Chapter Eighteen

University Policies to Support VCL Initiatives

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Introduction

Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL) refers to the integration of digital tools and virtual platforms to facilitate interactive, collaborative learning experiences for students and educators across geographical boundaries. By leveraging technology, VCL enables participants to engage in joint projects, discussions, and problem-solving activities in a virtual environment. This approach not only enhances students' technical and interpersonal skills but also prepares them for the demands of a globalised workforce.

Studies have highlighted the transformative potential of VCL in higher education. For instance, Dascalu et al. (2015) emphasised that integrating personalised learning agents based on student learning styles significantly enhances collaboration and engagement. Similarly, Mhouti et al. (2016) demonstrated the scalability and flexibility of cloud-based VCL platforms in supporting diverse institutional needs. These findings underscore the growing relevance of VCL as a tool for bridging gaps in access, fostering inclusivity, and enhancing learning outcomes across different contexts. Universities, particularly in the Western Balkan region, face unique challenges in adopting VCL due to infrastructural, cultural, and institutional constraints.

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for the widespread adoption of VCL models. Universities in countries like Australia, Canada, and South Korea implemented advanced virtual learning systems that emphasise hybrid collaboration, cross-institutional partnerships, and adaptive learning analytics. These international practices of-

fer valuable contrasts to the experiences in the Western Balkans, where institutional capacity building is still underway.

Additionally, Blewett et al. (2011) and Gaebel and Morrisroe (2023) identified key challenges in implementing VCL across multiple countries, including technological limitations and intercultural dynamics. The implementation of Virtual Collaborative Learning is grounded in educational theories such as Constructivism and Connectivism. Constructivism emphasises active student engagement, while Connectivism, proposed by Siemens (2005), highlights the role of digital networks in knowledge acquisition. Additionally, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989) suggests that faculty and students are more likely to adopt VCL when they perceive it as both useful and easy to use. Understanding these frameworks can help universities develop policies that address potential adoption barriers.

On the other hand, delivering virtual instruction in international contexts demands a broad set of competencies, including digital, pedagogical, linguistic, and intercultural skills. Institutions should adopt formal policies to recognise and validate educators' digital competencies and integrate virtual international teaching experience into career development frameworks, such as tenure and promotion tracks. Embedding digital teaching skills into professional development programs and actively promoting and incentivising staff participation in such initiatives is very important. Also, it is needed to prioritise the development of students' digital and intercultural competencies by integrating these topics into academic curricula and degree programs (Gaebel & Morrisroe, 2023).

This chapter aims to examine the critical role universities play in the successful implementation of Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL), with a focus on strategic planning, global practices, and the identification of key emerging trends. It provides actionable policy recommendations and a comparative analysis of institutional practices, offering a well-rounded framework to guide innovation and promote inclusive, future-ready learning environments.

Universities as Enablers of Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL)

Universities are key agents in enabling effective Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL) by embedding it into institutional strategies that prioritise innovation, inclusion, and internationalisation. Their commitment shapes how digital tools are integrated, how faculty and students
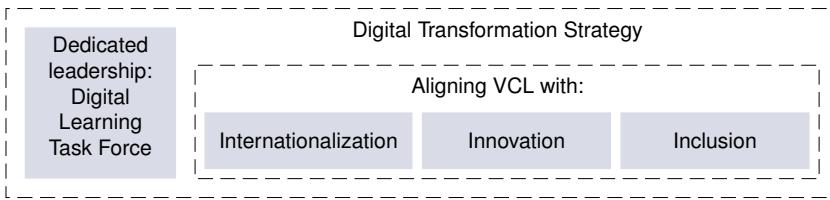
FIGURE 18.1   Digital Transformation Strategy Aligning with VCL

are supported, and how academic quality is sustained.

Proactive digital transformation strategies help universities adapt faster and create collaborative academic ecosystems. As noted by Bleiklie et al. (2022), entrepreneurial activities within support units and strong leadership are crucial in guiding successful digital change. Without institutional commitment, even the most promising initiatives face implementation gaps.

A structured and aligned digital transformation strategy ensures that VCL is not treated as an isolated initiative but is integrated with the university's broader vision. This alignment includes:

- *Internationalisation:* Encouraging cross-border learning and joint academic projects.
- *Innovation:* Fostering experimentation with emerging tools and teaching methods.
- *Inclusion:* Ensuring access for all students, regardless of background or location.

To operationalise this strategy, universities can establish dedicated leadership bodies, such as Digital Learning Task Forces, to oversee implementation and evaluation. These bodies ensure VCL efforts are aligned with accreditation standards, quality assurance mechanisms, and academic career pathways.

Universities act as the driving force behind the successful implementation of VCL. Their support and well-defined policies are pivotal in shaping effective digital collaboration within higher education. These frameworks not only provide the necessary infrastructure but also cultivate an environment conducive to innovation and inclusive learning.

Research indicates that universities with proactive digital strategies are better equipped to integrate collaborative technologies, enhancing both teaching and learning experiences. For instance, a study by Bleik-

lie et al. (2022) highlights how entrepreneurial activities within support units significantly contribute to digital transformation, emphasising the role of institutional leadership in facilitating such changes. The absence of supportive leadership can prevent the successful implementation of digital initiatives, emphasising the necessity for committed institutional support.

Moreover, the development of comprehensive policies that address digital infrastructure, faculty training, curriculum design, student engagement, and quality assurance is essential. Such policies ensure that digital collaboration tools are effectively integrated into the academic environment, promoting active participation and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. As noted by the BLOOM Hub (2022), institutions that prioritise digital education policies not only adapt more swiftly to technological advancements but also enhance the overall quality of education delivered.

Universities play a central role in the advancement of VCL, which requires a comprehensive and strategically aligned institutional effort. One of the foremost responsibilities is integrating VCL into the university's broader digital transformation strategy. This involves aligning VCL with goals related to internationalisation, innovation, and inclusion, while establishing dedicated leadership structures such as digital learning task forces to oversee and guide its implementation. For example, the University of Manchester and KU Leuven have established Digital Education Task Forces to lead institutional innovation, ensure quality benchmarks, and implement VCL tools in harmony with teaching excellence frameworks.

Figure 18.2 illustrates the pillars of a digital transformation strategy aligned with VCL. These include:

- *Strategic Vision:* A clear institutional roadmap that connects VCL with internationalisation, inclusion, and innovation goals.

- *Dedicated Leadership:* Establishment of digital learning units or task forces that coordinate VCL implementation and evaluation.

- *Technology Infrastructure:* Investment in robust platforms (LMS, videoconferencing tools, collaboration boards) supported by cybersecurity protocols.

- *Capacity Building:* Faculty development programs in digital pedagogy, incentives for innovation, and staff recognition pathways.

Institu-tional Policies	Digital In-frastructure	Training and Pro-fessional Devel-opment	Curriculum Design	Student Readiness and Inclusion (skills)	Monitor and Evaluation
Standards Platforms Assess-ment Quality assurance	LMS Microsoft Teams, Miro Continous IT support Security Equality access to devices and Internet	Digital pedagogy Peer mentoring Collabo-rative course design	Embed col-laborative learning elements in course objective Encouraging interdisi-plinary and cross based projects	Digital col-laboration Intercultural commmu-nication Support structures	Define KPIs for engagment, satisfaction and learning outcomes Incorporate data-driven strategies to refine VCL Feedbacks (students & staff)

FIGURE 18.2   Main Pillars of Universities' Roles in Promoting VCL

- *Policy Integration:* Embedding VCL into accreditation, quality assurance, and curriculum design systems.
- *Monitoring & Feedback:* Use of analytics and stakeholder input to improve collaboration and learning outcomes.

In addition to infrastructure provision, university IT departments play a critical role in ensuring the operational security and efficiency of VCL systems. Their responsibilities include maintaining robust cybersecurity protocols, performing regular system updates, and ensuring data privacy compliance in accordance with standards like GDPR. IT teams also manage technical support services to address real-time issues faced by faculty and students, thereby reducing disruptions during collaborative sessions. Their proactive involvement in system monitoring, risk mitigation, and user support creates a stable and trustworthy digital learning environment that is essential for VCL's success.

Barriers Faced by Universities in VCL Implementation

Despite growing recognition of VCL's importance, universities encounter multiple barriers that hinder effective implementation. Funding limitations pose a significant obstacle, especially for institutions

in under-resourced regions. Investment in infrastructure, software licenses, and technical support is often constrained by limited budgets.

Faculty training and engagement present another challenge. Many instructors lack confidence or familiarity with collaborative digital tools and pedagogies, making professional development essential yet often under-prioritised.

Sustainability and continuity also emerge as concerns. Pilot projects or externally funded initiatives may not be integrated into long-term strategic planning, leading to fragmented or temporary VCL programs. Finally, aligning VCL practices with existing quality assurance mechanisms remains complex, particularly in systems where face-to-face learning is still the dominant model.

Addressing these challenges requires holistic and context-sensitive strategies, combining policy reforms, resource mobilisation, and community engagement to ensure VCL becomes a sustainable and impactful part of the higher education landscape.

- Key institutional recommendations for supporting VCL
- Develop formal institutional policies that define participation standards, platform use, and assessment methods, and embed them in quality assurance frameworks.
- Recognise VCL participation in faculty career advancement, including tenure and promotion criteria.
- Invest in robust digital infrastructure, ensuring equitable access to LMS platforms, collaborative tools (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Miro), and secure, high-speed internet.
- Provide structured faculty development in digital pedagogy, peer mentoring, and collaborative course design.
- Integrate VCL into curriculum design by embedding collaborative learning objectives and promoting interdisciplinary virtual projects.
- Support student readiness and inclusion, focusing on digital skills, intercultural communication, accessibility, and psychosocial support.
- Establish monitoring and evaluation systems with KPIS to assess student engagement, satisfaction, and learning outcomes.
- Foster external collaborations through Erasmus+ and other ini-

tiatives to enhance quality and broaden institutional networks in VCL.

An example worth highlighting is the University of Prishtina, which adopted a comprehensive institutional VCL policy, integrating student participation metrics into its quality assurance processes. Similarly, the University of Ljubljana has established a Digital Learning Task Force to support the institutionalisation of VCL and ensure its alignment with strategic goals.

Establishing Institutional Policy Frameworks for VCL

One of the core responsibilities of universities in promoting Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL) lies in the development of robust and enforceable institutional policies. These policies should go beyond aspirational declarations and provide clear operational standards that enable consistent, inclusive, and effective implementation. Specifically, universities must address four critical areas:

- Participation and engagement expectations for students and faculty;
- Platform selection and integration standards to support synchronous and asynchronous collaboration;
- Assessment frameworks that ensure transparency and fairness in collaborative learning tasks;
- Data governance and privacy policies are aligned with regulations like the GDPR.

Integrating these standards into institutional quality assurance systems and faculty advancement criteria ensures that VCL is not treated as a peripheral initiative but becomes a central pillar of academic strategy and digital transformation.

Participation expectations for students and faculty: A foundational element of successful VCL lies in setting explicit participation expectations for both students and faculty. These guidelines should clarify the roles and responsibilities of each party. Students must actively contribute to group tasks, communicate respectfully, and meet agreed-upon deadlines, while faculty should facilitate interaction, monitor progress, and provide timely, formative feedback. Institutions are advised to support these expectations with structured orientation programs and training modules that introduce best practices in online

collaboration and group dynamics. Such initiatives have been shown to significantly improve student engagement and accountability in virtual environments (Gaad, 2022; Hanover Research, 2020). Additionally, digital dashboards can be used to monitor interaction metrics such as login frequency and participation in group activities, allowing for early interventions where engagement lags.

Platform use and integration standards: Effective VCL policies also require thoughtful selection and integration of collaborative platforms. Universities must ensure that digital tools are interoperable, user-friendly, and accessible. This means selecting platforms that support both synchronous (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Zoom) and asynchronous (e.g., Moodle, Google Docs) collaboration, and ensuring these systems are integrated through standards such as Learning Tools Interoperability (LTI). Clear usage protocols and technical documentation should accompany platform deployment to ensure consistent adoption and minimise confusion. Training programs for both faculty and students can further improve the uptake and effectiveness of these tools (Jantos, 2023; IMS Global Learning Consortium, n.d.). Continuous evaluation of platform performance, based on user feedback and usage analytics, is essential to adapt to evolving technological needs.

Assessment criteria for collaborative and group-based tasks: Assessment is a critical driver of student behaviour in any learning environment, and VCL is no exception. To promote fairness and transparency, universities should develop detailed rubrics that clearly distinguish between individual and group contributions. These rubrics must align with learning objectives that emphasise communication, teamwork, and collective problem-solving. The inclusion of peer and self-assessment tools can foster reflective learning and enhance students' sense of responsibility for group outcomes. Combining formative and summative assessments allows instructors to provide ongoing feedback while evaluating the final output. Studies indicate that varied assessment methods like project artefacts and peer evaluations are essential in capturing the complexity of collaborative learning outcomes (Macdonald, 2003; Jantos, 2023).

Data governance and privacy compliance: In the digital learning context, data protection is both a legal obligation and an ethical imperative. Institutions must conduct thorough data audits to identify what student and faculty information is being collected through VCL platforms, how it is stored, and who has access. These audits form the

basis for comprehensive privacy policies aligned with data protection regulations such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Universities must establish clear policies that outline the collection, use, and sharing of data, along with role-based access controls that restrict sensitive information to authorised personnel only. Equally important is ensuring that both students and faculty are trained in data protection best practices, cultivating a culture of responsible digital engagement (UNESCO, 2021).

Policies should also be embedded within the institution's quality assurance mechanisms and formally recognised in accreditation processes. By aligning VCL with institutional performance indicators and national/international educational standards, universities create a structure that ensures consistency, legitimacy, and long-term viability (Bleiklie et al., 2022).

Importantly, such policies must also incentivise faculty involvement. Academic career advancement structures, including promotion and tenure, should explicitly value and reward contributions to virtual teaching, course design using collaborative platforms, and innovation in digital pedagogy. Without this formal recognition, VCL may remain peripheral, rather than becoming an integral part of institutional culture.

An emerging best practice is the inclusion of student representatives in the policy design and evaluation process through mechanisms such as Student Advisory Boards or digital learning councils. These platforms empower students to voice their experiences, concerns, and suggestions directly to institutional decision-makers. By integrating student feedback into the development of VCL guidelines, universities not only improve the relevance and usability of digital platforms but also promote a sense of ownership and engagement among learners. Such participatory governance ensures that VCL policies remain inclusive, adaptive, and responsive to the evolving needs of the student community.

Developing Robust VCL Policies in Higher Education: Standards
Participation and Engagement Standards

Define explicit expectations for student and faculty engagement in VCL activities, including attendance, contribution levels, and communication protocols.

Implementation steps:

- *Student guidelines:* Mandate active participation in a specified percentage of collaborative sessions and contributions to group tasks.
- *Faculty responsibilities:* Require timely feedback, facilitation of discussions, and monitoring of group dynamics.
- *Orientation programs:* Offer training sessions to familiarise participants with VCL tools and expectations.
- *Institutional Example:* The University of Edinburgh's 'Code of Student Conduct' outlines expectations for online engagement, emphasising the importance of active participation in virtual learning environments (University of Edinburgh, 2021).

Platform Use and Integration Standards

Ensure the selection and integration of interoperable, user-friendly, and accessible digital platforms that support both synchronous and asynchronous collaboration.

Implementation steps:

- *Platform selection:* Choose platforms that facilitate real-time and asynchronous collaboration (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Moodle).
- *Interoperability:* Adopt standards like Learning Tools Interoperability (LTI) to enable seamless integration between different educational technologies.
- *Training and support:* Provide comprehensive training and technical support for both students and faculty.
- *Institutional example:* The CHARM-EU alliance employs interconnected high-tech classrooms across five universities, facilitating synchronous hybrid learning experiences (CHARM-EU, 2022).

Assessment Criteria for Collaborative Work

Develop transparent assessment frameworks that evaluate both individual and group contributions, incorporating peer and self-assessment mechanisms.

Implementation steps:

- *Rubric development:* Create detailed rubrics outlining criteria for evaluating collaborative tasks.
- *Peer and self-assessment:* Integrate tools that allow students to assess their own and their peers' contributions.

TABLE 18.1   Institutional Models and Best Practices for VCL Implementation

Standard Area	Key Focus	Example Institution
Participation	Engagement expectations, training	University of Edinburgh
Platform Use	Synchronous + Asynchronous, LTI compliance	CHARM-EU Alliance
Assessment	Rubrics, peer/self-assessment	University of Pretoria
Privacy	GDPR audits, role-based access	European University Association

- *Formative and summative assessments:* Balance ongoing feedback with final evaluations to measure overall achievement.
- *Institutional example:* The University of Pretoria utilises a comprehensive framework for assessing cooperative and collaborative tasks, focusing on both product and process (University of Pretoria, n.d.).

Data Governance and Privacy Compliance

Implement robust data governance policies that comply with regulations like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), ensuring the protection of personal and collaborative data.

Implementation steps:

- *Data audits:* Conduct thorough audits to identify data collection, storage, and access practices.
- *Privacy policies:* Develop clear policies outlining data usage, storage, and sharing practices.
- *Access controls:* Establish role-based access controls to limit data access to authorised individuals.
- *Training:* Educate faculty and students on data privacy principles and responsibilities.
- *Institutional example:* The European University Association emphasises the importance of data governance in digitally enhanced learning and teaching, advocating for clear policies and practices (Mezher, 2023).

Several European institutions provide strong models for implementing Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL) through well-integrated policy frameworks and digital strategies:

- *Technische Universität Dresden* incorporates VCL into its curriculum by engaging students in international virtual teams that solve real-world case studies. These structured tasks are designed to foster professional and interpersonal skills, and successful completion is rewarded with ECTS credits in line with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (Technische Universität Dresden, 2025). A key component of their approach is the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) module developed through the COWEB project. This module connects over 140 students and faculty members across nine countries, enabling interdisciplinary teams to work together on digital entrepreneurship and sustainability challenges. Through asynchronous tasks and synchronous video conferences, students gain practical experience in virtual teamwork, intercultural communication, and co-creation of digital solutions. The initiative is supported by structured feedback cycles, standardised evaluation criteria, and robust digital infrastructure. It exemplifies how transnational VCL projects can be institutionalised for long-term impact.

- *The University of Edinburgh* has developed a comprehensive policy framework to support virtual learning. Its Code of Student Conduct and Virtual Learning Environment Terms and Conditions set clear expectations for participation, digital behaviour, and data protection. Access to platforms like Learn and Moodle is governed by principles that ensure academic integrity, legal compliance, and inclusivity, backed by Scottish legal standards (University of Edinburgh, 2024). Their approach emphasises the institutionalisation of ethical digital behaviour, regular updates to platform policies, and a commitment to user rights and responsibilities.

- *The University of Novi Sad* in Serbia represents a strong regional example of innovation in VCL. Through its participation in Erasmus+ projects like 'Digi4VET' and collaboration with the Regional Innovation Smart Specialisation Strategy (RIS3), it integrates VCL principles into cross-disciplinary modules, combining ICT, environmental engineering, and business studies. These efforts are backed by university-wide policies promoting multilingual access, modular course design, and international certification standards. The institution also invests in hybrid learning labs and faculty development to scale up VCL.

TABLE 18.2   Global Best Practices in Virtual Collaborative Learning:
A Comparative Overview

University/Region	Key Features	Strategic Focus
TU Dresden (Germany)	COIL module via COWEB project 140+ participants across 9 countries ECTS integration	Transnational team-work, sustainability, and digital co-creation
University of Edinburgh (UK)	Code of Conduct for VLE Governance of Learn & Moodle Legal and ethical digital use	Policy institutionali-sation, inclusivity, and data protection
University of Novi Sad (Serbia)	Erasmus+ & RIS3 integration Multilingual & modular courses Hybrid labs & faculty training	Regional innovation, VET integration, scal-able VCL
Korea University (South Korea)	K-MOOC platform Global Virtual Exchange AI-driven feedback	Global collaboration, AI in education, and multi-lingual support
European University Association	Policy advocacy COIL promotion Pan-European collaboration	Strategic policy align-ment, internationalisa-tion

- From outside Europe, *Korea University* in South Korea showcases advanced VCL practices aligned with its digital-first education strategy. It supports collaborative learning through its K-MOOC platform and integrates artificial intelligence into student feedback mechanisms. The university runs the Global Virtual Exchange Program, where Korean students co-develop research and entrepreneurship projects with peers in the US, Japan, and Southeast Asia. Their success lies in policy coordination between academic units, investment in multilingual virtual classrooms, and high-bandwidth network infrastructure supported by national education funds.

- *The European University Association* (EUA) promotes Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and other cross-border initiatives through its 2023 report. The EUA highlights the importance of institutional policies that support digital transformation and advocate for cross-institutional innovation in teaching and learning (Mezher, 2023).

These diverse examples from Western Europe, Southeast Europe, and East Asia illustrate the adaptability of VCL across educational and cultural contexts. Institutions that implement clear policy structures,

develop technological ecosystems, and encourage global partnerships can maximise the impact and sustainability of VCL.

The adoption and implementation of Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL) represents a transformative opportunity for universities to align themselves with the demands of a digital and globalised world. By investing in robust technological infrastructure, fostering a collaborative culture, and prioritising continuous faculty and staff development, institutions can address the challenges of traditional educational systems and unlock new potential for innovation and inclusivity.

The European University of Tirana (EUT) and Epoka University have demonstrated the potential of VCL through strategic integration and innovative practices, setting a benchmark for other institutions in the Western Balkans. Key takeaways from their experiences include the importance of targeted faculty training, interdisciplinary collaboration, and leveraging feedback to refine methodologies. Furthermore, partnerships with international organisations and the use of advanced digital platforms like Moodle and Microsoft Teams exemplify the global connectivity that VCL can achieve.

While Albania and Kosovo face similar challenges in integrating VCL, international projects and regional initiatives can serve as catalysts for a more structured and effective approach in both countries. The active involvement of public agencies such as national accreditation bodies, ministries of education, and ICT authorities is essential in providing the regulatory and financial support needed for sustainable implementation.

To sustain the momentum, universities must embrace adaptive strategies, including policy revisions to support virtual collaboration and align VCL activities with accreditation standards. Additionally, fostering a student-centric approach, where learners actively participate in designing and evaluating VCL projects, can further enhance engagement and outcomes.

Drawing lessons from models in Northern and Western Europe, it is evident that continuous innovation in digital pedagogy and governance reforms is vital. Countries like the Netherlands and Finland have mainstreamed VCL through national digital education strategies, offering blueprints that Albanian and Kosovar institutions can adapt based on contextual needs.

As the educational landscape continues to evolve, VCL offers a pathway to create inclusive, flexible, and future-ready learning environ-

ments. Through collective efforts and a commitment to excellence, universities can not only transform their academic practices but also contribute significantly to the personal and professional growth of their students in a rapidly changing world.

To ensure the long-term success of Virtual Collaborative Learning, universities must integrate it into their core academic strategies, providing ongoing faculty training and technological investments. Policymakers should revise accreditation standards to formally recognise VCL as an essential component of higher education curricula. Additionally, regional collaboration between Albania, Kosovo, and neighbouring countries can enhance knowledge-sharing and resource allocation. By fostering a culture of collaboration, investing in faculty development, and leveraging global best practices, VCL can serve as a transformative force shaping the future of higher education in Albania, Kosovo, and beyond.

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