Internationalisation at Home through Virtual Collaborative Learning

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Purpose: This paper aims to give an overview of the challenges, mechanisms, and achievements of internationalisation at home through reporting the unfolding of two virtual exchanges across the Mediterranean.

Study design/methodology/approach: The research study was in three phases: course design, the implementation of the virtual exchanges and their evaluation through students' questionnaires. The evaluation was twofold; quantitative through student questionnaires and qualitative through forums analysis and synchronous meetings observation.

Findings: Results were in line with the quasi-consensus over the efficiency of virtual mobility in improving students' intercultural communicative competence, collaboration in virtual teams and English proficiency and hence supporting them in their internationalisation at home process.

Originality/value: The value of the current study lies in showing on a practical ground the viability of researching the benefits of virtual exchange, therefore adopting it as a strong strategy for internationalisation at home.

Introduction

Research has long preached for physical mobility as an effective tool for students' internationalisation (Dolga, Filipescu, Popescu-Mitroi, and Mazilescu, 2015; Llurda, Gallego-Balsà, Barahona, and Martin-Rubió, 2016). However, this type of mobility is not always affordable to the average student because of the funding and visa requirements (Knight, 2003). What made physical mobility even more unreachable was the health crisis that paralysed travel movements between countries (Benton, Batalova, Davidoff-Gore, and Schmidt, 2021). Therefore, in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, universities have recognised virtual mobility as a path for their local students' internationalisation at home (IaH) (Cairns and França, 2022). In this vein, I use two virtual exchange courses as concrete examples of local students' internationalisation at home. Despite their different orientations, these courses have three common learning objectives; enhancing students' intercultural communicative competence, collaborating in virtual teams, and practising English. The research study was in three phases: course design, the implementation of the virtual exchanges and their evaluation through students' questionnaires, forums analysis, and synchronous meetings observation. Results were in line with the quasi-consensus over the efficiency of virtual mobility in improving students' intercultural communicative competence, collaboration in virtual teams, and English proficiency, hence supporting them in their internationalisation at home process.

Thus, this paper intends to give an overview of the challenges to implementing internationalisation within higher education and the mechanisms and achievements of internationalisation at home through reporting the unfolding of two academic virtual exchanges across the Mediterranean.

Challenges in the internationalisation of higher education

It is worth noting that the birth of the concept of internationalisation at home (IaH) was principally the consequence of a sum of challenges encountered in the implementation of 'regular' internationalisation at higher educational institutions (Knight, 2003). These challenges and difficulties are mainly lived by the local students from under-developed

countries who do not have equal opportunities for physical mobility to international universities. Indeed, this type of student faces severe obstacles, such as hard and costly visa requirements. Most of them are not reimbursed in case of visa application denial. These students belong to universities that lack the necessary funds to support them in physical mobility within the large sphere of the International Credit Mobility and Erasmus+ programme. Additionally, their home countries are struggling with the harsh consequences of economic and political instability, making their opportunities for internationalisation even more complicated. In addition, the challenges to implementing regular internationalisation were made universal with the heavy consequences of COVID-19 that have hindered the movements between countries (Knight, 2003).

Mechanisms and Achievements of Internationalisation at Home

The principal objective of internationalisation at home (IaH) is to provide valuable opportunities for local students to acquire and own an international experience that is urgently needed for their future employability (Slotte and Stadius 2019). Thus, IaH aims to empower local students with the same success factors as those studying in privileged areas. To this end, IaH relies on integrating international components in the curricula, the campus, and the faculty. It also means promoting intercultural dialogue and developing a global mindset within universities (Leask, 2009).

In this sense, adopting internationalisation at home, according to Leask (2009), provides higher education institutions (HEIs) with complementary tools and methods of internationalisation to ensure a modern fair international inclusive society. Thus, local students and university staff do not need to leave their home universities to gain international experience. Therefore, IaH offers all students, without exception, global perspectives within their programme of study regardless of their physical mobility. It also involves all staff, not only academics and international officers. It is additionally supported by informal (co-)curriculum activities across the institution (IAU, 2007, 2008). It makes meaningful use of cultural diversity in the classroom for inclusive learning, teaching and assessment practice. Moreover, it creates opportunities for intercultural encounters within the local society by fostering purposeful engagement with international students (Beelen, 2011; Leas, 2009).

Therefore, IaH should not be developed as 'another' activity but must be integrated into the university's strategic plan to get its best. It should be based on the intention of policymakers, management, and staff to integrate the international dimension into the overall policy of the institution. In other words, it should be a deliberate, not a passive, process hence translated into actions in different levels (management, academic and administrative staff, students) and areas (education, research, society) (Van Gyn, 2009). It should not be a purpose in itself but a tool to improve the quality of teaching and learning within institutions. IaH, therefore should meet the needs of every society. Consequently, every university should have a strategy of internationalisation at home. Because this latter is based on intercultural sensitivity and communication, cultures should be valorised for what they add to the global citizenry (Elkin, Farnsworth, and Templar, 2008). It is also an overall process that involves every stakeholder in the institution; students, academic and administrative staff, and management. In this sense, inclusiveness is the basis for every successful strategy of IaH. It should be an ongoing process to guarantee the sustainability of its outcomes.

Previous studies (e.g. Bocanegra-Valle, 2015; Planken, 2005; Shaw, 2006) have shown that more focus should be on the proliferation of internationalisation in higher education. Indeed,

in Bologna, for example, the interest in revising academic needs and updating syllabi is a recent trend (Bocanegra-Valle, 2016). Aguilar (2018) states that some increasingly popular practices are meant to internationalise education in Europe and anywhere else in the world. Among these areas of interest are English-medium instruction (EMI) and the emphasis on developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Internationalisation in higher education has already been put on its way, which metamorphosed the classrooms into "small international spaces where local students' intercultural skills can be developed." (Aguilar, 2018: 25). For her, professionals being put into contact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds need to be interculturally and linguistically competent. This need stems from the increasingly connected and globalised world. Thus, developing these vital skills is widely accepted within the courses (Aguilar, 2018), originally designed to prepare potential professionals for working in this globalised world.

Teekens (2003) states that university classrooms have changed into spaces of exchange between local and international students and staff. These classrooms are now seen as fertile environments of internationalisation. However, according to Lantz-Deaton (2017), developing ICC should not only be left to the isolated efforts of local and mobile students within internationalisation academic programs such as Erasmus+. Internationalisation at home should also be the role of universities play through providing intercultural curricula and "extra-curricular activities, research, scholarly collaboration and other external relations." (Knight, 2004; in Aguilar, 2018: 28). Several studies (Aguilar, 2016; Aguilar, 2018; Bocanegra-Valle, 2015; Planken, 2005; Shaw, 2006) suggest that educators and decision makers or textbook designers should base the teaching practices on ICC theories and models for the integration of ICC as a learning outcome.

In this vein, IaH can also include virtual mobility through collaborative online learning with partner university students, which aims to integrate ICC as a learning outcome. In the following sections, I present two virtual exchanges as concrete examples of fulfilling the principal goals of internationalisation at home, namely enhancing local students' ICC, offering them opportunities for virtual collaboration in multicultural teams, consolidating their field knowledge, and sharpening their linguistic skills.

The unfolding of two virtual exchanges

Course design

Both virtual exchanges involved two partner universities; The Virtual University of Tunis (UVT) and The Catholic University of Valencia (UCV). Before implementing the virtual exchanges, the course was designed based on 4 major interdependent stages.

- **The preparation phase:** The goal is to prepare the students for the cultural experience by introducing themselves as cultural entities. This phase helps the facilitators eradicate the potential dangers of such an experience. It is also important to build a stress-free and convivial learning environment.
- **The reflection phase:** It is meant to guide the students into reflections on the similarities and differences between their cultures and those in the videos provided on the platform. This phase aims to lead the students into accepting the differences and recognising them as enrichment to their cultural identities.

- **The interaction phase:** The students enter into discussions to find common ground on which they build partnerships. They are put within teams of 4 to 6 students from different cultures and various educational disciplines for cultural diversity and multidisciplinarity widely solicited in intercultural communication and virtual collaboration.
- **The production phase:** the partners in the interaction stage produce and deliver presentations in which they propose a marketing campaign in the first virtual exchange and solutions for their respective communities in the second virtual exchange.

Implementation of the virtual exchanges

The two virtual exchange programmes in question were implemented during the academic years 2019/2020 and 2020/2021. Both involved two groups of students from the Virtual University of Tunis and the Catholic University of Valencia who were put into contact on the Unicollaboration platform over four weeks. Each of the aforementioned phases was conducted over one week. In the first virtual exchange, the participants were 12 students from each partner university. In the second virtual exchange, the number increased to 20 students per group.

The cultural composition of both groups was different; mono-cultural for the UVT group and multicultural for the UCV group. Some of the UCV students were already on physical mobility. However, they were hindered from being physically present at the premises of the UCV during the Covid-19 lockdown in both academic years 2019/2020 and 2020/2021.

After going through the three first phases, namely the preparation, reflection, and interaction, the students who belonged to the same teams collaborated in multicultural partnerships to produce and deliver presentations in which they proposed marketing campaigns (in the first VE) and effective solutions to their respective communities (in the second VE) by using their field of expertise as a reference and a tool.

Four Zoom synchronous meetings were also scheduled during each virtual exchange to give the students the space to discuss cultural topics and participate in intercultural activities and games. In addition, they had the opportunity to interact within their partnerships in break-up rooms to brainstorm ideas for the production phase.

Roles of the facilitators

During the virtual exchanges, the facilitators were not only the tutors of the online course but also played other significant roles in facilitating the virtual collaborative learning experience. They were partners, monitors, guides, and cultural mediators.

- **The facilitators as partners:** The students were not the only partners in the two virtual exchanges; the facilitators were partners too. Moreover, they followed two virtual exchange training sessions as partners before collaborating in the course implementation.

- **The facilitators as monitors:** During the VE implementation, the facilitators monitored and observed student interactions in the forums. They encouraged the students to contribute to the discussions and participate in cultural activities throughout the synchronous meetings.

- **The facilitators as guides:** Instead of being the sole source of information, the tutors rather served as guides to accompany the students throughout their intercultural journey.

- **The facilitators as cultural mediators:** In line with the intercultural approach in education, both tutors played the role of mediators between members of different cultural entities. In fact, the role of the mediator principally implies leading these different cultural entities to respect each other's cultural beliefs and practices, accept the cultural differences as enrichment to their cultural identities, and most of all, help them relativise their own beliefs and recognise their belonging to the same realm of global citizenry.

Evaluation

The evaluation of the two VEs was conducted quantitatively through student questionnaires as well as qualitatively through forums analysis and synchronous meetings' observation. I explain the administration of the employed data-gathering instruments in the following subsections.

- **Quantitative evaluation:** A questionnaire was administered during the preparation phase of both VEs to collect data about the participants' educational and cultural backgrounds as well as the inclusion of culture in their regular Business English course and their previous participation in a similar academic VE. At the end of each VE, another questionnaire was administered to assess and monitor the development of the participants' competencies concerning intercultural communication, collaboration in virtual teams, and English language proficiency.

- **Qualitative evaluation:** For the sake of triangulation, the qualitative evaluation was carried out through two instruments forums analysis and synchronous meetings observation. Indeed, the four synchronous meetings in each VE were recorded. Participants' interactions were first transcribed, and then the data collected from both instruments were grouped into themes in accordance with the three mentioned competencies specifically needed in intercultural communication, collaborating in virtual teams, and English language proficiency. Analyzing the student's reflections and participation served as a tool to assess the extent to which these competencies were developed.

Findings

The following subsections are dedicated to presenting the findings of both evaluation types in the current study; quantitative and qualitative.

- **Findings of the quantitative evaluation:** The data collected from the first questionnaire revealed the fact that the participants of both VEs had various cultural and educational backgrounds. Some of them were law students; others were IT and business students. Different nationalities were involved, including Tunisian, Spanish, French, Italian, Pakistani, Ukraine, Malian, etc. This cultural diversity helped immensely in allowing the students to interact with members of different cultures, hence discovering what reunites them within the realm of global citizenry. Regarding their participation in a previous VE, the totality of the participants denied such participation. However, in both VEs, 27.3% of the students were already on a physical exchange programme in Valencia, Spain (See Figure 1).

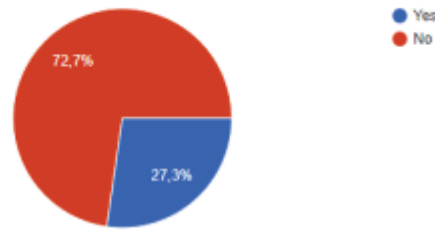14- Have you ever participated in an academic cultural exchange project?

Figure 1. Participation in academic cultural exchange projects

In addition, the data gathered from the second questionnaire revealed the development of the competencies and skills needed in intercultural communication (e.g. Intercultural Communicative Competence), collaborating in virtual teams (e.g. Flexibility, openness, soft skills, teamwork skills, leadership skills, media literacy, etc.), and English language proficiency (i.e. the receptive skills and productive skills). The participants unanimously agreed on the opportunity to communicate across cultures with students of different educational backgrounds. They could also collaborate within virtual teams by using the different online tools provided by the facilitators of the VEs (See Figures 2 and 3).
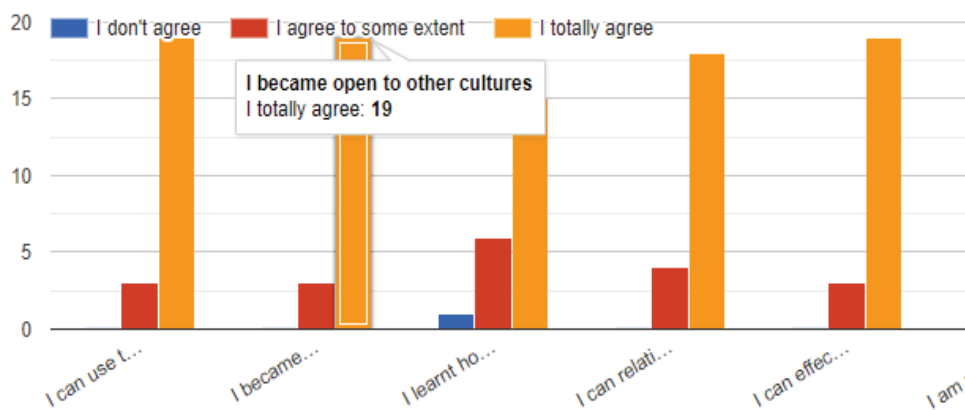

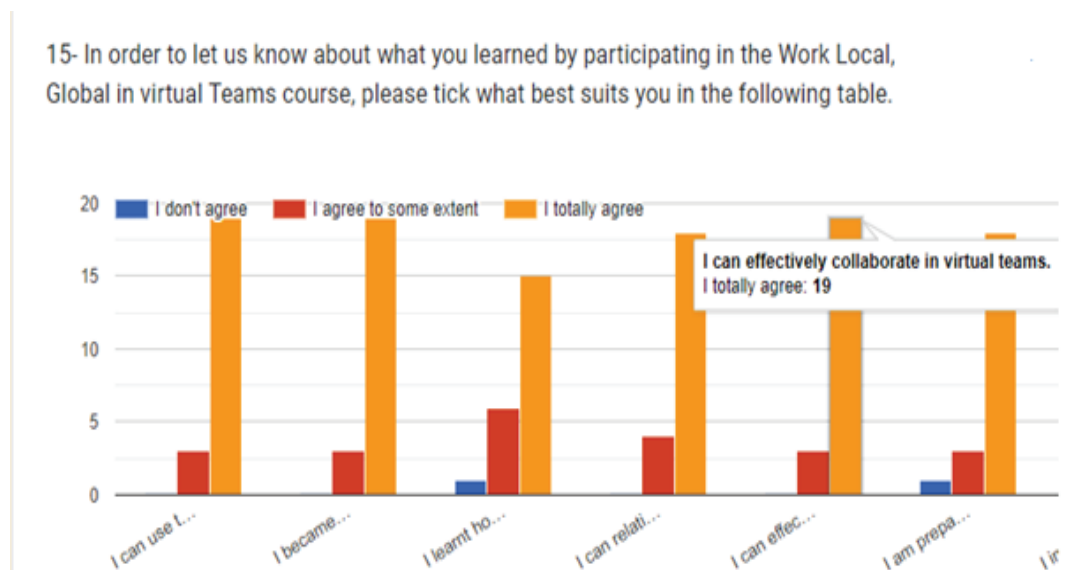**Figure 2. Openness to other cultures**

Figure 3. Effective collaboration in virtual teams

- **Findings of the qualitative evaluation:** The facilitators provided a comfortable learning environment during the synchronous meetings. The participants practised the language by interacting with equally non-native speakers of English. They also were stress-free when engaging in intercultural interactive, funny, and motivational activities.

  The tutors relied on their previous intimacy with their respective students to urge them to speak and contribute to the activities. Indeed, they were as if in their own regular classroom with their classmates.

  Furthermore, using the break-up rooms helped build the sense of partnership urgently needed among the same team members and therefore developed their competencies to collaborate in virtual teams. They had their own time to make acquaintances reach a compromise and find affinities with the members of their teams in order to work on the same final project.

Virtual exchange implications for Internationalisation at Home

In light of the findings reached in the current study, we can draw several conclusions about the implications of the virtual exchange for internationalisation at home within higher educational institutions (HEIs) in the underprivileged as well as the privileged corners of the world. It is worth noting that the virtual exchange can be carried out in four different scenarios. I describe these scenarios in the following subsections, including their procedures, mechanisms, and objectives.

The four scenarios of virtual exchange

- **Preparatory or follow-up activity to physical mobility:** It is equally named blended mobility. It is set before or after a physical mobility exchange to provide high-quality preparation and ensure that students succeed in their stay abroad or reflect on their international experience.
- **Intertwined component of physical mobility:** Also blended mobility knotted with physical mobility into a single educational experience. The principal aim of this VE scenario is to expand the participating student audience of physical mobility by involving those who cannot travel for longer periods.
- **Stand-alone learning activity:** This scenario is recognised as an individual activity that helps institutions introduce VE projects with more restricted faculty contributions if wanted.
- **Component of a traditional or online course:** It is conducted as an integral or required part of a course. This VE scenario is suitable for teachers who wish to give their courses an international dimension. In this VE scenario, the teachers can design the course or include a ready-made VE within a single course.

Implications for Internationalisation at Home

In light of the results of the current study, we deduce that virtual collaborative learning may be a tool to provide educational inclusion for underprivileged and vulnerable students, such as people with disabilities or refugees, which gives them equal opportunities to share and exchange cultural interests. They are therefore offered an international experience without caring about the funds or the visa.

Moreover, students can build partnerships and expand their intercultural network via collaborative online tools. To this end, the VE empowers them with the right competencies, including intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and virtual collaboration skills

vastly required in their employability process. Thus, the four VE scenarios are perfect for adopting ICC as a learning objective in the curricula of higher education institutions.

It is also important to note the merits of mingling international and local students within the same VE to get the best of their international experience. In fact, they can co-construct their knowledge and competencies within efficient and complementary partnerships.

Therefore, adopting virtual collaborative learning to exchange cultural reflections can be a strategic pillar of Internationalisation at Home. This latter should therefore be acknowledged as an institutional policy within the overall strategy of internationalisation.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that the virtual exchange can be an efficient tool for developing the competencies and skills essential to build students' international experience, namely intercultural communicative competence, collaboration skills, and language proficiency. Through virtual collaborative learning, these students are given equal opportunities in the internationalisation process that should no longer be the privilege of students belonging to specific places. Therefore, internationalisation at home comes as an alternative or consolidation to the internationalisation strategy of universities. To this end, approving the potential of virtual exchange in providing an international experience without leaving the home country should be considered when setting the university's overall internationalisation strategy. Therefore, in the current paper, I tried to shed light on the challenges that may emerge within the 'regular' internationalisation. Then, I present internationalisation at home through collaborative learning as an equally efficient strategy to internationalise local students. Thus, two virtual exchange programmes were given as concrete examples of using virtual collaborative learning to guide the students throughout their international experience, which is highly solicited for their future employability.

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