Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange

Handbook for International Relations Officers

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1. About this handbook

This handbook aims to provide universities' International Relations Officers with all the information they need in order to engage their universities in the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project activities.

The document starts with a **Background section** that focuses on what Virtual Exchange is and on the characteristics of the European Commission's Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project. Then, the **benefits of getting involved** in the project are presented, together with some guidelines on the opportunities offered by the project and the way teaching and administrative staff can get involved and engage students. To exemplify this, some **practical examples** of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities are provided, followed by some ideas on **how to integrate Virtual Exchange activities** in the university's educational offer. Finally, some **practical steps** are proposed that International Relations Officers can take to engage in the project, complemented by some **tools** that can help you reach out to the university staff.

The handbook aims to answer all your questions related to the project. In case you have further questions, please contact **erasmusvirtual@uni-med.net**.

2. Background information

What is Virtual Exchange?

Developed over the past 30 years from experience in the field of educational exchange and study abroad, and evolving rapidly with the growth of ICT, Virtual Exchange is defined as **technology-enabled, facilitated, people-to-people education programmes sustained over a period of time**. By employing a wide variety of technologies and educational pedagogy, Virtual Exchange makes it possible for every young person to have meaningful, transnational and intercultural experiences.

Education exchanges and study abroad programmes are among the best means to prepare young people for our contemporary world, increasing their inclination and capacity to deal effectively with difference and to communicate and collaborate across cultures. But only 3.7 percent of youth populations in Europe participate in international exchange programmes, and fewer than 1% of young people worldwide. Virtual Exchange is uniquely placed to expand the scope and reach of traditional physical exchange programmes, thanks to its inclusive and scalable character.

How is Virtual Exchange different from other forms of online learning and from Virtual Mobility?

Virtual Exchange distinguishes itself from other forms of online learning in several ways:

- The focus is primarily on **people-to-people interaction** and dialogue whereas the primary focus in many e-learning programmes is on content.
- Learning is **experiential**, with participants experiencing first-hand how to communicate and collaborate with their peers from different backgrounds and cultures.
- The learning goals or outcomes include **soft skills** that are key for employability and that are often not formally recognized, such as the development of intercultural awareness, media and digital literacy, teamwork, etc.
- It is primarily **learner-led**: following the philosophy of dialogue where participants are the main drivers of knowledge.

Virtual Exchange is different with respect to Virtual Mobility, since Virtual mobility does not necessarily include student-to-student dialogue, and usually refers to distance and eLearning learning courses (for example students taking one course at another university without actually going there, and having these international credits recognised through a learning agreement between universities). Virtual mobility programmes and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) could be enhanced with an Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange component.

How does it work in practice?

Virtual Exchange sessions take place on the **Exchange Portal**, a custom-designed online platform, based on best practices in conflict resolution to optimise cross-cultural communication among participants. The platform includes video-conferencing rooms for online dialogue sessions, a stream section for participants to engage asynchronously and an extensive resources section on all programmatic and technical elements of participation.

During Virtual Exchange facilitated sessions, participants meet in real time to discuss a variety of themes with peers from different cultural backgrounds, learn about the viewpoints of others while critically reflecting on their own, learn from experts and practitioners, and improve their language and communication skills as well as their confidence, empathy and curiosity.
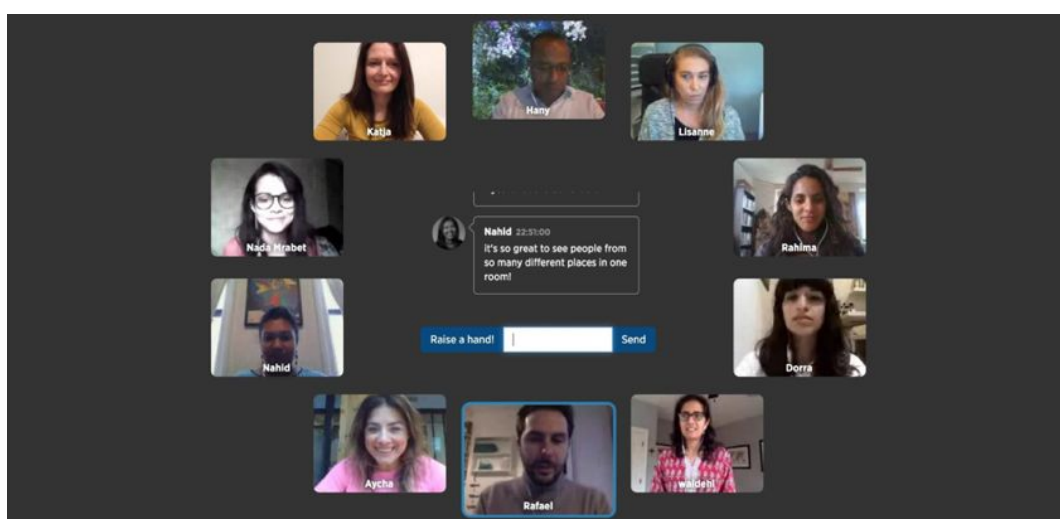

Figure 1: Screenshot of a Virtual Exchange session

What is the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project?

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange is a new European Commission project that aims to **expand the reach and scope of the Erasmus+ programme through virtual exchanges**. The project is providing a ground-breaking way for young people to engage in intercultural learning, and is open to any young person aged 18-30 residing in Europe and the Southern Mediterranean. It proposes different Virtual Exchange programmes of varying duration and thematic scope for young people. It also offers training opportunities for educators to develop innovative online teaching methods. **All project activities are totally free of charge**. More information at https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual.

During its first pilot year in 2018, the project engaged over **8.200 participants from 42 European and Southern Mediterranean countries**. A strong impact was achieved in fostering the development of employability and interpersonal skills among participants, and triggering attitudinal changes. Young people developed key competencies such as intercultural communication, critical thinking, curiosity and self-esteem, became more aware of stereotypes they held, and built meaningful relationships with peers from other cultures.

Download and read the brochure detailing 2018 Achievements, or read more about the project's impact in the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange 2018 Impact Report.

3. Why and how to get engaged

Why should my university get involved in Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange?

There are many reasons for your university to get involved in Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange:

- **Enhance internationalisation at home**, by enabling those students who cannot take part in a mobility programme to have an international and intercultural experience without leaving their home institution, thus promoting a great level of inclusion.
- **Equip your students with much-needed s**o**ft skills** that improve employability, including the ability to work in a virtual and intercultural environment
- **Enhance competencies of your teaching and administrative staff** to work in an intercultural and international setting, also by adopting innovative ICT tools.
- **Enrich your university mobility offer**, by implementing pre-mobility activities devoted to outgoing/incoming students prior to their departure so as to deepen their intercultural and language preparation.

What activities does the project offer?

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange offers two categories of activities to universities:

Virtual Exchanges. These are ready-made Virtual Exchange programmes, that can be integrated in different ways in the university educational offer (more information in Section 5). The duration of these exchanges varies from 2 to 10 weeks. Exchanges are available in English and Arabic.

Virtual Exchange Training. These training course target teaching and administrative staff who want to learn how to create their own international Virtual Exchange project. The basic training lasts 4 weeks (2-3 hours of work per week) and combines asynchronous activities with one or two Virtual Exchange sessions. Advanced training is also available, to help teaching staff to design and implement their own transnational Virtual Exchange projects with one or more partner institution(s) in another country. The training is available in English and French.

What can teaching staff do through Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange?

Teaching staff can get involved in the project in two ways:

1. **Involve their students into ready-made Virtual Exchange programmes**, either online facilitated dialogue programmes (see here) or thematic interactive online courses (see here). Under this option, the project team will be in charge of programme implementation and will provide the teaching staff with detailed feedback on the students' participation and performance.
2. **Engage in an online training on Virtual Exchange** with the objective to set up their own international Virtual Exchange project in collaboration with one or more colleagues from another country (more information here). This option implies a higher time commitment on the side of the teaching staff but gives the possibility of tailoring the Virtual Exchange to their subject area, the courses they are teaching, and partnerships they already have.

What can administrative staff do through Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange?

Administrative staff can enroll in a basic training course to help them gain a better understanding of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange through an experiential learning approach. This course is of particular interest to staff working in international offices, or responsible for internationalisation in departments or faculties, eLearning or digital support staff, those working in Teaching and Learning Centres. This training will equip them to support the implementation of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange at their university.

Can students get involved directly?

The project offers a number of activities to which students can sign up directly without the need to involve teaching staff, that you can promote among your student population. Example of activities where students can apply directly are the Social Circles and the Interactive Open Online Courses.

Is there a recognition scheme for Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activities?

Every participant, trainee, and coordinator (both students and staff) who successfully completes an Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activity will gain an Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Open Badge. Open Badges are verifiable, portable digital badges with embedded metadata about competencies and achievements. Furthermore, your students will become part of an international network of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange alumni.

4. Examples of Erasmus+ Virtual exchange activities

Example 1: a professor enriches his/her teaching activities with Online Facilitated Dialogues

Simon, a Business School professor, (he/she could also be from Anthropology, Sociology, Political Science, Communication, Engineering, or any other discipline) decided to enrich his course by integrating the Connect Programme, an online facilitated dialogue that comes under four different modules, ranging in duration between four and eight weeks. The activity complements classroom learning with first-hand practical peer-to-peer learning. With the module Simon selected, his students engaged in two hours weekly online sessions with international peers for eight weeks, totalling their face-to-face interaction to 16 hours.

During the programme, his students participated in technology enabled face-to face conversations around current global events in the presence of highly trained facilitators to apply new understanding of diverse cultures, beliefs, economies and forms of society to deepen their local and global knowledge. While doing so, they developed a set of skills, attitudes and behaviours that would enable them to approach and engage with cultural/international diversity with confidence, including skills around collaboration and conflict resolution that are typically known as innovation enablers of the 21st Century.

In order to integrate the activity in his course, Simon identified an academic incentive to ensure student participation such as allocating a portion of the final grade to the activity; made room in his syllabus that would allow for 20-25 hours student commitment by replacing an existing assignment with the activity; and communicated clearly the goals and expectations of the programme with his students. During the weeks the activity was in session, Simon continued to meet with students at regular class hours and supported student learning by allowing the students to reflect on their individual experiences in the classroom. He received weekly reports on student performance and participation; and screened evaluation results, which he has relied upon for his final grading. Simon also ran his own evaluations which showed students achieved the learning objectives and grew personally. Given the huge success of the pilot, after consultations with his department colleagues, the course that integrated the Connect Programme became a required component of the undergraduate international business programme.

Example 2: a professor enriches his/her teaching activities with a Virtual Exchange Course

Marta lectures in Applied Linguistics at Limerick University, Ireland. She wanted to offer her students an opportunity to learn with and from peers across cultural boundaries, build practical 21st-century skills and complement their theoretical knowledge. Discussing with the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange partnerships team, strong overlaps were found between the themes and learning outcomes of one

Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange interactive course and those of Marta's course (Examples of the various interactive courses on current socio-political topics, ranging from 5-10 weeks, can be found here).
The academic level, background and needs of her course were discussed and a model of implementation was chosen that best suited Marta and her class. Marta chose to offer the course using a *blended learning* approach within her 6 ECTS compulsory module. She enrolled over thirty 1st year BA students within her module, *Communication across Cultures,* to take part in the interactive Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange course. In so doing, she engaged both the confident and shy students, those who were motivated from the outset and those who conveyed to her how much they gained only after they had completed the course.

During the course, students learned from expert academics and practitioners through original thematic video lecture series. In parallel, in the weekly facilitated virtual exchange sessions, they discussed the course themes with cultural "others" to learn about diverse viewpoints while critically reflecting on their own. They also built transversal skills through completing a practice-based assignment. Reflecting on their experience, her students observed: *"I knew from the first session that this project was going to push me out of my comfort zone, but I recognized that this experience was an opportunity to grow."* And *"I have to say I thoroughly enjoyed the past few weeks and truly do believe it will have a lasting effect on me as an academic student."*

Marta's model has received institutional support both from the Assistant Dean of Internationalisation and from the Coordinator of the Language Learning Hub, who are working with other departments to expand the University's engagement in the project. Marta continues integrating Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange courses in her Communication across Cultures module and also has extended it to other modules she coordinates including a module on Language and Technology, which had more than 70 students participating in autumn 2018.

Example 3: two professors setup a collaborative project based on Virtual Exchange

Nadia teaches entrepreneurship at the Higher Institute of Technological Studies of Béja (Tunisia), and her partner, Gosia, is a research and teaching assistant from Cracow University of Economics. She gives classes in strategic management and international negotiations. They were interested in enriching and expanding their existing university courses by adding an international and intercultural dimension, so they followed the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Basic training. The project team then put them in contact as they had similar interests, and they followed the Advanced Training during which they designed their virtual exchange. Together they developed a project which explores entrepreneurial eco-systems in European countries. "It helps students be aware of the differences and similarities between Poland and Tunisia", explains Nadia. "We want them to feel inspired to adopt new practices."

Gosia explains that comparing and contrasting practices with another country is a good way of making us aware of what we do in our own society. Collaboration is progressing positively according to both: "I've had far more students applying than places available" laughs Gosia. Nadia's students are learning about how European universities function. "They are interested in the fact that students in Poland study in the morning and have jobs in the afternoon. This is a very big difference and something that is not possible in Tunisia. They are curious and making many comparisons". The exchange is an integral part of the courses they teach.

Example 4: Virtual Exchanges for Administrative Staff

Sabine works at a German university for the Teaching and Learning Centre, supporting innovation in teaching by organising workshops for teaching staff. She also collaborates with the international office and the careers office. She attended the Basic Training course to learn more about Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange and understand how it could be implemented at her university. She has now decided to follow the Advanced Training as she has been asked to develop a virtual exchange project for new staff at the international relations office. The project is aimed at developing their language and intercultural skills, and at enabling them to work with staff at other institutions on a personal and professional level. This will also help to establish longer lasting cooperation, share work perspectives and prepare for physical mobility. She has found partners at universities in Italy and Morocco who are going to develop this virtual exchange with her during the course and promote it for staff in their institutions. Also, through the experience of designing and then implementing a virtual exchange herself Sabine will acquire the skills to be able to support educators at her university to design and implement virtual exchanges on the basis of their needs and interests. As her university is part of a European Universities Alliance it is important to increase the cooperation and mobility between staff and students at her university, and their partners. In her view, virtual exchange is going to play a key role in this. She also sees virtual exchange as a way of enhancing the quality of teaching and improving collaborations between staff in joint degree programmes.

Example 5: Virtual Exchanges for International Students – the *eTandem* project

Lisa works for the University Language Centre (ULC) of the University of Padova, Italy, and she runs the *eTandem* project, which is a pre-mobility virtual exchange lasting 8 weeks, matching up Italian university students who wish to learn a foreign language, with students in other countries who are going to study at the University of Padova as international or Erasmus students in the following semester. She has followed the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange facilitator training, and her team have followed the Advanced training to develop virtual exchange projects.

The *eTandem* project helps international students to become familiar with the host university, culture and language before arriving. They interact with peers and participate in the eTandem community with the support of trained facilitators who support interaction by proposing activities and various themes which they discuss every week. They also have facilitated dialogue sessions supported by trained Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange facilitators. In this way, students deepen their linguistic and intercultural knowledge in an authentic context, the integration of international students with host country students is boosted, and the whole university benefits from greater internationalisation at home. Upon completion of the project, moreover, most participating students say they feel better prepared to leave for their mobility exchange. The project has become particularly significant for KA107 students, especially for its intercultural dimension and the opportunity for international students to meet peers in Padova who will then also become their first contact upon their arrival.

5. How to integrate Virtual Exchange activities within your educational offer

Higher Education Institutions have a number of different models to choose from when integrating Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange into their educational programmes. Each Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange activity has its own integration options. The recommended way to pilot a Virtual Exchange is by integrating it into an existing course as a required, graded component of that course. To do this, professors replace some content within their syllabi with the Virtual Exchange.

Below are a number of integration models.

1. Integrate into an existing accredited course

Integration of the virtual exchange activity into an existing, accredited, elective or non-elective course, as a required or optional, graded project.

2. Offer as a-stand-alone credited course

Integration of the virtual exchange activity by creating a stand-alone course where the activity makes up the majority of the course-work.

3. Extracurricular integration with no credits

Professors promote the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange opportunities to students, giving them the option to participate as an extra-curricular course and to receive a certificate of completion but receive no academic credits.

Please get in touch with us at <u>erasmusvirtual@uni-med.net</u> to see how to best integrate the Virtual Exchange activities of your preference within your academic offer.

6. Take action: practical steps

Step 1: identify a local coordinator

Your university's participation in Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange can be managed centrally (for example by the International Relations or the Erasmus+ Office). Alternatively, activities can be implemented by a specific department within a certain discipline. Also, a member of the teaching staff can decide to be a contact person for the project.

In all these cases, having one (or more) **institutional coordinator(s)** who can act as a contact point is fundamental. This will be the person who we will contact with upcoming project opportunities and who will liaise with interested teaching and administrative staff.

Step 2: promote Virtual Exchange among your faculty, staff and students

The first activity that the local coordinator(s) should do is to promote Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange and its opportunities among faculty, administrative staff and students. This can be done by:

- **sending an email to all professors** (an email text is available in Part 7). We will periodically send emails with project news and opportunities, that you can share across your university.
- **sending an email to all your students** promoting the Virtual Exchange activities that they can subscribe to on their own (an email text is available in Part 7)
- **present the project** during an event organised by your office (an Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange PowerPoint presentation is available in Part 7 of this document).
- **organise an awareness raising event** in the university (the project team will be happy to support you with this if needed, by attending in person or virtually)
- Promote the project through the **university website** and share the project in **social media** news.

Step 3: identify individual professors/staff to be engaged

Another step you should take is to **identify a number of teaching and administrative staff in your university** that you think might be interested in taking part in Virtual Exchanges activities. These would typically be innovative teachers who might want to explore new activities with their students, or who are active in international activities already. They can be from any discipline, even if you might want to start from professors of English language, intercultural relations, social sciences. Also, you can start from teaching staff involved in joint diploma or joint degree programmes, as there may already be some degree of transnational collaboration. Staff involved in the European University Alliances may also be interested.

You might want to address different centres at the University which may be interested in promoting virtual exchange, for example **Language Centres** can offer 'ready made' virtual exchanges to students as an opportunity to practice their English, French or Arabic - our research has found that it is a very powerful tool for increasing students' confidence in using a foreign language. Also teachers from the language centres may be interested in following the training to develop their own virtual exchanges. **Teaching and Learning Centres**, or university centres/offices that organise professional development for lecturers, and **eLearning** or **Digital Learning Centres** may also be interested in having staff follow the training. If the **Careers Centre** at your university offers training opportunities for students, they may be interested in promoting 'ready made' exchanges, as some of our university partners have been doing. **Equity, diversity and inclusion offices** are also important departments to involve as virtual exchange can break

some of the barriers of physical mobility, offering opportunities for international and intercultural experiences to those students for whom physical mobility poses a challenge or is not possible, for whatever reason.

Once you have contacted these teaching and administrative staff or centres (an email text specifically for them is available in Part 7) and they have manifested interest, you can put them in touch with the project team (by using the email erasmusvirtual@uni-med.net) and we will take care of guiding them through the different project options.

Step 4: follow up and assess impact

We will stay in touch to make sure that IROs have all the tools and support they need to engage their institution in the project, and to learn from our collaboration activities.

7. Tools

General promotional email messages for your faculty and staff

Dear colleagues,

I am contacting you to introduce **Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange**, a flagship project launched in 2018 by the European Commission.

The project enables university students from Europe and the Southern Mediterranean to engage in intercultural learning through meaningful online, people-to-people, facilitated, and sustained **Virtual Exchange** activities. Thus, it gives students a chance to expand their worldview and build critical 21st century skills and attitudes, such as self- and global-awareness, empathetic listening, critical thinking, curiosity, and digital literacy.

Two types of opportunities are offered under this initiative :

Virtual Exchanges. These ready-made Virtual Exchange programmes can be integrated in different ways in the university educational offer. These activities are open to any student aged 18-30, last from two to ten weeks, and are available in English and Arabic. Both formats can be integrated in your courses. <u>All you will have to do is engage a number of students who will join the virtual exchanges. You will then receive a report on their participation and performance.</u>

Virtual Exchange Training. These training courses are addressed to university teaching and administrative staff wishing to learn how to create their own international Virtual Exchange project. The basic training lasts four weeks and entails two to three hours of work per week. An advanced training course is also available, to help professors to build their own transnational Virtual Exchange projects with a partner class in another country. Training courses are offered in English and French.

All project information is available at https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual.
I also suggest that you subscribe to the project newsletter to receive future news.

I believe that this is an excellent opportunity to enrich our students' learning experience and advance the internationalisation of our university. If you are interested in taking part in this project, please contact me. It will be my pleasure to introduce you to the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange team.

Sincerely,

xxx

Specific email messages for individual faculty and staff

Dear Professor XXX,

Given your interest in innovative teaching practices/your experience in international cooperation/your experience with ICT-supported teaching, I am contacting you to introduce **Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange** – a flagship project launched in 2018 by the European Commission – and explore the possibility for you and your students to join this initiative.

The project enables university students from Europe and the Southern Mediterranean to engage in intercultural learning through meaningful online, people-to-people, facilitated, and sustained **Virtual Exchange** activities. Thus, it gives students a chance to expand their worldview and build critical 21st century skills and attitudes, such as self- and global-awareness, empathetic listening, critical thinking, curiosity, and digital literacy.

There are two ways for you to participate:

Virtual Exchanges. These ready-made Virtual Exchange programmes can be integrated in different ways in the university educational offer. These activities are open to any student aged 18-30, last from two to ten weeks, and are available in English and Arabic. Both formats can be integrated in your courses. All you will have to do is engage a number of students who will join the virtual exchanges. You will then receive a report on their participation and performance.

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Sincerely,
xxx

The Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange newsletter

Please subscribe to the project newsletter [here](#).

The Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange PPT presentation

Please download the project latest general PPT presentation [here](#).

The Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange brochure

Please download the project latest [brochure](#) here.

The Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Hub

All the updated information on the project is available here: https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual.