Introduction

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Virtual Exchange (VE) is a pedagogic practice based on values such as reciprocity and mutual learning, offering young people opportunities to engage with multiple perspectives on particular issues or disciplinary areas, and to interact and collaborate with distant peers within structured educational programmes in formal or non-formal contexts. VE is not a novel practice, as it has been implemented in a variety of contexts and academic disciplines for nearly 30 years (O'Dowd, 2018), since the Internet made it possible to connect classrooms. In recent years, VE has become recognised as a way to internationalise the curriculum (Leask, 2015), as a form of 'internationalisation at home'.

The recent Covid-19 pandemic has led to a heightened interest in VE, due no doubt to the halt and predicted reduction in student and staff mobility for the near future. Yet this growing interest may also be a response to the need for more environmentally sustainable, and also more accessible and equitable ways to offer meaningful international and intercultural experiences to both students and staff (De Wit & Altbach, 2020). The need for international collaboration is stronger than ever – but experiences of international collaboration based on principles of mutuality and reciprocity are somewhat lacking.

This volume brings together a series of case studies which illustrate how VE projects have been developed and implemented in a range of different settings. Most of the case studies presented were developed in the context of the Erasmus+VE project (2018-2020), a pilot project funded by the European

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Commission[3]. The aims of the project are to offer young people in Europe and in Southern Mediterranean countries opportunities to engage in a meaningful cross-cultural experience, as part of their formal or non-formal education. The project's specific objectives include:

- encouraging intercultural dialogue through online people-to-people interactions;

- promoting various types of VE as a complement to Erasmus+ physical mobility, allowing more young people to benefit from an intercultural and international experience;

- enhancing critical thinking and media literacy, and the use of the Internet and social media;

- fostering the development of soft skills, notably to enhance employability;

- supporting the objectives of the 2015 Paris Declaration; and

- strengthening the youth dimension of the EU Neighbourhood Policy.

The E+VE project was accompanied by monitoring and evaluation of activities by a research team, and impact reports have been published every year (see Helm & van der Velden, 2020). The case studies in this volume, however, bring to the fore the voices of some of the beneficiaries of the project, that is educators and youth workers who implemented VE. Their case studies present two main models of VE, as outlined in Table 1 below.

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3. E+VE is a pilot project established under a contract with the Education, Audiovisual, and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), financed by the European Union's budget. It is implemented by a consortium composed by Search for Common Ground (Search), Sharing Perspectives Foundation (SPF), Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF), UNIMED, Soliya, UNICollaboration, Kiron Open Higher Education (Kiron), and Migration Matters.

Table 1.   Models of VE

'Ready made', facilitator-led dialogue exchanges	Co-designed exchanges
These exchanges are developed and implemented by organisations that have specialised in this activity. Universities have students participate in these projects, which are integrated into curricula, and students may be awarded recognition for their participation. Examples of these are the Connect Programme, a facilitator-led dialogue exchange developed and implemented by Soliya[4] and thematic, dialogue-based exchanges such as those developed by the Sharing Perspectives Foundation[5].	These 'grassroots' exchanges are collaboratively designed by educators who develop a shared curriculum for (part of) their course. Activities or projects are designed so that students in partner classes interact and collaborate with one another in order to meet the learning objectives. In non-formal education contexts these activities are collaboratively designed by youth workers.

In the context of E+VE, training courses were offered to university staff (both educators and administrative staff, mostly but not only international relations officers) and youth workers interested in developing and/or implementing VEs to meet their specific needs and target groups. Based on an experiential and collaborative approach, these courses allowed the participants to have an experience of VE, engaging in both synchronous and asynchronous activities as well as in facilitated dialogue sessions, and exchanging knowledge, experiences, and perspectives. In the advanced training and the course for youth workers, participants collaborated in the design of a Transnational Exchange Project (TEP). However, not all educators and youth workers that took part in the training events actually went on to develop exchanges for a range of reasons, including the difficulty in finding a partner, changes in their working situations, lack of time to invest, not feeling prepared for it, and perhaps not fully understanding how it would fold out.

The idea for this collection of case studies came above all from the strongly perceived need for concrete examples of VE which would help educators and

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4. Developed by the non government organisation Soliya.

5. https://sharingperspectivesfoundation.com/

youth workers to get a sense of what VE actually 'looks like'. The case studies are therefore examples of how VEs have been designed and/or implemented in different settings, to meet the needs of specific target groups. They are not intended as models of 'best practice' or ideal scenarios for VE, but rather 'real life' contextualised examples of how VE has been designed and implemented.

The authors of the case studies were asked to provide some information about the settings in which their exchanges were developed and/or implemented, the aims of their VE, information on the different steps taken in the design and implementation of their project, and how the participants' learning was assessed. They were also asked to write about the lessons learnt, and reflect on how they would change the exchange if they were to repeat it. VE is an often 'messy' endeavour: whilst interactions and activities may be structured and planned, the outcomes are unpredictable and depend on a multiplicity of factors. Yet it is often the unexpected and the challenges that lead us to reflect and learn.

The case studies in this volume illustrate various different 'models' of VE. The majority fall into the category of co-designed or 'grassroots' VE projects. These are generally developed in collaboration by partnering educators or youth workers around a specific theme, disciplinary area, or set of competences. However there are also several case studies (**Al Mqadma & Al Karriri**; **Hoskins & Reynolds**; **Giralt**; **Bruni**) which report on how some of the 'ready made', dialogue-based VEs developed by Soliya and Sharing Perspectives have been integrated in courses in different disciplinary and geographic contexts. In addition, **MacKinnon, Ensor, Kleban, and Trégoat** describe how they used digital badges as a way to acknowledge the skills developed by their students.

Most of the case studies presented come from the Higher Education (HE) sector, first of all because the majority of VEs in the context of E+VE have been developed in HE contexts, and also because writing about and publishing their work is a more common working practice for lecturers. However we have included two case studies which look at VE in the context of youth work (**Dixon & Tahmaz**; **van de Kraak & Lai**) and are sure that in the near future there

will be more VEs in this sector, as well as trans-sectoral exchanges which bring together universities and youth organisations.

VE has been practiced in some disciplinary areas for decades and there is a considerable amount of research literature in particular on foreign language and intercultural learning, where it is known as 'telecollaboration' (Guth & Helm, 2010) or 'online intercultural exchange'(O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016), and management or business studies (Jimenez, Boehne, Taras, & Caprar, 2017). In this collection we have actively sought case studies from other less represented disciplinary areas, such as tourism (**Háhn & Radke**), performing arts (**Gorman, Kanninen, & Syrjä**), history (**Cioltan-Drăghiciu & Stanciu**), and STEM (**Fernández-Raga & Villard**; **Auffret & Sens**, two examples of trans-disciplinary projects), in addition to language and culture (**Vinagre, Wigham, & Giralt**; **Moalla, Abid, & Balaman**) and business (**Koris & Vuylsteke**; **Koris, Hernández-Nanclares, & Mato Díaz**; **Cheikhrouhou & Marchewka**).

Several of the VEs reported in the case studies can also be considered examples of what is now referred to as 'blended mobility', that is the combination of VE with short-term mobility projects, a format which will become more common in the upcoming Erasmus programme[6]. **Gorman et al**'s telepresence in theatre project was intended to culminate with a short-term mobility of students from Coventry (UK) to Tampere (Finland) but this was thwarted, like all student mobility, by Covid-19. **Cioltan-Drăghiciu and Stanciu**'s history project succeeded in its second iteration to secure funds for students to cross the border and actually meet one another in both universities and participate in events in which students collaboratively presented their research projects to the host universities, expanding the understanding of VE to their institutions. **Griggio and Pittarello**'s VE was specifically designed for incoming international students, to support their social, linguistic, and academic integration on arriving at the host university through contact with local students before their arrival, and to prepare outgoing students for their upcoming mobility. **Millner**'s case study describes how a large scale VE project integrated a 'mobility for some'

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6. http://www.erasmusplus.it/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Bruno-Castro_DG-EAC.pdf

component whereby one or two participants from each partner university took part in a one-week trip to Brussels. Whilst this brought tangible benefits for the direct beneficiaries, the majority of participants were excluded, and the viability of the model of 'mobility for some' is discussed.

VE provides an opportunity for reflection and research on educational practice, but for some of the authors it has also opened up avenues for collaborative research in their subject disciplines: **Cioltan-Drăghiciu and Stanciu**, for example, report how their three-year project is embedded in a research study on cultural remembrance and the construction of history in their respective contexts. Similarly, **Cheikhrouhou and Marchewka** found that an additional benefit of their VE project was the possibility of scientific cooperation. By working together on the contents of their TEP, they discovered shared topics of interest and have since expanded their academic cooperation.

Co-designed VEs can also be seen as a form of continuous professional development – as the process of developing an exchange entails reflecting on and discussing one's pedagogic practice and context, and learning about one's partners'. Through the E+VE project, a community of practice has emerged, many of these case studies have been presented and discussed virtually, and an ethos of collaboration and sharing has developed.

The case studies in this volume cover a wide range of countries: from Finland, Poland, the UK, Hungary, Romania, France, Spain, Germany, Belgium, Ireland, Italy, The Netherlands, to Turkey, Palestine, and Tunisia. The geographical scope of this collection is limited to Europe and Southern Mediterranean countries as this is the area that the E+VE project targeted. This is no doubt a limitation, as the collection is somewhat Eurocentric. In addition, the majority of the authors are from the field of HE. What we would like to see in the future are more case studies from non-European countries including, for example, sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Central and South America, and covering a wider range of languages, since the majority of exchanges reported were carried out in English. We also hope that future collections will gather examples from a wider range of disciplinary areas, in particular the hard sciences and STEM as this is

where there is a considerable gap. Finally, we would like to see more case studies involving youth work, as well as studies of VE across educational sectors.

The case studies can be read in any order. We have divided them into three groups: teacher-designed VE projects, ready-made options, and projects in youth work. The structure of the case studies is similar, facilitating comparison between them. For this reason, we believe the book would be particularly useful to educators in HE institutions looking for inspiration, international relations officers looking for ideas to implement in their own institutions, youth workers wishing to understand how they can integrate VE into their work, and finally teacher trainers looking for examples of innovative teaching practices.

We would like to express our gratitude to the authors who were willing to share their experiences with us and you, our readers. We believe their studies show the many ways in which VE can enrich university curricula and non-formal education alike, offering young people around the world opportunities to connect and develop meaningful relationships online.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CEF or CEFR Common European Framework of Reference (for Languages)

E+VE Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange

EC European Commission

ELF English as a Lingua Franca (not sure we have it, but just in case)

HE Higher Education

HEI Higher Education Institution

TEP Transnational (Virtual) Exchange Project

VE Virtual Exchange

Designing and implementing virtual exchange – a collection of case studies
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