

VIRTUAL EXCHANGE AT COIMBRA GROUP UNIVERSITIES

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This brief report provides an overview of Coimbra Group (CG) universities engagement in Virtual Exchange (VE), a pedagogic approach to the internationalization of university curricula by involving students in online international programmes whereby they actively engage with groups of students who bring diverse perspectives and insights on global issues or on a specific subject they are studying¹.

As such, virtual exchange is one of many tools to support a comprehensive 'internationalisation at home' strategy which addresses issues of diversity, equity and inclusion for both domestic and international students². Virtual exchange is one of the specific areas of interest for the Education Innovation working group which has collaborated with the Academic Exchange and Mobility and the Employability working groups in presentations and discussions about virtual exchange at CG universities.

The EC has funded virtual exchange in several ways in recent years, through policy experimentations (KA3) such as the EVOLVE project, which the Coimbra Group has been directly involved in as a partner, and the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (EVE) pilot project - which many Coimbra Group university members have benefitted from. Both of these projects terminate in 2020, at a moment when universities more than ever need support from this kind of initiative.

At the time of writing this report international student mobility has come to a halt due to the Covid-19 virus, and there is great uncertainty as to the future. Virtual exchange is of greater relevance now than it was before, and continuity in support of this activity is important at this time so that the seeds that have been sown for the growth of quality virtual exchange across European universities are allowed to flourish. Continuing to invest in virtual exchange now will prepare students and staff for higher quality mobility programmes in the future.

Two models of virtual exchange

There are many different models or examples of virtual exchange which can be designed to meet a range of objectives. One way of distinguishing between approaches to virtual exchange is looking at them from the institution and/or educator's point of view.

¹ What distinguishes virtual exchange from virtual mobility is the focus on interactions and collaborations among students. The term 'virtual mobility' is generally used when students are taking courses at a distance from another university and obtaining credits from that university. Virtual exchange can of course be included in virtual mobility programmes, but student-student interaction and collaboration is not a prerequisite for virtual mobility programmes.

² Elspeth Jones (2017) Problematising and reimagining the notion of 'international student experience', *Studies in Higher Education*, 42:5, 933-943, DOI: [10.1080/03075079.2017.1293880](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1293880)

'Ready made' exchanges	Co-designed exchanges
<p>These exchanges are in a sense 'pre-packaged', having been developed by consortia of universities or external organisations. Universities can have students participate in these projects which can be integrated into curricula and students can be awarded recognition for their participation through ECTS.</p> <p>In Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange several <u>exchange activities</u> of this type are available (at no cost) to universities.</p>	<p>These 'grassroots' exchanges are co-designed by educators who collaboratively design a shared curriculum for part of their course, which will have students in groups with students from partner classes interacting and collaborating with one another on specific activities or projects. The EVOLVE project provided training and mentoring for university staff in 2018 and 2019.</p> <p>In Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange <u>training courses</u> and mentoring for educators in designing these exchanges is available until the end of 2020.</p>

The EVOLVE project

The Coimbra Group is a partner in the EVOLVE³ project (Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange), an Erasmus+ KA3 Forward-Looking Cooperation Project which aims to mainstream Virtual Exchange (VE) as an innovative educational practice in Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) across Europe. The project started on 1 January 2018 and runs to 31 July 2020. It is coordinated by the University of Groningen, The Netherlands⁴.

In 2018 the EVOLVE Baseline study⁵ was carried out, aiming to understand the current state of the art as regards understanding and implementation of Virtual Exchange in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across Europe. The survey was directed at four different types of stakeholders-educators, educational supporters, internationalisation officers and policymakers - primarily at members of the Coimbra Group and SGroup University Networks.

The Baseline study found that there was, at that time, no institutional recognition for VE in HEIs and that VE was not widely referenced in strategies of internationalisation. A small number of

³ <https://evolve-erasmus.eu/>

⁴ other partners in the project are: The University of León (Spain), Université Grenoble Alpes (France), The Open University (United Kingdom), Jan Dlugosz University (Poland), University of Padua (Italy), University of Warwick (United Kingdom), Malmö University (Sweden), Sharing Perspectives Foundation (the Netherlands), Search for Common Ground (USA), Coimbra Group and Sgroup University Networks (Belgium)

⁵ https://evolve-erasmus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Baseline-study-report-Final_Published_Incl_Survey.pdf

respondents to the survey did report some virtual exchange activities in their institutions, but there was little data on inclusion of VE at the curriculum or course level.

The baseline study was followed by case study research to understand how VE has been finding its way into those few institutions where there has been strong interest at a bottom-up level. Several CG universities have been included in these case studies, namely Edinburgh, Granada, Groningen, Padova, and Würzburg. The final case study report will be published this summer on the [EVOLVE website](#), and a series of online events to replace the final conference, will begin on 26th June. In this report a short summary of the case studies which involve CG universities is provided.

The University of Edinburgh

At the University of Edinburgh virtual exchange is currently driven by the international office and 'Edinburgh Global'⁶. Virtual exchange is part of the university's [Vision 2025](#) strategy, through which the university is committed to provide all students with an international experience. The university's internationalisation plan does not explicitly state Virtual Exchange anywhere, but it is a term the International Office has embraced. The University of Edinburgh is leader of the EC-funded [NICE](#)⁷ project (Network for Intercultural Competence to facilitate Entrepreneurship) which also involves the CG universities of Goettingen, Iasi, Padova and Salamanca as well as 3 non-CG universities. This project is based on the concept of challenge-based learning. The consortium of universities have developed seven online modules which students complete, at the same time collaborating in small transnational teams to design a solution to their challenge. 20 students from each university can take part in the course. The course falls under 'blended mobility' as some of the students are also selected for the NICE summer school. The project has been recognised as an Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange and trained facilitators support the transnational teams. The project ends in 2020 but the online modules will be available as Open Educational Resources and it is hoped that the resources will continue to be used in virtual exchange.

The University of Granada

There is a strong interest from the Vice-Rectorate of Internationalization of the University of Granada in fostering exchanges with other universities, especially with those that are part of their consortium of universities, as a means of internationalizing the curriculum and promoting internationalization at home. The interest for VE came, among others factors, as a result of their participation in EU-funded projects like OERTest, MOVINTER or VMCOLAB. In VMCOLAB each of the universities involved developed and taught one of the modules, and in each module international groups with students from each university had to carry out tasks together. The vice rectorate of internationalization realized that it was not enough to allow students from one

⁶ <https://www.teaching-matters-blog.ed.ac.uk/developing-virtual-exchange-at-the-university-of-edinburgh/>

⁷ <https://www.nice-eu.org/>

university to follow online courses at another university, but that it was important to stress how different cultural backgrounds can be used in the (online) classroom to bring new perspectives on the subject matter.

Virtual Exchange arrived at the UGR to respond to this need that they had already identified of developing intercultural skills within the disciplines. Since 2018 students at the university have been participating in the Cultural Encounters⁸ programme which is part of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange. Even if VE development is still quite limited at the UGR, they have made a considerable advancement in terms of institutionalization through the recognition of students' learning outcomes with formal accreditation. After completing the VE, students received, 2 ECTS as part of a total of 12 ECTS of free choice that they must obtain to finish their degree. In addition to these credits obtained in their transcript of records, students also receive an Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange open badge which provides additional information and can serve as evidence of the competences developed within the exchange.

University of Groningen

The University of Groningen has been strongly involved in virtual exchange for many years, beginning in language education but expanding to other disciplines. It is lead partner of the EVOLVE project, and has also developed ENVOIE (Enabling Virtual Online International Learning)⁹, an institutional project to develop online international exchange as a university-wide practice. The ENVOIE project involves 6 different faculties (Arts, Economics and Business, Behavioural and Social Studies, Theology and Religious Studies, Spatial Sciences, and University College Groningen) and is supported by teams from the Educational Support and Innovation (ESI), Language Centre (LC), and the International Classroom (IC)¹⁰ offices. The project was co-funded by the Board of the University as part of the E-learning Tender 2017-2018 because of its potential for enhancing intercultural communicative competence, language proficiency, digital literacy, and discipline-specific or transversal collaboration skills (21st century skills) and because it offered a relatively low-cost, additional tool for internationalisation.

By building on the results of the previous ENVOIE project and combining these with results of the EVOLVE and Erasmus Virtual Exchange projects, the ENVOIE II project was funded for 4 semesters in 2 academic years. (Dec. 2019 - January 2022). Besides the project manager, the project team consists of educational experts and instructional designers from both the ESI teams of Educational Innovation and Teacher Development, and Faculty of Arts colleagues working for and funded by EVOLVE. As stated in the project plan, the main objective of the project is to implement VE more firmly as educational practice across disciplines and faculties in UG. The project plans for 15 new exchanges and accommodating 8 which started in the context of ENVOIE I. Each new exchange is budgeted at around €8000. This includes provision of central

⁸ https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/activity/cultural-encounters-perspectives-populism_cs

⁹ <https://www.rug.nl/let/onze-faculteit/organisatie/diensten-en-voorzieningen/ictol/projecten/envoie/?lang=en>

¹⁰ <https://www.rug.nl/about-ug/organization/quality-assurance/in-practice/international-classroom-project/>

pedagogical and technical support to be provided by ESI and the involved Faculties and a personal budget for educators to be allocated to faculties, which they can use for hiring a student assistant or travelling to colleagues in the partner institute (if still allowed in light of the Covid-19 pandemic). This amount is granted after participation in the training and formal acceptance of a proposal to set up the exchange. There is also a small provision for renewed exchanges, again to be divided by the support team and educators.

University of Padova

The University of Padova also has a long history of involvement with Virtual Exchange above all in foreign language education with many language teachers involved in bilateral virtual exchange projects since 2000. The Department of Political Science, Law and International Studies (SPGI) has also been involving students in 'ready made' virtual exchange projects related to European and global political issues since 2009 through partnerships with Soliya and since 2013 with the Sharing Perspectives Foundation, which have recently become part of the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project. This EC initiative has allowed for the involvement of many more students across a wider range of university departments and the awarding of credits for participation. Teaching and research staff from the Next Generation Global Studies group have also contributed with content in the form of video resources to EVE, and with research evaluating the impact of virtual exchange.

The Language Centre developed the pre-mobility eTandem virtual exchange project in collaboration with the international relations division which has been running since 2016, partnering incoming students with domestic students to develop their language skills and support social and academic integration.

The international relations division has also been a partner in the NICE project and recruits students for participation in this project. There is a strong interest in strengthening virtual exchange at the University of Padova - in light of the Covid-19 situation a risk assessment was carried out and the need for virtual exchange is highlighted in the risk mitigation strategy - both to offer students an international and intercultural experience today when mobility is not actually possible, and to prepare students for quality mobility experiences in the future. The international relations division is developing a strategic plan for the next 6 months and will include virtual exchange in this, above all in activities with key partners, such as the European University Alliance ARQUS. In June 2020 a staff week on virtual exchange will be held, having switched from face to face to the online mode.

University of Julius-Maximilian-University of Würzburg (JMU)

At JMU interest in VE emerged in 2018 and in just two years JMU has managed to involve several different university centres, in particular the *ProfiLehre/Hochschuldidaktik* and the Career Centre, both of which are part of the Service Centre for Innovation in Teaching and Learning (ZiLS) which

is a university management staff office. This strong interest developed as a result of a series of interactions through involvement in the Coimbra Group.

ProfiLehre offers lecturers the opportunity to obtain Teaching Certificates at Basic, Advanced and Specialization levels. The Thematic Certificate of Internationalization of Teaching and Learning (ITL) has also been developed which teachers can acquire either in addition to or independently of the University Teaching Certificate programs established throughout the Bavarian Universities. Attending *ProfiLehre* coaching on Virtual Exchange and/or participation in one of the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange and EVOLVE co-laboratory trainings, are recognised activities for the ITL Certificate. The workload for both the coaching and the online training are recognised as work unit credits for the Teaching Certificates of the Bavarian Universities. The integration of Virtual Exchange into the certificate has been implemented in cooperation with the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange pilot project. The development of the ITL certificate was made possible thanks to funding received from the Quality Pact for Teaching which is the third pillar of the Higher Education Pact of the Federal Government and the German States to improve study conditions and the quality of teaching and mentoring.

The Career Centre plans to focus more on “21st century skills” and lifelong learning in cooperation with partners from within and outside university. As a result, it has implemented two Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange pilot programmes in the wintersemester of 2019/2020 with Online Facilitated Dialogue (Social Circles) and an iOOC (Cultural Encounters) because these equip students with digital as well as intercultural competencies. These Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange modules are part of the “key qualifications pool” and present a blended learning format, that is they are offered in combination with two classroom-based sessions before and after the courses. The Career Centre has also recently taken on the challenge to create the Centre’s first self-contained virtual exchange project with a partner at a foreign university.

The teams at *ProfiLehre* and the Career Center are determined to keep addressing the topic of VE as much as possible with stakeholders at different levels of the institution (students, educators, heads of departments and central administrative institutions, the international office, the vice dean of internationalisation) and by looking for collaboration with other stakeholders both in and outside of the own institutions.

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange

Almost half of CG universities have been involved in this initiative, with a significant increase in the first half of 2020. Students at some CG universities have been taking part in ‘ready made’ exchanges, and CG university staff have been participating in the training programmes developed for teaching and administrative staff to implement VE within their own institutions as part of their ‘internationalisation at home’ strategies. This increased interest and involvement in VE can be attributed in part to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on student mobility and the recognised need for partner universities to be able to continue collaborating and building on the strong relationships that have been developed through the CG network. This is highlighted also in the

CG Report *“Practices at Coimbra Group Universities in response to the COVID-19 - A Collective Reflection on the Present and Future of Higher Education in Europe” (May 2020)*

Possible Futures for virtual exchange for the Coimbra Group network

VE at CG universities is somewhat fragmentary, though strong collaborations are beginning to emerge between university partners through VE activities, in particular at the universities involved in the 5 case studies listed above.

Below are a list of possible future directions for the Coimbra Group with regard to virtual exchange, but the successful implementation of most of these projects would require the investment of resources. Though virtual exchange may offer a ‘lower cost’ form of internationalisation in comparison to mobility, quality virtual exchange and institutional adoption will require resources. Possible initiatives could include:

- Coimbra Group becoming a partner in a future Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange consortium (if a new tender is published and discussions are held with other organisations).
- The development of Coimbra Group Virtual Exchanges. These could be included as an optional, credit-bearing course for students at CG universities.
- Development and integration of CG lecture series with virtual exchange dialogue sessions (Narratives of Europe, Narratives for Europe)
- Professional development specifically for CG university staff on virtual exchange - to strengthen the understanding of VE and lead to new CG joint VEs
- Virtual exchanges to support cooperation and development activities of the Development Cooperation group
- A pre-mobility virtual exchange amongst CG members to promote and improve the quality of student mobility between CG universities
- A CG networked advocacy seminar/virtual exchange in collaboration with Scholars at Risk
- A research project on internationalisation at home and virtual exchange

This report is available in PDF format at <https://www.coimbra-group.eu/cg-publications/>

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