Student voices and experiences in virtual exchange

Building virtual exchange capacities
in the Baltic Sea Region
Envision Training – University of Vilnius, Lithuania
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EVOLVE project

The Impact of Virtual Exchange on Student Learning in Higher Education

EVOLVE Project Report

December 2020

EVOLVE Project (Evidence-Validated online learning through Virtual Exchange 2018-2020)

EnVision

- Erasmus+ KA3 project, aimed at mainstreaming VE as innovative practice in HE in Europe and beyond,
- focus of report: impact of Virtual Exchange (VE) on student learning in Higher Education
- comprises data of 248 students collected from 16 exchange projects between 34 partners from HEIs, looking into students' general perceptions and appreciation of VE and the development of intercultural competences, critical digital literacy, language skills and disciplinary learning.
- 20 countries: Argentina, Brazil, Cyprus, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Latvia, Palestine, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Taiwan, Tunisia, Turkey, UK, USA.
- VE duration ranges from 1.5 to 14 weeks
- Used pre- and post-VE questionnaires, student portfolios completed by students whose teachers opted for using these, and post-hoc interviews with students.
- Disciplines of students taking part: education, language and literature, language, economics and tourism, management studies, intercultural studies, linguistics and e-learning design.
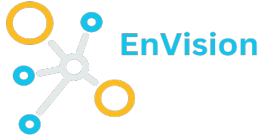
General appreciation

- Students predominantly consider VE as a **positive experience** in their HE curriculum: 83.5 percent of the students who participated in one of the 16 VEs analysed give a positive overall feedback in the post-survey.

- The majority think that VE is a **valuable part of their HE course** and **should be continued in the future**.

- Among these, a major factor influencing students' general appreciation appears to be their perception of the VE being an **opportunity for developing transversal and discipline specific skills**.

- The scores for general appreciation and for "I am competent in the knowledge and skills identified by the course objectives", "I am able to communicate adequately in the language of the Virtual Exchange", "I am able to communicate effectively through online tools" and "I am able to take initiatives when working with others" after the VE, for instance, show significant correlations.

Factors influencing students' general appreciation

VE design / task design and organisation

Students express a positive opinion overall of the **design of the VE** they participated in and of the **tasks** included in it.

Correlation between students' perception of a **well organised VE** and their general VE appreciation

Critical points: **workload** due to the VE, particularly with regard to the **deadlines** and competition with workload in other courses in the students' curriculum.

Factors influencing students' general appreciation

Tasks

The majority agree that "The level of difficulty of the tasks was appropriate for the course" They also mostly agree with the statement "The Virtual Exchange offered a learning experience that would not have been possible otherwise" .

Despite general student satisfaction with tasks, in several VEs students state that the design of the VE does not allow for sufficient interaction and contact with peers. This highlights the need for an adequate balance between course-oriented tasks and

1)   informal exchange, in order to "*build closer relationships with our peers*",
2)   "*involve our personal culture and world*"

In line with this, students often request initial synchronous ice-breaking videoconferencing meetings with their partners as occasions for informal and relationship-building communication, particularly in those VEs where no initial videoconferencing sessions had been planned.

Factors influencing students' general appreciation

Teacher support

Teachers hold a crucial position in the success of a VE since they plan, organise and tutor it. Students' feedback corroborates this view. They are highly satisfied overall with the support their teachers provided:

> "*all the teachers were committed to their students giving them support and understanding in difficult moments, they answered our questions when we did not know how to continue*"

However, a small number of students express dissatisfaction due to perceived lack of teacher support (from their own or from the partner institution), always linked to a specific aspect or moment within their VE.

Most of the students state that "The tasks and VE instructions were clear and easy to understand".

Factors influencing students' general appreciation

Technology

Technology plays an important role in students' perception of their VE experience, since it mediates their communication and group work. Their perception of the VE tools being **appropriate** to the VE tasks, being **easy to use** and **working wel**l is consistently correlated at significant levels to their general VE appreciation, but also to their reported degree of personal participation and engagement.

Challenges: most students report the technology they used for the VE worked well. But qualitative data also reveal issues regarding **material conditions**. Most of the technical problems students mention are linked to **synchronous videoconferencing sessions**: **insufficient quality of headsets**, **microphone**, or more generally **sound problems**. And regarding specific VEs, and hence local institutional equipment and conditions, **internet connection** and **background noise** problems are mentioned.

Factors influencing students' general appreciation

Technology

Other students indicate either they or their partners **lack digital skills**, which underpins the importance of initial technical training in technology sustained learning situations.

Integrating videoconferencing sessions into VE design, at the very least at an initial stage, is requested by students having experienced VEs that did not entail such videoconferences. Synchronous multimodal communication allows for more spontaneous relationship building:

> "*I think a videoconference would have been appreciated before starting the VE, in order to introduce ourselves. It would probably have been more efficient than the texts.*"

It also allows for audio-visual clues that facilitate capturing the partner's communicative intentions:

> "*Using WhatsApp is good but it's just a writing exchange, we cannot see the emotional part of a normal communication*".

Factors influencing students' general appreciation

Participation

Participation and **communication** between the partners are key elements that influenced the students' perception of the VE.

The same applies to the perception of **one's partners' active participation, comfort in interaction, and the building of positive relationships**. An analysis of the quantitative data shows that **participation and engagement (own and partners')** are closely related to the general appreciation of the VE. The same applies to **social presence** (e.g. "My partners participated actively in the Virtual Exchange" and "I felt comfortable interacting with my partners (my opinion was taken into account; it was possible to express disagreement while still having a sense of trust)"

Factors influencing students' general appreciation

Collaboration

A majority of students recognise their own investment as well as their partners'. They appreciate their partners' **contribution**, **punctuality** and **readiness to work efficiently**. Some participants notice a positive evolution and are happy with "*[h]ow the group work turned out to be in the end*". They are positively surprised to have "*actually managed to do something collaboratively!*" When the different sides are **actively engaged**, they feel comfortable and a sense of mutual help prevails: "*I think we were able to work in good terms, respecting everyone and giving each one the opportunity to speak their minds. Everyone was really nice, and helped when (...) the language barrier was challenging*". As a result, peer learning was achieved through active participation.

Factors influencing students' general appreciation

Collaboration

Students express dissatisfaction with the **misunderstandings** between them and their partners. These issues are often related to what was perceived as a **lack of motivation or participation** from the other side ("*It was exhausting when people not reacted or participated*") and had direct consequences for them ("*Finishing the work at 22h because your partners didn't send their part of the job in time*").
Working in groups also implies reaching agreement and several students expose their difficulties to do so.

As a participant sums it up:

"*I think the personal experience is very influenced by the people who form the group, and unfortunately this was a main factor for mine*".

Factors influencing students' general appreciation

Interpersonal

The interpersonal relationship between partners appears essential to the perception of the VE. Numerous students underlined the **interpersonal dimension was** that they mostly value and appreciate. The opportunity to meet new people was repeatedly mentioned. The contact with peers sharing the same interests or the same perspectives is especially highlighted: "*It was also great to connect with people that are basically on the other side of the planet and hear their stories and experiences in studying to become teachers*".

Students are satisfied when the relationships are harmonious: "*My partner and I both participated very well in this program and we could both share our thoughts and ideas together, both of us respected each other and we openly shared our conversations*". Consequently, many VEs enable students to build new friendships. Generally speaking, the "*human exchange*" was greatly appreciated.

Factors influencing students' general appreciation

Interpersonal

However, the **quality of interpersonal relationships** was sometimes perceived as low. For instance, a student considered that participation "*was very minimal. It felt contrived, and I think everyone sensed that. Our interaction was kept to the basic "as needed" level*".

Another participant noticed that "*Some meetings were actually awkward because they [their partners] barely talked*". This influence of the quality of interpersonal relationships on the perception of the VE is an element to bear in mind when conducting such a project as it can be seen as a weakness.

Factors influencing students' general appreciation

Communicating in a foreign language

The opportunity to use a second or third language during the VE was mostly appreciated. However, communication also entailed negative comments from some participants. An issue raised had to do with the necessity of using a foreign language to communicate and a lack of self-confidence. This sometimes gives rise to **difficulties to communicate**; nevertheless, as a student interestingly put it: "*Sometimes the communication with partners was difficult, but this is the part of the process that helps us to be more intercultural competent*".

The perceived obstacles to communication are inherent to VEs, namely the online setting and the presence of people coming from different cultural backgrounds ("*The high risk for misunderstandings due to either lack of English skills, or just the cultural difference. Certain phrases, or even jokes, were at times conceived a different way than intended. This risk of conflict and misunderstandings was always present, so this was a small inconvenience*").

Factors influencing students' general appreciation

Opportunity for international experience without travelling

The VEs were viewed by many participants as a way to gain **international experience** and an **alternative to physical mobility**. As such, they are often seen as a **unique opportunity**: "*I would have never been in contact with Palestinian students if not for this telecollaboration".*

Students enjoyed broadening their horizons: "*I liked being part of a diverse team that could use our diversity as a creative strength. Bringing different educational and cultural understanding to lesson design allows for the ability to "think outside the box" of one's culturally-prescribed view of education*".

The easiness of having contacts with peers abroad without travelling was greatly appreciated: "*I liked a lot that I was able to communicate and connect with someone in a different part of the world. Normally, it would be difficult to do that unless I had participated in some program or went outside of the country.*" However, far from preventing them from having a direct international experience, it "*inspired* [some of us] *to travel and to learn about other cultures*".

Factors influencing students' general appreciation

An intercultural experience

In relation to the international experience, the perception of having an **intercultural experience** influenced students' general VE appreciation: *"The opportunity to learn about other cultures and ways of seeing the world. It made me understand that there are people on the other side of the planet, who have different languages, customs, ideas and life experiences than me"*.

The idea of **exchanging and sharing views** with one's partners also appears regularly. These different elements are related to the opportunity to meet, interact and work with people from different cultures: *"Engaging with people of different cultures and values which in turn gave me more insight"*.

Students highlighted their **openness** and their **critical thinking**: *"The opportunity to talk to foreign friends and rethink what we previously never think about"*.

They also became aware of the **risk of generalization**: *"So, I only met two students and then I tend to generalize on the whole country. […] But if I keep this in mind, it's just I have to be open".*

# Factors influencing students' general appreciation

'Real' practice

The last factor related to participation and communication between partners that influenced the whole perception of the VEs is the sense of 'real' practice. Numerous students highlighted **their development of skills** thanks to the exchange ("*I did acquire skills I would not have been able to acquire otherwise"*) and considered them **useful for the future**.

Several participants report a gain in **collaboration skills**. The possibility to **practice a foreign language** is greatly appreciated: "*I faced some problems with expressing my idea because it's been a long time that I didn't practice English. So, I faced some problems but there is really a remarkable difference after the virtual exchange. I think that it's a very good way to have more confidence on oneself, to talk in public and to give one opinion".*
Pre-service teachers were particularly appreciative of this concrete experience: "*It was a very practical course in that sense, because it is something I can replicate in my teaching".*

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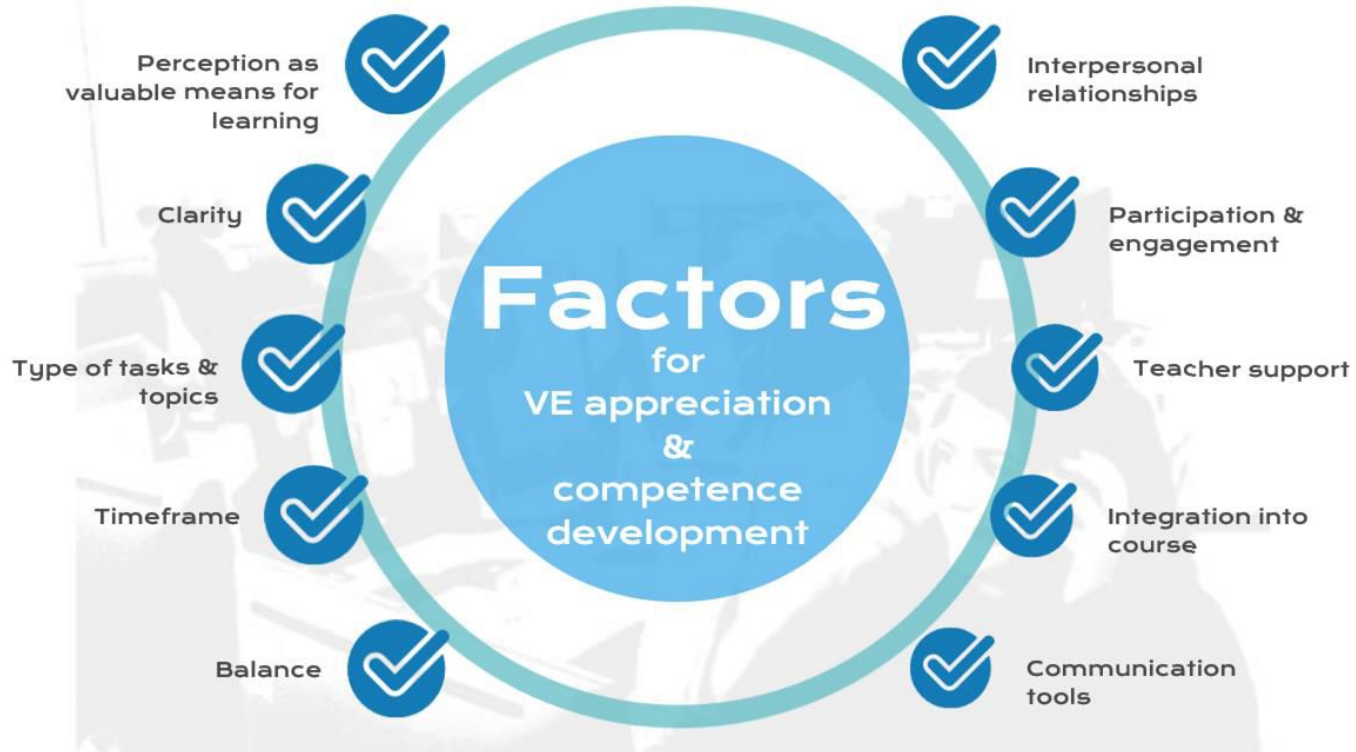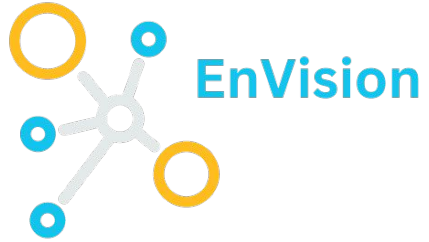
Thank you!

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