

Chapter Eleven

Implementing VCL in Western Balkans: Real-Case Initiatives Case Studies

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Introduction

Implementing Virtual Compatible Learning (VCL) in the Western Balkans is a growing focus as digitalisation advances in the region. However, the pandemic exposed the existing structural problems of the education system in the Western Balkans, even though the countries of

Dermol, V., Demaj, E., Nuka, D., & Altmann, M. (Eds.) (2025). *Higher education contemporary learning landscape: Virtual collaborative learning*. ToKnowPress.

the Western Balkans are trying to develop education and training systems in accordance with the new demands and needs of the market (*Kapacitetet e e-mësimit në Ballkanin Perëndimor*, 2022).

Several real-case initiatives and projects have been undertaken by governments, NGOs, international organisations, and Higher Education Institutions to enhance digital education and virtual learning platforms. These initiatives aim to modernise education, promote digital literacy, and bridge the digital divide. Universities are fostering great changes and development when it comes to digitalisation, rising productivity and implementing contemporary methods in human development skills. Their commitment has been noticed with projects and initiatives that support such developments. We may name projects such as VALUE-X, VIRTUEU and now COWEB.

The Virtual Albanian European Universities Exchange VALEU-X (<https://valeu-x.eu/>) project aims to support the internationalisation of Albanian and Balkan universities by introducing Virtual Blended Mobility as an internationalisation at home instrument. VALEU-X is co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union. The project ran from January 2020 to January 2022.

The VIRTUEU (<https://virtueuproject.eu/>) project is a Virtual Exchange programme designed to bring together young people from different countries, enabling their participation regardless of any obstacles. The project aims to enrol 2500 young people from Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, and European countries in Virtual Exchanges, fostering a common approach to active citizenship within a united Europe.

In 2022, COWEB (<https://cowebproject.eu/>) became a new innovative project designed to facilitate local, regional, and international Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL). With the increasing need for digital transformation in education, COWEB's VCL implementation aims to bridge the gap between traditional classroom settings and modern online learning environments. The COWEB project is developed by partners from the Western Balkans with other central European HEIS.

This consortium consists of: Epoka University, Technical University of Dresden, International School for Business and Social Studies, University of Salento, European University of Tirana, UBT College, Biznesi College, International Burch University, University of East Sarajevo, and University of Montenegro. This chapter provides a deeper analysis of the advantages, problems, and solutions to implement virtual collabo-



FIGURE 11.1 Epoka University and European University of Tirana Local vCL Report Wallpaper

ration successfully. Below we present some cases of successful implementation of this project from partners in the Balkan region.

COWEB's Local vCL in Albania

In Albania, Epoka University implemented the Local vCL (Virtual Collaborative Learning) Module within its institution. The vCL module, specifically Local vCL, focuses on the course Strategic Management – Master. It involves six teams comprising a total of 40 students. The course was instructed by a higher education teacher, with support from several e-tutors Klea Pashteranjaku. The duration of this module is eight weeks.

COWEB's Local vCL Implementation in Kosovo

The Local vCL Module at Biznesi College, titled Focus on Two Main Subjects: Programming and Introduction to Decision Making, is specifically for Bachelor courses. This module involves two teams comprising a total of 10 students. The course was taught by two higher education instructors, supported by several e-tutors. The duration of this module is five weeks, from April to May 2024.

The Biznesi College emphasises the institution's commitment to providing quality education and fostering collaborative learning through digitalisation.

At the same time, the Local vCL Module at UBT College were focused on Digital Marketing support for Start-up Master's Degree. This



FIGURE 11.2 Biznesi College and UBT College Local vCL Report Wallpaper



FIGURE 11.3 International Burch University and University of East Sarajevo Local vCL Report Wallpaper

module involves two teams comprising a total of 8 students. The course was taught by a higher education instructor, with support from two e-tutors. The duration of this module is five weeks, from April to May 2024.

COWEB’s Local vCL Implementation in Bosnia and Hercegovina

International Burch University implemented Local vCL on the course of: Introduction to Mobile and Wireless Networking. This module involves three teams, each consisting of four students, making a total of 12 students. The course is taught by a higher education instructor, with



FIGURE 11.4

University of Montenegro Local
VCL Report Wallpaper

support from one e-tutor. The duration of this module is between six and seven weeks. Meanwhile, at the University of East Sarajevo, local VCL was implemented on three main subjects: Forensic Accounting and Auditing, Financial Institutions Accounting and Application software. This module involves four teams comprising a total of 20 students. The course is taught by three higher education instructors, with support from three e-tutors. The duration of this module is six weeks, from April to June 2024.

COWEB's Local VCL Implementation in Montenegro

In Montenegro, the University of Montenegro successfully implemented the local VCL on three subjects: Differential Equations, Resource Management, and Organisation and Management in Road Traffic, all at the bachelor's level. This module involves four teams comprising a total of 20 students. The courses are taught by three instructors, with support from two e-tutors. The duration of this module is four weeks.

Western Balkan Needs and Promptness for Engaging in Virtual Compatible Learning Projects

The Western Balkans is at a pivotal moment in its digital transformation. While the region has made considerable progress, several key areas still need attention, such as improving digital infrastructure, fostering digital skills, expanding e-government services, and strengthening cybersecurity frameworks. Regional cooperation and alignment with EU digital policies will be crucial in accelerating this transformation

and ensuring that the Western Balkans can fully participate in the digital economy and global digital society. The Western Balkans should try harder and adapt digital skills policies in response to emerging technologies for the benefit of all (*Aftësitë & Mësimi Dixhital*, 2020).

Western Balkan countries have faced the challenges of digital transition, including institutional building, limited administrative skills and other challenges related to the e-learning process (*Kapacitetet e e-mësimit në Ballkanin Perëndimor*, 2022).

The Western Balkans, a region that includes countries such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, faces unique challenges and opportunities when it comes to engaging in virtual-compatible learning projects. The needs and speed to engage in such projects are shaped by several socio-economic, educational, and technological factors, and they are:

1. Needs and demands for Virtual Collaborative Learning Capacities;
2. Promptness for developing of Virtual Learning Concept;
3. Key Considerations for Virtual-Compatible Learning Projects.

Based on the first factor, the socio-economic, educational, and technological factors that we mentioned above, there is also a need to engage in such projects.

Implementing virtual collaboration is a key factor for Western Balkan countries in adopting modern approaches to digitalization and sustainability, making it essential to address the following needs:

- Overcoming educational inequality;
- Removing obstacles to access to physical infrastructure;
- Developing the labour force and enhancing digital skills;
- Strengthening cooperation and promoting international mobility;
- Supporting adult education and fostering lifelong learning processes.

Below we will talk briefly about each.

Overcoming Educational Inequality

The need to prevail over educational inequality is crucial, especially between rural and urban areas, in the Western Balkans. Virtual (Collab-

orative) Learning methods may help fill this gap by providing students in remote or deprived areas access to quality education.

Students from rural areas will be able to feel promoted and treated equally as their peers from more developed parts of any country, by being aware of and using virtual learning platforms that, at the same time, can facilitate their digital skills.

Removing Obstacles to Access to Physical Infrastructure

Many Western Balkan lower, middle, and higher education institutions are facing challenges regarding their infrastructure, regarding the need to overcome these limitations to offer access to students who live in remote areas in quality education. Therefore, many institutions have a high demand for support in digital infrastructure to reach the goal of facilitating all students' needs.

Developing the Labour Force and Enhancing Digital Skills

The economy and digital development are moving forward with giant steps. People in general need to adopt their skills to be competitive. Naturally, the Western Balkans region does not make an exception; everyone needs to adopt it too. Starting from education institutions, where all who aim for more advantages for business and work competition, the most logical path to enhance this kind of skill development is. Western Balkan countries have a great need to access these modern digital skills. Virtual interaction and collaboration locally or internationally is one of the most important skills to make students and the future labour force competitive and on step with trends.

Strengthening Cooperation and Promoting International Mobility

Western Balkan institutions work accordingly with the Bologna Process, which gives them the opportunity to smoothly collaborate with other institutions in Europe and not only. Even though it is still the missing part of the Union of European countries, they are successfully collaborating internationally. Consequently, from these partnerships, higher education institutions also match with their problems, ideas, and common goals. To make superior education accessible for all. Virtual platforms and virtual collaboration initiatives are helping and will help students and institutions to break many barriers, as time, abilities, and accessibilities, to realise a successful mobility or training between respective partners.

Supporting Adult Education and Fostering Lifelong Learning Processes

Fast digital development has many benefits, but at the same time, it is creating new problems among people who are actually part of the labour force in the economy. A significant number of adults have a huge demand for upskilling to remain competitive in the labour market. Constant retraining to develop skills on modern technology and methods is more than important. The new approach of finishing duties and collaboration virtually is going to make them more flexible, sustainable, and efficient at the same time. Lifelong learning concepts and platforms supported with virtual collaboration programs will provide adults with easy and flexible access to the development of contemporary skills.

The promptness of Western Balkan higher education institutions to engage in virtual collaborative learning projects is faced with the following important elements:

- Expansion of digital infrastructure;
- Governmental and regulatory institution support;
- Fostering adoption of digital solutions;
- Arrangement with European institutions practices;
- Engagement of youth and human resources.

Expansion of Digital Infrastructure

During the last years, the development of digital infrastructure has taken a huge focus in the Western Balkan region. Nevertheless, the same development did not happen in all areas equally; there is a lot to work on, especially in rural areas. It is worth mentioning that the expansion of the infrastructure differs between Western Balkan countries, too, as you may see in the chart below. Otherwise, problems of a technical nature are evident, especially when it comes to speed and sustainability of internet connectivity. Putting fibre optic cables to use by institutions made a significant impact on the development of the digital infrastructure, which in turn will support further virtual collaboration capabilities.

Governmental and Regulatory Institution Support

Governments of the Western Balkan countries are prioritising digital transformation in general, also in education, but there is room for more

FIGURE 11.5

Households Level of Internet Access in Europe (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:CPC25_Households_internet_access_2024.png)

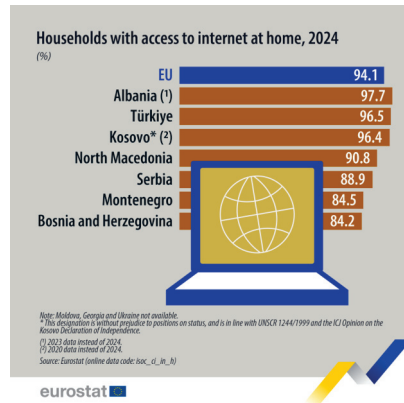
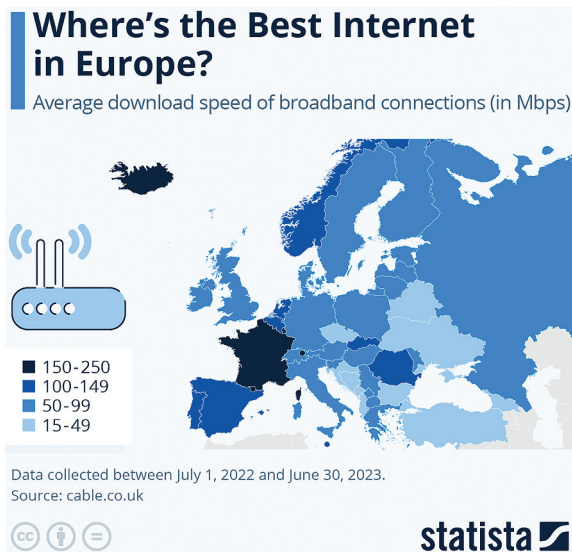


FIGURE 11.6

The Most Powerful Internet among European Countries (<https://www.statista.com/chart/3348/europes-fastest-downloaders/>)



when it comes to regulations that allow and legitimise many aspects of working and developing virtual work, especially in education. As we may refer to Higher Education Laws in different Western Balkan countries, many of them allow the process of distance learning to be held, but the same does not happen in the case of Albania. In Kosovo, Article 2, point 2.5 states that higher education can be pursued with a break from work, without a break from work, in distance, as well as in any other type of combination of these study methods, just like provided for in the statute of the holder that provides the qualification of higher education (Ligji nr. 04/L-037, 2011).

In the case of Montenegro, Article 85 states: Classes can be organised as distance learning, and exams are held on the premises of the institution. The conditions and manner of organising classes and taking exams, from paragraph 1 of this article, are prescribed by the Ministry, with the prior opinion of the Council (Zakon o visokom obrazovanju, 2021). Bosnia and Herzegovina has also allowed it as it cites in Article 2 point D: Distance learning is a formalised form of study for self-financed students, which ensures access to the teaching process through the use of computer technologies and interactive teaching materials, and which is more precisely regulated by the statute of the higher education institution (Zakon o visokom obrazovanju, 2025).

In the case of Albania, it is different, as it cites in Article 1, point 2: The Ministry of Education and Sports does not consider applications for the following cases: following the programs of online or distance learning (*Përmbledhje e legjislacionit për arsimin e lartë perditësuar deri me*, 2023).

Fostering Adoption of Digital Solutions

The unexpected wave of the COVID-19 pandemic had made a huge impact on education systems, an impact that would be a turning point for the entire system. Academics were looking for every possibility to keep the education process going, without losing the rhythm and time. Virtual collaborative learning tools revolutionised the whole process and gave a good solution for that emergency situation. During that time, Virtual learning became a normal part of academic life. Now we are in a post-pandemic time when society's approach to digitalisation has changed, and it is getting more importance than ever. All stakeholders adapted to their capabilities and skills during those hard times, but now we are developing them to offer more digitalised and sustainable solutions for students and all other stakeholders. Fostering initiatives such as EU co-founded projects is making a great impact on enhancing further capabilities and skills for academics and students to develop virtual work with each other. Knowing that EU co-founded projects include other international institutions, it helps all of Europe develop together without leaving aside other countries compared to others.

Arrangement with European Institutions Practices

The Western Balkans is a natural part of Europe; therefore, higher education institutions continuously collaborate with international and

especially European institutions. At the same time, the alignment of practices and procedures has similarities in many aspects. Added that, with the support of European funds and common goals, these collaborations are getting stronger, and the alignment of practices is too.

Engagement of Youth and Human Resources

Youngs in Western Balkan countries constitute around 20% of the population (Eurostat, 2025). Most of them belong to generations where the use of technological devices broadly started and it is continuing its development. This creates a good basis for adopting newer technologies more easily today and in the future. Virtual Collaborative Learning projects and platforms are the best way to keep young people engaged and committed to learn contemporary methods of collaboration, nationally and internationally. All these factors together make them gain skills that keep them competitive in the market.

Experience of WB Countries with VCL Implementation

Western Balkan countries have gained significant focus from the European Commission to support and develop capacities. These capacities are building and enhancing WB's social capabilities and skills to become more productive and competitive in the market. In addition, there have been many cases where HEIS in the Balkans have conducted virtual learning in one way or another, especially during the pandemic. In such emergency situations, the lecturing and learning process was implemented on different platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, etc. The whole process has faced many obstacles, especially when it comes to international collaboration, a lack of a professional approach to the platforms, etc. Meanwhile, virtual learning brought new ideas and concepts in the academic society by seeing its advantages on productivity, time consumption, and sustainability, too, they decided to dedicate a more professional approach to the way of collaboration in distance learning. Therefore, the urge to develop a common project that supports VCL became bigger.

For instance, there are some successful capacity-building projects co-founded by the European Union that supported VCL implementation in Balkan HEIS, which are already finalised, such as VALEU-X. The Virtual Albanian European Universities Exchange (VALEU-X) project aims to support the internationalisation of Albanian and Balkan universities by introducing Virtual Blended Mobility as an international-

isation at home instrument. VALEU-X is co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union. VALEU-X focuses on several key objectives:

- Qualifying academic staff at Albanian Higher Education Institutions (HEIS) for innovative virtual teaching and learning settings.
- Supporting Albanian HEIS in adopting and implementing effective ICT-based internationalisation at home activities.
- Integrating Albanian HEIS into a global network for Virtual Mobility.
- Qualifying administrative staff at Albanian HEIS to adopt and recognise Virtual/Blended Mobility as part of their institutional internationalisation strategy.

The partner universities involved in the project:

- Technische Universität Dresden (Germany) – Coordinator
- International School for Social and Business Studies (Slovenia)
- Mediterranean Universities Union (Italy)
- European University of Tirana (Albania)
- Epoka University (Albania)
- University of Elbasan ‘Aleksander Xhuvani’ (Albania)
- University of Shkodra ‘Luigj Gurakuqi’ (Albania)
- University of Vlora ‘Ismael Qemali’ (Albania)
- University of Korça ‘Fan S. Noli’ (Albania)
- Aleksander Moisiu University of Durres (Albania)

Another successful example is the VIRTUEU project. The VIRTUEU project is an international Virtual Exchange program designed to involve more than 2,500 students from Higher Education Institutions (HEIS) in EU Member States and Western Balkan Countries, including Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, Portugal, Germany, and Greece. The project is funded by the ERASMUS+ programme and has a duration of 36 months.

Objectives: The primary goal of the VIRTUEU project is to promote European and universal values of democracy, peace, freedom, solidarity, and collaboration among young people in Europe and the Western Balkans. It aims to strengthen their identity as active citizens and

residents of Europe and provide them with adequate skills to improve their chances of employment. The VIRTUEU project has successfully achieved its objectives:

- *Virtual Exchanges:* The project focuses on bringing together young people from different countries through virtual exchanges, allowing them to participate regardless of any obstacles that may prevent them from being part of such a program.
- *Non-Formal Educational Curriculum:* VIRTUEU creates activities in the form of a non-formal educational curriculum to empower youth towards their capacity to become more active and open to participation.
- *Civic Engagement:* The project aims to foster active citizenship and civic engagement among young people, highlighting core European values and providing real examples, tools, and methodologies to positively contribute to society.
- *Impact:* The VIRTUEU project aims to cultivate a common approach to active citizenship in the framework of a united Europe. By providing new teaching and learning approaches within the framework of virtual education and training, the project seeks to increase the engagement of youth at all levels of civic participation.

This project was finalised successfully with this group of partners:

- University of Aveiro (Portugal)
- IBCM (Kosovo)
- EVBB (Belgium)
- Professional College of Tirana (Albania)
- University Mediterranea (Montenegro)
- University Metropolitan Tirana (Albania)
- European University of Tirana (Albania)
- Universum International College (Kosovo)
- Metropolitan College (Albania)
- Albanian University (Albania)

Meanwhile, COWEB is developing VCL at the Regional level. The Regional Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL) program of the COWEB



VirtuEu - Virtual Exchanges of Active citizens

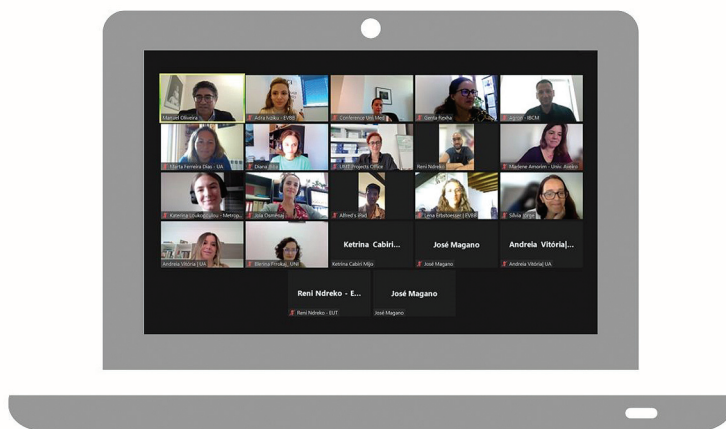


FIGURE 11.7 VirtuEu Descriptive Picture (<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=122111531588105983&set=pb.61553179490434.-2207520000&type=3>)

project is an initiative aimed at enhancing collaborative learning experiences among students from various partner institutions in the Western Balkans. This program, launched for the Fall Semester 2024–2025, runs from October 2024 to February 2025 and involves academic teams working on different case studies. Each Team is supported by their e-tutors, who were trained accordingly for the duty.

The vCL courses are composed of transnational student groups who collaborate with peers from other participating countries in the Western Balkans. This setup generates an innovative model of cross-regional collaboration and transnational work that will be finalised with cooperation at the international European level.

The Regional Virtual Collaborative Learning (vCL) Program involves multiple universities working together in tandems:

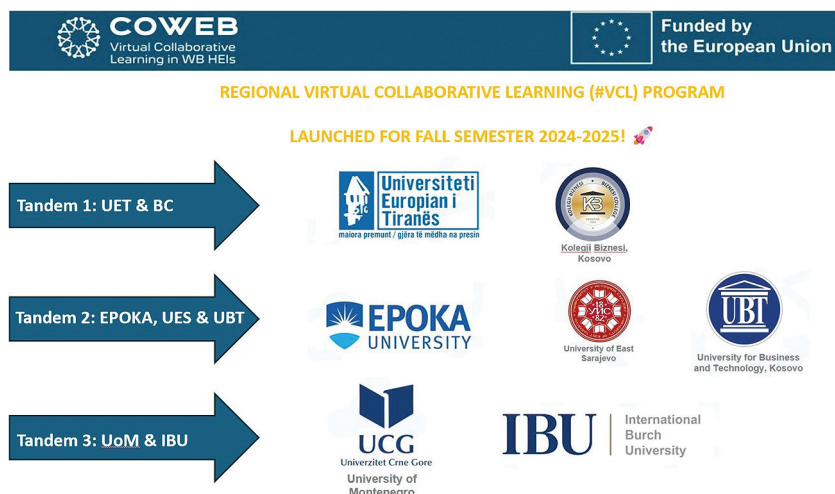


FIGURE 11.8 COWEB's Regional vCL Descriptive Wallpaper (<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=489727417451823&set=pb.100092437068258.-2207520000>)

- Tandem 1: European University of Tirana (UET) and Biznesi College (BC), Kosovo
- Tandem 2: EPOKA University, University of East Sarajevo (UES), and UBT College Kosovo
- Tandem 3: University of Montenegro (UoM) and International Burch University (IBU)

The program aims to foster international collaboration in higher education within Western Balkan Higher Education Institutions. All partners highlighted the diverse and cooperative nature of this initiative.

Challenges and Solutions in vCL Implementation among Western Balkan Institutions and International Institutions

- Lingual and digital skills problems
- Support from governmental institutions
- Academic staff training
- Costs and accessibility to vCL platforms

Lingual and Digital Skills Problems

One of the main obstacles that students and academic staff in the Western Balkans have is language. The Western Balkans is a small part of

Europe that consists of small countries, yet with language differences. English, as a common understanding language, is known mostly by the younger generation, who followed education after 1999. Otherwise, this region is adopting the newest technologies quite well. Based on our everyday academic life, we are witnessing obstacles in adaptation toward new technologies, mainly by older academic staff who have a huge experience and contribution, but face hardship in adopting quick digital changes.

Support from Governmental Institutions

Governments, private sector organisations and international development agencies must collaborate on projects to ensure that there is adequate funding, infrastructure, and technical support.

Academic Staff Training

Teachers need continuous professional development to effectively use virtual learning platforms. Ensuring that educators are well-prepared and confident in using digital tools is essential to the success of virtual learning projects.

Costs and Accessibility to VCL Platforms

Virtual collaborative platforms come in different ways and from different companies. Platforms that facilitate the implementation of virtual collaborations, such as Teams, Google Meet, Zoom, etc., are helping a lot with their free versions, but requirements are greater to use their full capacities. Therefore, those platforms come with additional costs for licenses. These costs in the case of Western Balkan institutions are covered with the financial support of the European Union funds.

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