Virtual Exchange and Initial Teacher Education: Findings of the EVALUATE European Policy Experiment

Virtual Exchange is an educational approach which involves the engagement of groups of learners in extended periods of online intercultural interaction and collaboration with international peers as an integrated part of their educational programmes and under the guidance of educators and/or facilitators. Virtual Exchange is based on student-centred, international and collaborative approaches to learning where knowledge and understanding are constructed through online interaction and negotiation with students from other cultures. There are various models of Virtual Exchange and this study looked at the telecollaborative model which involves partner classes working under the guidance of their teachers. Telecollaborative Virtual Exchange generally follows the following process:

The EVALUATE project (http://www.evaluateproject.eu/) is a European Policy Experimentation (EPE) funded by the European Commission’s Erasmus+ programme (EACEA/34/2015). The study examined the impact of the telecollaborative model of Virtual Exchange on students and teachers of Initial Teacher Education. The EVALUATE consortium is led by the University of León, Spain and brings together 5 public authorities, 7 universities and a university network.

The aim of policy experimentations is to assess the effectiveness and potential scalability of innovative policy measures through experimental or semi-experimental approaches. This particular EPE evaluated the impact of the telecollaborative model of Virtual Exchange on student teachers' digital, intercultural and foreign language competences.

We then worked with public authorities in 5 European regions and countries to upscale the approach across Europe.

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Between 2017-18, the project consortium worked with teacher trainers from 34 institutions of Initial Teacher Education and organised 25 Virtual Exchanges which involved over 1000 student teachers. In total, institutions of Initial Teacher Education from 16 countries were involved. The majority of institutions were from Europe but teacher trainers from the United States, Brazil, Israel, Turkey, Macau and Canada also took part in the study. The classes of Initial Teacher Education were matched together and engaged in a period of intensive Virtual Exchange with partner classes in institutions in other countries based on specifically-designed tasks and content related to pedagogical digital competence as well as intercultural competence.

The guiding research question for the study was:
“Will participation in Virtual Exchange contribute to the development of competences which student teachers need to teach, collaborate and innovate effectively in a digitalised and cosmopolitan world?”

The learning gains from these exchanges were analysed using qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. In collaboration with the public authorities, the consortium are now undertaking actions to upscale the use of Virtual Exchange in teacher education across Europe.

**EVALUATE involved:**

- 25 Virtual Exchange projects between classes of Initial Teacher Education at 34 Teacher Training institutions
- 1018 students of Initial Teacher Education taking part in the Virtual Exchanges and the data collection process.
- Quantitative and qualitative research instruments collecting data on students’ digital, intercultural and linguistic competence development as well as on the learning experiences of both students and teacher trainers.
Main findings of the European Policy Experiment

- Virtual Exchange is popular with both students and teachers
  - 70% of participants indicated that they had learned a lot from the Virtual Exchange.
  - 76% believed the Virtual Exchanges will be useful for their future career as teachers.
  - 75.2% would recommend other student-teachers to do telecollaborative Virtual Exchange in their courses.

- Virtual Exchange meets both international and digital learning goals for Initial Teacher Education
  - Students reported that participation in Virtual Exchange led to increased knowledge of how to use technology in the classroom for international collaboration.
  - For many students who come from homogenous backgrounds, Virtual Exchange was often their first serious engagement with members of other cultures.
  - Following their experiences of Virtual Exchange, students reported increased confidence in working in international and intercultural contexts.
  - In facing and overcoming challenges students developed team work and problem solving skills.

- Virtual Exchange facilitates innovation and internationalisation at home in the university classroom
  - Students reported that Virtual Exchange provided them with new intercultural and digital learning experiences which forced them to move beyond their accustomed learning styles.
  - Teachers found that Virtual Exchange had forced them to go further in their teaching and had led them to use more innovative teaching strategies.
  - Virtual Exchange brought teachers to take up other international learning opportunities including new physical mobility agreements, co-authoring of articles and staff mobility visits.

- The growth of Virtual Exchange depends on the provision of increased training and support from institutions and educational decision makers. Institutions of Initial Teacher Education and public authorities can support Virtual Exchange by providing:
  - Funding for teacher training and for short periods of physical mobility to facilitate exchange planning.
  - Promoting and collaborating with European initiatives such as Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange.
  - A recognition of the workload and innovative character of Virtual Exchange in national and institutional teacher evaluation systems, calls for projects and policy documentation.

Students’ voices:

“I think it is a great experience as you get to share your ideas with people from other cultures who have different life experiences so you learn from each other. Now that the world is globalized it is important that we learn how to collaborate with people from other countries.”

“I learned a lot with this experience. It was different from any other activity that I have done. It helped my communication skills, in the practice of the second language, team work, learning about education in a different culture and more.”
How can we support Virtual Exchange and extend its use in Initial Teacher Education?

Based on the findings of our study, we make the following recommendations:

Higher Education Institutions can…

○ increase the number of teacher-training programmes for staff through collaboration with the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange programme.
○ offer teachers extra credit or time release for carrying out Virtual Exchange in their classes.
○ mention participation in Virtual Exchange in students’ European Diploma Supplement.
○ award students credits for participating in Virtual Exchange.
○ make Virtual Exchange part of their internationalisation at home strategy.

Regional & National Public Authorities can…

○ provide funding for training programmes on virtual exchange for teacher trainers in their countries/regions.
○ incorporate Virtual Exchange into the Public Authorities’ projects and initiatives.
○ mention and recommend Virtual Exchange in Public Authorities’ publications and strategy papers.
○ promote Virtual Exchange to counterparts in other regions/countries and to other educational decision makers in the EU.

The European Union and Erasmus+ can…

○ raise awareness of Virtual Exchange as a valid part of universities’ internationalisation policies.
○ provide funding for Virtual Exchange ‘planning visits’ for teachers to meet and work with their partner teachers.
○ increase funding for projects and research initiatives specifically related to the activity.
○ provide specific activities of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange dedicated to Initial Teacher Education.

Teachers’ voices:
“[Teachers need]….a recognition of what we are doing. I believe teachers get motivated when what they do is valued. And this can be valued by giving them recognition for their work.”

“Teachers will need to have provided with special time for planning and time to develop Virtual Exchange. They will need much more time. Virtual Exchange (as any form of collaboration) is really important for learning, but it takes more time than individual work.”

The final conference of the EVALUATE project on the theme of Virtual Exchange and Teacher Education will take place at the University of Léon, Spain on 4-6 September 2019. The full report of this European Policy Experiment will be available on the EVALUATE website in 2019: http://www.evaluateproject.eu/. Further information is also available by contacting: evaluateprojecteu@gmail.com