increase the number of international students, which can affect a university’s position in terms of international university rankings.

8. Supporting virtual exchange in HEIs

Despite the potential challenges, virtual exchange has much to offer higher education (de Wit, 2016). It is a tool which can complement and enhance the quality of mobility and, for those who may not be able to engage in mobility for whatever reason, it may be a valuable alternative. Virtual exchange provides universities with a sound, pedagogic approach to developing students’ and staff’s global competence. Virtual exchange programmes that are based on principles of mutual learning and reciprocity, and values such as empathy and equity, go beyond a market-oriented, competence-based approach to internationalisation (Khoo, Taylor, & Andreotti, 2016). They can foster and strengthen university collaboration and partnerships in mutually beneficial ways (Sutton, 2016).
Reasons why universities could include virtual exchange in their internationalisation portfolios:

- To offer educators and students different perspectives on the subjects they study as an authentic form of internationalisation of the curriculum which allows them to understand how their knowledge is situated and context dependent.

- To develop students’ soft skills (e.g. linguistic, communication, digital and intercultural competences, etc.).

- To strengthen academic partnerships through mutually beneficial collaborations in teaching and learning that can enhance the quality of inter-institutional collaborations, for example European University Alliances (https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/european-universities-initiative_en), double diplomas and joint masters’ degrees.

- To improve the quality of physical mobility through pre-mobility virtual exchange programmes.

- To make international and intercultural experiences more accessible to students who cannot benefit from mobility programmes.

- To innovate teaching and learning practices and to broaden the scope of learning and teaching (Rizvi, 2008), for example using transnational collaborations to examine local issues comparatively and linking our understanding of them to global processes.

- For a more environmentally sustainable approach to internationalisation of higher education (de Wit & Altbach, 2020).

9. Recommendations for HEIs

There is a strong case for integrating virtual exchange into internationalisation portfolios, but few universities have strategies in place for this as it is still an emerging field. There are several measures that can support the growth of different models of virtual exchange as part of universities’ internationalisation portfolios. For example:

- Identify a virtual exchange coordinator and set up a virtual exchange committee or working group with members of staff from internationalisation offices, centres for teaching and learning, and faculty to evaluate opportunities for virtual exchange that your university could offer students and staff.
Establish how student participation in ‘ready-made’ virtual exchange activities can be rewarded with university credits, for example as ‘free credits’ or ‘general courses’ or as part of students’ grade if integrated into existing courses.

Promote opportunities for student participation in virtual exchange programmes on university websites and social media to attract students across disciplines.

Harness the energy and experience of teaching staff who have experience of virtual exchange to share their experience with other colleagues.

Offer opportunities for staff to follow online training courses (for example through the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project) and/or organise in-house workshops to familiarise staff with the concept and practices of virtual exchange.

Provide incentives to staff who choose to develop ‘grassroots’ VEs. Such incentives might be a reduction in course load for teaching staff or a percentage of working hours dedicated to VE for administrative/technical staff, or funding for mobility to support the development of a virtual exchange.

Recognition has proved to be a powerful incentive, both soft recognition, e.g. through stories being published in university newsletters and teaching awards, as well as hard recognition, e.g. implementation of a VE being included in criteria for promotion.

Set up blended programmes which combine virtual exchange with short-term or longer-term mobility programmes.

Kristina works as a coordinator and trainer at the Centre for Innovation in Teaching and Learning at a large university in Germany, organising workshops and coaching for teaching staff. She runs a talk and seminar series on “Internationalisation of Teaching and Learning” and has hosted a talk and workshop on virtual exchange in this context. Kristina attended the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Basic Training to explore how virtual exchange could be implemented at her university.

Lecturers at this university have their badges from the Basic and Advanced Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Training recognised for their teaching qualification certificates. Kristina has now decided to follow the advanced training to design a course which supports teachers to reflect and discuss their approaches to teaching and learning. Kristina also collaborates with the international office, the Career Centre and the Writing Centre of her University and has noticed an increasing interest in her coachings on virtual exchange among teachers and colleagues.
10. Conclusion

This paper has outlined the concept and field of virtual exchange, in particular the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange initiative, and elucidated how it has been and could be implemented and supported in higher education contexts. Virtual exchange offers a pedagogic approach to using technology in education to engage university staff and students in dialogue and transnational collaborations that can further the understanding of differences and global interconnectivity. A growing base of evidence points to the transformative impact of virtual exchange, highlighting that both students and educators report honing 21st century skills and attitudes such as cross-cultural understanding and collaboration, active listening, critical thinking and empathy. Moreover, as an inclusive and evidence-based medium of cross-cultural exposure and engagement, virtual exchange can complement traditional physical mobility and reach a greater diversity of participants. However, though there is strong evidence showing the impact of virtual exchange immediately and six months after participation, a longitudinal study has yet to be conducted. Such a study is necessary even outside of the scope of the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project to further understand the transferability of skills gained through virtual exchanges as well as the endurance of student learning.

Virtual exchange has become more widely recognised and applied across certain regions, most notably in Europe, the Southern Mediterranean, the United States and Japan given recent investments in the field. It can support educational partnerships across various countries; however, further advocacy is needed to grow this programming in areas where it is currently underutilised.

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