

# VE and transferable skills in the digital age

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Building virtual exchange capacities  
in the Baltic Sea Region  
Envision Training – University of Vilnius, Lithuania  
24-25 April 2024



# Erasmus+

## Virtual Exchange

INTERCULTURAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES



2020 Impact Report



## E+VE 2018-2020

- pilot project, run by the European Commission 2018 – 2020
- provided an accessible, ground-breaking way for young people to engage in intercultural learning experiences online through a range of activities
- E+VE expanded the scope of the Erasmus+ programme through online collaborative learning activities known as Virtual Exchanges (VE) and training programmes
- involved Europe and MENA region
- the project involved 33,541 individuals: 28,426 (85%) youth participants engaged in different VE models, and 5,115 (15%) individuals trained in Online Dialogue Facilitation, Debate Leadership or to develop Transnational Projects
- data collected mostly through post-experience questionnaires

## 21st Century skills

<b>ability to listen actively</b>	N	3210	
	%	100%	91.25%
<b>critical thinking skills</b>	N	3213	
	%	100%	83.75%
<b>English and/or foreign language skills.</b>	N	5497	
	%	100%	79.39%

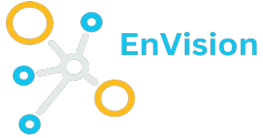
Numbers and percentages of students agreeing with statement that VE had improved skill



## 21st Century skills

<b>team- work and collaborative problem- solving skills.</b>	<b>N</b>	5574	
	%	100%	77.90%
<b>digital competences</b>	<b>N</b>	5459	
	%	100%	75.71%

Numbers and percentages of students agreeing with statement that VE had improved skill

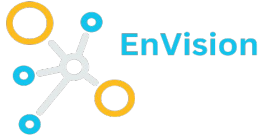


# Critical thinking and media literacy

*“It is important to know what is happening in other countries talking with people that live there. We can’t trust media all the time.” Male, 21, Spain*

*“(I have learnt) that my experience isn’t a worldwide experience, we may all see the same stories but interpret them in different ways due to our experiences.” Female, 20, Ireland*

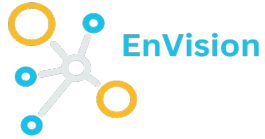
*“I learnt that there are so many things in this world that are sometimes overseen and gender inequality, especially in the media field is a serious issue that should raise awareness and should be improved.” Female, 20, Romania*



# Language and communicative competence

*“Another important point with regards to the dialogue is that we spoke in English during our sessions. [...] We did not grow up expressing ourselves in English but, even if we are not expert users, we discussed about politics, poetry, economy and history in a successful way. When somebody did not know a specific term, others explained to him or her. Not being native speaker makes your behaviour modest, and you can feel free to ask for explanations. On the other hand, it is also true that this situation did not enable us to talk normally as we do in our mother tongue. However, it may prompt us to improve our English and to gain some confidence.” Female, 23, Italy*

*“In light of covid-19, Virtual Exchange and virtual collaboration becomes more and more important. These ways of communication face even more obstacles than real meetings, hence being aware of them becomes crucial for successful communication. I see a potential hazard for communication to fail to accomplish, if people are not aware of those subtleties.” Female, 25, Germany*



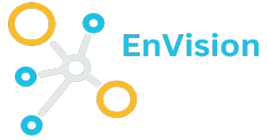
# Teamwork and collaborative problem solving

*“I never have had to work on a whole project and carry out a presentation with others with our sole interactions being over a screen and technology. In addition, I have never worked on something with nearly every person being from a different country and university.” Female, 21, Ireland*

*“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, 22, Germany*

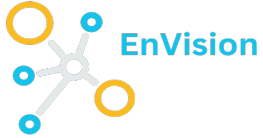
*Well firstly it was hard to manage time with others from different places and countries, harder to schedule and work. Of course it feels more similar to the context of communication in real work.” Female, 24, Czech Republic*





## Global skills

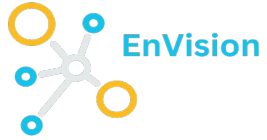
<b>skills to communicate or work in a culturally diverse setting</b>	N	5564	
	%	100%	89.00%
<b>my knowledge and/or interest in global events</b>	N	5722	
	%	100%	85.49%
<b>my knowledge about the relationship between and across different societies</b>	N	5421	
	%	100%	79.30%



## Global skills

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

*“ I am even more so interested in following through with creating more connections with youths across the globe to build a solidarity platform on how to better address the conflict situations in our different countries. Indeed I have found the courage to connect, to question our failing system and motivation to keep speaking and doing my own bit to transform my society.” Male, 29, Netherlands/Nigerian*



# EVOLVE Project



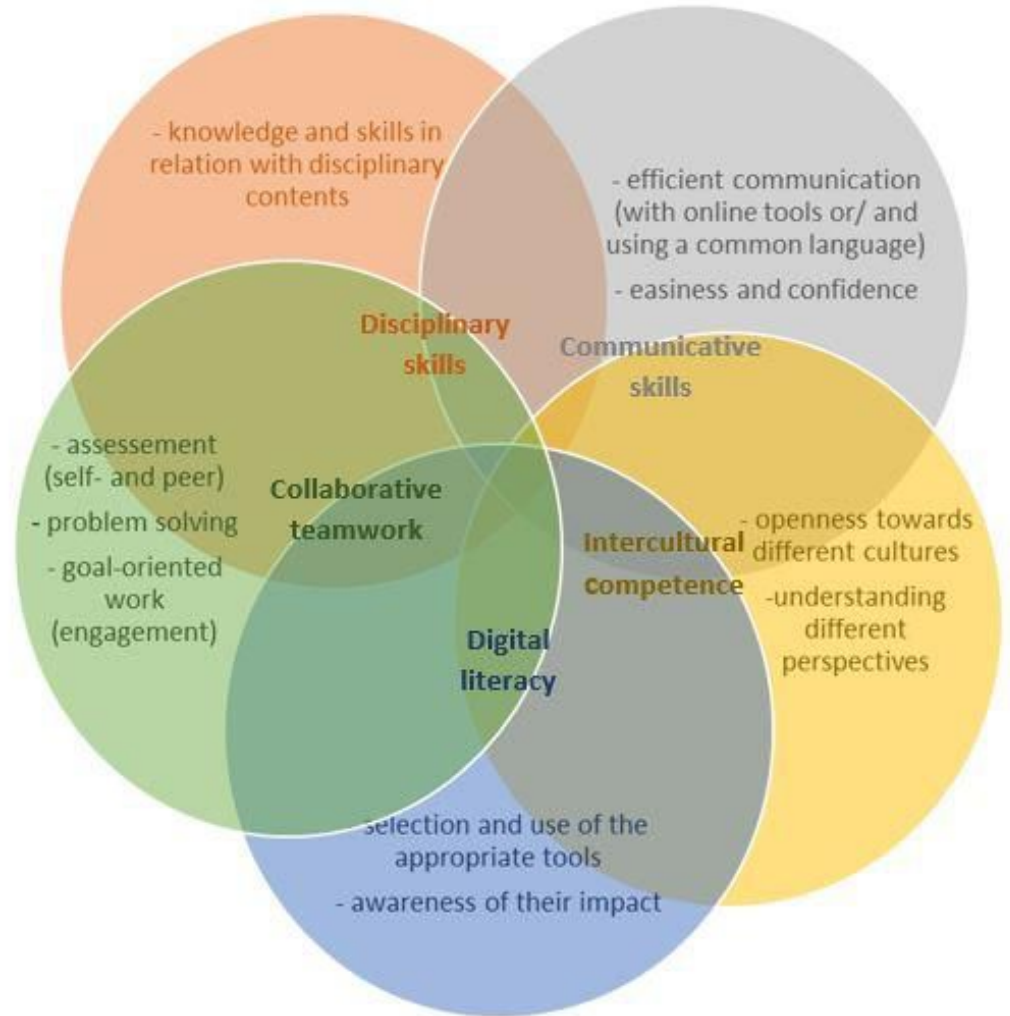
## The Impact of Virtual Exchange on Student Learning in Higher Education

EVOLVE Project Report

December 2020



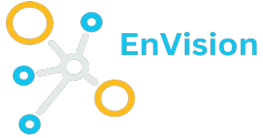
# VE and transferable skills





# VE as an opportunity for personal development

- Among the aspects students report having particularly appreciated is the fact that the VE provides a **wide range of opportunities** (along with the learning objectives targeted in the individual courses) and enables them to get **new experiences**.
- Gain or improvement can also relate more **general or personal aspects** (becoming more open-minded or overcoming shyness) or on their behaviour (being more flexible, able to cope with unexpected situations).



# Development of intercultural competences

The EVOLVE dataset provide evidence of VE's potential for developing:

1. the set of skills for successful intercultural interaction and collaboration in online settings as well as the ability to manage and resolve conflicts in such contexts;
  2. different aspects of cultural knowledge as well as an adaptability to cultural perspectives and practices which are different to one's own;
  3. a critical understanding of cultures, a reflection on one's own perceptions and a distancing from some of one's own worldviews.
- VE itself does not automatically lead to intercultural learning or critical understanding of other perspectives if it is not supported by **pedagogical intervention and thought-out integration in the course** (O'Dowd, Sauro, Spector-Cohen, 2020). In this sense, intercultural communicative competence (ICC), intercultural awareness or the development of reflection and critical thinking need to be targeted learning outcomes.



# Intercultural awareness through VE

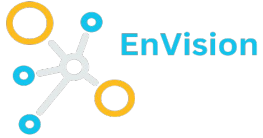
- In the qualitative data, the aspect students mostly highlighted is the impact the VE had on the **development of intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes**.
- **Openness to cultural diversity and other worldviews, growth in empathy and awareness of worldviews of others** are highlighted by several students in the open-ended questions.



# VE to experience online collaboration in multicultural teams

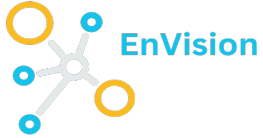
- In VE, tasks often require students to actively work with the partners in order to achieve a joint goal or elaborate a joint product. Participants reported experiencing how challenging teamwork can be when dealing with distance, different time zones, unaligned schedules, varying levels of engagement of the participants or with different work and learning cultures.
- It also helps many students develop appropriate skills and attitudes to cope with these challenges:  
*“I learned to work with people I did not know, who speak a language other than my own and who each have their views based on their contexts and beliefs”.*
- Collaborative work is often associated with more flexible, more inclusive attitudes and could lead to a shift in habits at linguistic, communicative, cultural, working or digital levels.





# Development of critical digital literacy

As a convergence of both digital and critical literacies, critical digital literacy (CDL) examines how digital contexts shape ways of thinking, knowledge, identities, and social relations in ways that often privilege some and marginalize others. It equips learners with the tools to examine the linguistic and non-linguistic features of digital media, to identify their embedded biases and assumptions, in order to better inform their activities and judgments (Darvin, 2017). It is informed by critical digital pedagogy which is concerned with methods for establishing presence and voice (Morris, 2017).



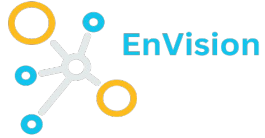
# Development of critical digital literacy

- Quantitative self-assessment of participants' **confidence in the knowledge and use of a range of digital communication tools** was quite high and increased after their VE experience. This included participants' **ability to support others with their online presence; knowledge of the impact and potential bias of different digital modes of interaction** such that they could critically evaluate online resources.
- However, qualitative data shows comparatively low levels of **engagement** in considering the potential impact of digital communication choices and potential cultural impact of those choices (but high levels of **reflexivity** and **empathy** in their exchanges). These behaviours could be considered forerunners to critical digital literacy as participants gain experience of digital communications. For instance, at a functional level, students were responsive to partners' preferences in terms of communication channels, demonstrated creativity and flexibility in supporting effective exchanges using combinations of digital communication tools. This was demonstrated by a high value placed on establishing and maintaining positive personal and social relationships using technologies which enabled the use of humour and sharing of personal information.



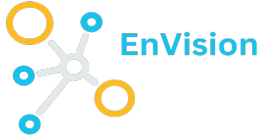
# Development of critical digital literacy

- Having specific tasks to engage newcomers was highly successful, as it gave an instant focus to participants' exchange; a clear reason to collaborate and communicate.
- However, a number of participants had time constraints and found the completion of tasks challenging. For these, on-time task completion to a high standard became the focus of the VE, and completing the task was prioritised almost to the exclusion of a focus on the exchange experience itself.
- Working across time zones with partners and dealing with technology challenges added further pressures.



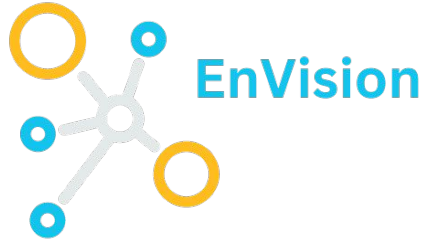
# Development of language skills

- Findings correspond with many of the findings of prior studies on language learning outcomes resulting from VEs partnering foreign language classes. This includes development of sub-competences such as understanding of the target language, vocabulary knowledge and the ability to interact with other speakers in the target language.
- Beyond this, quantitative results pointed to the development of additional sub-competences such as communicative ability, confidence, goal-oriented collaboration, spoken fluency, and grammatical range and control.
- Finally, qualitative results indicated the development of both production in the target language, and adaptation, particularly among higher proficiency participants and native speakers of the language of the VE.



# Conclusion

- VE has the potential to contribute to students' transferable skills.
- English and foreign language skills develop even when they are not the focus of the VE. For native speakers, the ability to adapt to their non-native speaker interlocutors is an important linguistic competence.
- Critical thinking skills are often developed through listening to different perspectives on a problem, which is an opportunity offered by VE.
- Online teamwork across cultural differences and geographical distance is a valuable employability skill.
- Intercultural awareness is not an automatic outcome of contact with cultural others, and needs to be specifically targeted in the VE, with suitable tasks that encourage curiosity, openness, empathy and awareness of other world views, as well as a critical analysis of one's own cultural assumptions.
- Critical digital skills are not an automatic outcome of more general digital skills.



**Thank you!**



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