5. The experiences of teacher trainers using virtual exchange

5.1. Studying the role of teacher trainers

As seen in the previous sections of this study, the main research questions asked in the European policy experiment have been related to the impact of virtual exchange on student-teachers’ competence development. However, demonstrating that virtual exchange has a positive impact on students’ foreign language, intercultural, and digital-pedagogical competences is not sufficient to ensure that this learning approach will be implemented on a large scale in European institutions of initial teacher education. It is also important to understand the perspective of the teacher trainers who took part in the EVALUATE exchanges and to delve in-depth into their experiences of running virtual exchanges as part of their courses in initial teacher education and within the context of teacher education in their countries.

In order to achieve this, the research team contacted teacher trainers from the two rounds of projects, inviting them to take part in either written (interview questions answered through email) or online and/or face-to-face interviews. Interviews with a total of 31 different teachers were collected. The aural interviews were then transcribed and uploaded into the NVivo data analysis platform. The profile of the teachers who took part in the study reflected the overall profile of the teachers participating in the EVALUATE exchanges: they were teacher trainers mainly from the project’s ‘partner’ regions and countries – Spain, Portugal, Hungary, and Baden Württemberg, Germany. The large majority (29/31) were also novice telecollaborators – this was for most the first time they had organised a virtual exchange in their classes. This was a deliberate choice on our behalf as we wished to study the impact of virtual exchange on teachers who were new or relatively new to this activity.

The two researchers involved in this part of the analysis then individually coded and recoded the data (Chilisa & Preece, 2005). This was a two-step process wherein the data were first thematically coded according to the main points that were detailed by the participants and then a second coding was undertaken by the same researcher after a week to ensure that the first emergent themes were reliable. Next, the finalised thematic codes were exchanged between the researchers, corroborated, and the main themes identified and correlated to the initial research questions listed here:
5.2. The impact of virtual exchange on their teaching and professional practice

Many teachers remarked on the profound impact their experience had on their own teaching practice and approaches. The highlighted points were: the teachers were very satisfied and found the experiences to be generally positive for both themselves and their students, underscoring gains such as the broadening of their pedagogical knowledge (new ideas, abilities, and confidence to implement further telecollaborative exchanges) and other unexpected opportunities including new (physical) mobility agreements and student visits. These findings are illustrated in Figure 26. Some of the teachers also mentioned that taking part in these projects compelled them to be more innovative in the face-to-face classrooms, bringing into play more participative teaching strategies.

Of the points mentioned, one of the most highly referenced (and unexpected) points that emerged from the interviews was the development of new professional or collaborative opportunities and

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Figure 26. Main outcomes teacher impact
expansion into other virtual exchange practices based on similar patterns of practice. Several of the teachers explained in detail how new possibilities for collaboration arose from the virtual exchanges. These ranged from Erasmus agreements (physical staff exchange), to collaboration on publications and presentations in academic conferences regarding their own experiences. One teacher mentioned that her university had decided to continue with the initiative as a sustained practice (note that in the following quotes, the teacher's names and other potentially identifying markers have been removed to retain anonymity of the participants):

“It's something that has served as a basis this year were [sic] doing a similar experiment I suppose it's what you'd call it we're having a similar experience with a Danish university with students in a different subject that I'm sharing with another colleague”.

There was also mention of ‘non-institutional’ collaboration:

“We haven’t discussed an Erasmus mobility but I would like to invite the two teachers from Holland to come and teach here in my faculty and organise a workshop for the other teachers in the faculties – and invite students to come and talk about their experiences. Because I think this would be suitable not only for students of languages but also [for] students of other faculties”.

This type of unexpected collaboration and physical mobility was not only in relation to themselves, the teachers also noted that the students had arranged for ‘impromptu visits’:

“The [partner class 1] group is now with intention to try to carry out a ‘study visit’ to [the partner institution] next year. Teachers are also considering joint projects around this theme [of virtual exchanges]”.

5.3. The challenges and problems which teacher trainers encountered

As mentioned above, the teachers were generally very positive about their experiences, citing both student and professional gains as reasons to carry out virtual exchange. At the same time, the teachers were quite honest about the problems and challenges they encountered during the process. Of course, virtual exchange is a highly complex practice and the challenges that arise are complex and multi-layered, although we attempt to ‘tease out’ the main points emerging from the interviews in this section. The most frequently mentioned issues were (in order of most oft-
cited): technology, student resistance, time management, task design, intercultural issues, and
difficulties arising from the teacher partnership. These themes are illustrated in Figure 27. Due
to the qualitative nature of the interview data, we do not consider exact numbers of referencing
as the only indicator of frequency because one teacher may mention the same topic several times
in the same interview (if it is a topic of key interest for them, for instance). Thus, recurrence was
considered as a sum factor of (1) being mentioned by the majority of the teachers and (2) mentioned
more than once by more than one teacher in the interviews.

5.3.1. Technology

Difficulties arising from the technology were usually either related to differences in access and/
or knowledge of the technologies between the two groups or lack of diversity in the available
technological resources:

“My students were not able to form strong relationships due to the weak internet
connection in Italy and having limited time to interact online”.

Inevitably, the matter of technology is directly related to issues that arise out of scheduling
overlaps and time zones (another common problem that was brought out in the interviews).
These points are important, particularly in relation to synchronous online meetings and the
timely exchange of geographically-distributed student activities:

“The day we wanted to do the skype conversation we asked for the salon de actos
[translation: Conference Hall] and the technology did not work there. Finally I used my
phone and it was not good at all. So if technologies are related in your work, that’s not easy
for us”.

More than one teacher mentioned that they were surprised by the lack of ‘technological
awareness’ of their students, despite being the generation considered to be ‘digital natives’. At
the same time, the teachers also mentioned the resourcefulness of their students for resolving communication difficulties:

“So we divided the students into groups and we gave them email addresses. They took off and collaborated... everywhere. And for me, I'm a total control freak. [laughs] Google Docs, Facebook Messenger... they invited us into everything so we could see what was going on. And I was quite surprised because their collaboration was quite dynamic actually, choosing whatever they wanted. But I don't think I would do that again because it was a bit hard to control. I think you need a base camp”.

5.3.2. **Student resistance**

Despite overall positive feelings about the experience, the teachers did notice that there was some ‘pushback’ from the students themselves although they felt that in the end the students demonstrated learning and intercultural gains:

“Students complained a lot in the process and said it’s not possible, we can’t do that and we have to be in the same room and no... but in the end, I think they were okay with it and the products were nice”.

The teachers provided different possible reasons for student resistance, explaining that it is a ‘normal’ part of any pedagogical experience; that the pressures of completing a series of tasks during a specific window of time affected students’ perceptions and different expectations regarding the exchange.

5.3.3. **Time management**

As it has already been mentioned above, time management is woven through other difficulties referenced in the interviews. This issue is related to both short periods of calendar overlap (scheduling) and time pressures of completing the tasks on schedule in order to fulfill their partners’ requirements:

“The main problem was the issue of time. Because we were paired with the Swedish university and the academic timetable is very different to ours so the overlap between the subject being taught in Sweden and the subject being taught here was quite a narrow window so we felt the whole time we were under a lot of pressure to get the students
through the different stage or the different the [sic] tasks – in fact we had to reduce the tasks”.

5.3.4. Task design

As with time management, the issue of task design is not as simple as the category might suggest. Problems with task design range from different teacher interpretations of the task implementation and outcome to difficulties in time management of the task, to the amount of task monitoring by the partner teachers:

“It is fundamental for teachers to organize and monitor; interference is not good. Students’ conversations were personal and social and should be allowed to develop that way”.

5.3.5. Intercultural issues and difficulties arising from the teacher partnership

Intercultural issues emerged from both student and teacher perspectives. In reference to the students, intercultural questions were mostly related to different approaches to the assigned work in the virtual exchange:

“They had lots of complaints about their partners in [the partner class]. I don’t know if it’s been a coincidence, I don’t know if it’s just that it happens in all groups, that some students are responsible, they’re hardworking, they get their work done, but some others are not. So the thing is that they didn’t, some of their partners did not reply on time, they didn’t do the work; they weren’t willing to do video conferencing”.

In all of the interviews, the teachers balanced their negative comments with affirmative statements of the benefits they gained from taking part in the exchange. Several noted that negative feelings that arose were not pervasive throughout, nor were they always long-term:

“There was a phase when we both had the feeling that, it felt like our students were blaming it on [their partners] and [their partners] were blaming it on our students. ‘They didn’t do anything’, or they said ‘They don’t do anything so we can’t continue’ and so on. Maybe it is also normal that they wait till the last minute and then they do it”.

In at least one exchange, the teachers noted that with sufficient support the participants in the exchange were able to discuss and work out and negotiate their differences:
Because [my class] had an idea for the design of the final project. So they came up with an idea and presented it to the [the partner class]. So the [the partner class] just changed it. They thought that it was what they were supposed to do. But [my class] were completely upset. They thought [the partner class] would praise the product and just comment on it. So they were completely upset and both groups complained to their lecturers. So my partner and I got to know about it. So I talked about it to my partner and said we should leave it to the students. We told them – you are capable of solving the problem now. This is a cultural problem and this is the type of intercultural situation we were talking about and will you be able to manage that? And they did. They talked about it. And that was the thing, they didn’t stop when they were upset. They kept on talking about it. And of course we had to push them a little bit. And they were able to solve it”.

Different work approaches were also evident between the teacher partnerships, contributing to some communication gaps:

“Some students from her class and from my class left the project and after that the communication between the two teachers was less fluid. She said in an email ‘talk to your students, find out why they are not working’. I replied that it was the problem of the two groups. After that the project went better but we never exchanged any more emails”.

5.3.6. What is the impact of virtual exchange on their students?

The interview data reveals a wide range of positive learning outcomes which the teacher trainers feel that the virtual exchanges had on their students. These outcomes are summarised
SECTION 5. THE EXPERIENCES OF TEACHER TRAINERS USING VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

In Figure 28. In general, teachers found that virtual exchange enabled opportunities for learning which were not normally available to students in the traditional classroom. For example, teachers reported frequently that students had found the exchanges motivating as a learning activity and that it had allowed them to learn and practise their English in an authentic way with speakers of other languages – something which is not easily achieved in monolingual classrooms:

“For my students this has been very motivating. They told me that they had enjoyed being in contact with another group, to know other cultures, to talk about their subject with others....this is a direct contact for them. Normally, they wouldn’t be able to practise their English. Even though this was with non-native speaker speakers [sic]. But I suppose that makes sense too because we are always talking about ‘international English’”.

They also mentioned that students had developed both greater awareness of different cultural perspectives as well as learning information about their partners’ cultures and the different systems of education. One practitioner explained:

“At the end of the exchange the reaction was very positive because the students said they had learned a lot from their partners and that was, for me, very satisfying. Because I realised that the students had understood the essence of what we wanted to develop in this project – which is put yourself in the position of the other, understand them and, many times, give way. They also told me that they had learned the contents of the course better because their international partners had helped them see the contents from another point of view. And they learned how other people work”.

[Image of two students using headsets]
As the project had been based to a great extent on issues related to education, other teachers found that virtual exchange also enabled students to learn about differences between educational systems:

“However, I think it went well, as students got to know the education system in Brazil and discussed common themes in both education systems, such as, for example, lack of success or assessment. In terms of the education of future primary teachers, this experiment was enriching and gratifying for students”.

Finally, teachers spoke regularly about how students had developed their digital competences as well as their understanding of how to use technology in a pedagogically efficient and innovative way thanks to the exchange. For example, one teacher mentioned that “[m]any of them didn’t know the tools that we used. Like Padlet, voicethread we used, well nearly all of them they didn’t know any of them and they found them useful”, while another practitioner explained how students had explored how they themselves could integrate virtual exchanges into their own classes: “I think they learned how to set up such an exchange with their students, we also reflected a little bit every time on what kind of support you could give your students if you do it in for example secondary schools”.

When asked about students’ use of online tools during the virtual exchanges, practically all the teacher trainers reported similar experiences. The EVALUATE team had originally prepared a Moodle platform (a well-known and easy to use virtual learning environment) where each exchange was assigned a course for their online interactions and digital products. However, a large majority of the teachers reported that students had been quick to move their interactions away from the Moodle forums and on to more interactive and personal social networks such as WhatsApp, Skype, or Google Docs. A representative example of how students worked is explained by one of the teacher trainers:

“From the technological point of view all students created a gmail account, registered on the Moodle platform, used Google Docs to share information, VivaVideo to design short introductory personal and group videos addressed to their colleagues in Brazil, used PowerPoint and Prezi to present final project work, and also communicated via social media, such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. For synchronous communication during several consecutive weeks, the teachers in charge of the project in both countries used Skype and Zoom. When students communicated synchronously [outside of class], twice, the Zoom platform was used”.
It appears that while using a virtual learning environment such as Moodle may be more practical for teachers as they try to follow their students’ interactions, students prefer to use online communication tools which are considered to reflect their daily online communicative practices and also allow for instant feedback. One teacher trainer from Germany reported:

“One student said to me: ‘Once I used the WhatsApp chat it was the first time it felt like real people, before that it felt like texting to a computer’”.

Another teacher explained:

“What they wanted was instant synchronous communication. They wanted instant replies. I don’t know, they could see the pictures of the people and their names. They said that Moodle looks old fashioned. It’s easier to connect via Facebook and write via Messenger because they can look at the photos and learn more about the person”.

As a result of this approach, the Moodle platform was used almost exclusively for submitting finalised documents and project outcomes to the teachers. Teachers seemed to be generally comfortable with this approach although a small number of informants did suggest that the mix of tools led at times to confusion and that it had resulted in a loss of control by the teachers as they did not always have access to the myriad of collaborative documents and text and oral conversations which were taking place. And while this ‘loss of control’ of the technology being used is ostensibly a positive aspect of the learning process (gradual autonomy and learner control), the remark seems to indicate a feeling by the teacher that she no longer knew what was occurring in the exchange nor had full access to students’ language use within the parameters of the class. We choose not to evaluate this statement from a pedagogical perspective, but rather we focus on the need for the practitioner to feel comfortable with the virtual exchanges and therefore include it as an indicator of a challenge for the teacher regarding the Moodle platform:

“I don’t think I would do that again [allow for a mix of online communication tools] because it was a bit hard to control. I think you need a base camp. ...And I think my partner realised that too that you do need this base camp. You can send them off into these different satellites but they need to come back home and report”.

These comments most clearly reveal a possible mismatch between the digital practices of the teachers and their students. Previous studies show that educators often feel that they face a
“constant challenge of refining teaching and learning techniques to keep up with the increasing demands and expectations [regarding technology]” (Duncan-Howell, 2012, p. 827). Often times learners are what might be called ‘digitally expectant’, that is the assumption that technology will be integrated into teaching practices nowadays and the teachers feel they are not tech-savvy enough to meet these expectations. These issues appear to have come to a fore in these exchanges as well. Added to this, the nature of telecollaborative exchanges implies effective use of communication technology which can be interpreted as additional pressure.

5.4. What do the teacher trainers consider important for successful virtual exchange?

The qualitative analysis of the teacher trainers’ interviews allowed us to identify a series of good practices in virtual exchanges which practitioners considered important for the success of this type of learning (see Figure 29). The first two of these good practices are related to the teacher trainers themselves and how they approached their working relationships between their partner teachers, while the remaining three are related to how the virtual exchanges are structured and carried out.

![Figure 29. Reasons for success](image)

5.4.1. Virtual exchanges work better when teachers have an opportunity to meet their partner and plan together beforehand

Throughout the interviews with the teacher trainers, it became evident that those who considered their exchanges to have been a success related this directly to a good working relationship with their partner teacher. This type of relationship was achieved by, first, actually having the
opportunity to get to know the partner in a face-to-face context before the exchange and, second, by maintaining constant contact via email or videoconferencing with the partner teacher during the exchange itself.

Many of the teachers had had the opportunity to meet their partners during the workshops which were held in Padova, Italy, and León, Spain before each round of virtual exchange. For many of those teachers, this was an opportunity not only to plan the exchange together but also to establish trust and to develop a working relationship together. One Spanish teacher commented “[o]ur relationship was strengthened by the two days we spent working together in the León workshop” while another recalled “[m]y partner and I worked together in the training workshop in Padova and we really connected well together. We worked a lot because we wanted to get a lot done together”.

For some of those who did not have the opportunity to meet together physically, the option of videoconferencing sometimes appears to have been sufficient. However, in all cases, it appears that this ‘getting to know you’ phase must go further than merely agreeing on the practicalities of the exchange and needs also to involve the development of a relationship of trust between the teachers. For example, a teacher explained:

“She [my partner] hadn’t been at any of the workshops. So I was wondering how was this going to go. But she was very helpful and we skyped a couple of times. And I think that’s very valuable because when you get to actually see each other and actually talk... and the time difference was that I was at home in the evenings so it became more casual”.

When exchanges were not reported as being successful by the teacher trainers, the lack of initial contact between the instructors is mentioned as one of the negative factors:

“It is more difficult to carry an online exchange if you do not have a face-to-face meeting with the partner institution’s leader. It is important to know beforehand what each other’s expectations are”.

5.4.2. The relationship between the partner teachers requires close attention and flexibility

When the virtual exchange begins, the relationship between the two teachers and their ability to communicate and collaborate effectively together also becomes key to whether or not
teachers consider their exchanges as being satisfactory. This involves, first of all, regular contact throughout the exchanges as this teacher highlights:

“The reason why it works so well is definitely the relationship between [his partner] and me. For this telecollaboration we spent an awful lot of time together. We basically mailed at least once a day and we are very close as regards the preparations and everything. We got to know each other very well. It’s very personal relationship and that helps a lot”.

Other informants made clear that this teacher-teacher collaboration must, again, go further than simply exchanging information and trying to fit the exchange into pre-existing curricula, but must also involve an active interest in the partner teachers’ context and a willingness to adapt and be flexible when necessary. One informant explained: “[t]he relationship with my partner was of mutual respect, of collaborative work, and of great disposition on the part of the teachers” while another reported “we were able to adapt to each other’s plans and to appreciate each vision and suggestion and we tried to really coordinate our syllabus. I think that we made a very positive work in adapting to each other’s syllabus and to create [sic] a new one where we could accommodate each other’s perspective”.

The term ‘flexibility’ appears repeatedly in the interview data as being one of the keys to a successful working relationship for teachers running virtual exchanges together. A practitioner from one of the exchanges reflected: “I am surprised to realise once again that there is a need to organize every bit in detail and to be ready to fix unexpected problems. And to be flexible!”,
while another teacher from Holland concluded “[i]t’s actually not that hard to carry out such a project if you and your partner really want it. You just need to be a little flexible and motivated”.

When instructors did not maintain fluid contact with their partners during the exchange, this was commonly mentioned as one of their regrets or one of the keys to a lack of success in exchanges. When asked what advice they would give other teachers planning to take part in virtual exchange, one practitioner suggested the following: “[c]ommunicate with your partner face to face once every week or so – more than I did”. Furthermore, when two instructors who reported disagreements or annoyance with their partners, this was clearly based on a lack of regular communication together. For instance, this first example shows a case where lack of coordination between teachers led one of them to become frustrated with the lack of balance in workload:

**Interviewer**: “Did you have any kind of workload distribution? In terms of organizing the exchange?”.

**Teacher trainer**: “(laughing) Well, (laughing) I did all the Moodle things and then I asked her all the time and she always said, ‘Yeah yeah that’s fine, that’s fine! So we didn’t really develop this together...’”.

This next example also describes the consequences of the lack of communication between the partner teachers during a class where students were involved in synchronous discussions together:

“So there were two or three groups that worked really well and there was one group that was just sitting there [in class] and didn’t get any replies from their [partner] group which was also sitting in class. And then I couldn’t communicate with [the partner teacher] because she didn’t reply to her emails and she didn’t have any other social media because she didn’t have a smartphone. So I had to tell one of my students to tell her partner to tell [the partner teacher] that one of the groups wasn’t working. So that made it very complicated”.

5.4.3. **Tasks with joint collaborative outcomes are the most effective for learning – but are also the most challenging for students**

When teachers spoke about what were the keys to successful learning outcomes for their students, many of them referred to the benefits of virtual exchange tasks which involved requiring
students to collaborate closely together in order to produce a joint product or to complete a project. Teachers found that it was during these intense periods of ‘high stakes’ negotiations and collaboration that students learned most about cultural differences and about the challenges of online collaboration. One practitioner reflected this widely-held belief in the following:

“Producing something together is the most important part of the whole project. It’s a hands on activity and they have to generate something and this is where they realise cultural differences, how people go about things and how they deal with it.”

However, getting students to collaborate together in close coordination also brings with it a series of challenges. Problems with partner response times, timetabling differences, and bad internet connections became all the more visible when students were under pressure to complete projects which depended on input from both classes. This led, at times, to students blaming each other or feeling let down by their partners. An exchange practitioner explained:

“At the end they really worked quite hard to finish their products... But there was a phase when we both had the feeling that..., it felt like our students were blaming it on the partners and the partners were blaming it on our students. ‘They didn’t do anything’, or they said ‘They don’t do anything so we can’t continue’ and so on”.

This is definitely a challenge for virtual exchange – the best tasks are often the most complex while at the same time, the need for the exchanges to be meaningful and with a purposeful task was highlighted by the teachers. This implies the need for careful planning, including consideration of the time needed for the activities and sub-tasks that the students are expected to complete.

5.4.4. Virtual exchanges work best when they are integrated into classes and students receive credit for their work

Teachers also reported that another key to success was the degree to which the virtual exchange could be integrated into courses. This meant that exchanges needed to be related to course content, worked on during class time, and be credit-bearing activities. One practitioner highlighted this strong approach to virtual exchange integration:

“The exchange was integrated into both partners’ course classes. The chosen theme was according to the objectives of our two courses. In all classes, a period of time was always
reserved to ask questions about the tasks, to comment on the exchanges, and for the students to carry out their interactions with their partners”.

Those teachers that did integrate the exchange believed that this was one of the keys to successful learning. For example, one teacher explained: “I would highly encourage it and suggest that they weave it into their course so it is a frequent topic of discussion”. Another teacher concluded that acting as an intercultural mediator for her students during the exchange had had a transformative impact on her students' learning:

“We have acted as mediators in the exchange and that was a very satisfactory task. Speaking from [sic] myself, I could see how my students changed their perspectives when sharing with the class their concerns about the communication with their partners. And I think the role of the teacher is very important here”.

Similarly, those who did not integrate the virtual exchanges fully into their class programme (not allowing time in class or dealing with the exchange as supplementary activities) often reported regretting this. One teacher reported this as an important realisation after the fact: “I learned that... I should have allocate[d] class time to do exchange projects. I regretfully did not integrate the exchange into my classes – only for clarifying assignments”. Another also attributed a lack of credit for the exchanges as one of the reasons why students had stopped participating in the exchange: “[i]t wasn’t obligatory for [her partner’s] students and as it got more complex students started dropping out. Thirteen fell to seven. Her incentive was for them to do two essays instead of three! Very little!”.

5.4.5. **Virtual exchanges work best when students use videoconferencing/synchronous communication**

A large number of teachers underlined the use of videoconferencing between the partner classes as being another important factor for the success of exchanges. Teachers used videoconferencing technology in different ways. Some required their students to work in small groups using desktop videoconferencing tools such as Skype or Zoom, while others organised ‘class to class’ videoconferencing at key stages of their exchanges such as in the first or final weeks of their projects. The teachers reported that using videoconferencing meant that, in the words of one practitioner, “they saw each other as ‘flesh and bone people’” and contributed to giving the students a sense of who their partners were. One teacher explained in her interview: “[i]n the past collaborations we only used [a text-based messaging app]. But that’s not enough. They really
need to see each other”. This explanation from a different quote captures how many teachers understood the difference between videoconferencing and text-based communication:

“What I noticed was that the students would have really appreciated a live, oral communication between the students. Because everything was asynchronous. And that was a problem. Because when you read a text, it sounds cold. But when you hear someone saying something, it creates a more personal connection. So one of the things which we missed is that there were no personal relationships created. It was more like a work agreement and there was a lack of trust”.

Of course, videoconferencing also brings with it certain challenges and problems which text-based communication does not have. There are practical challenges such as finding a time when both classes can be online together. There are also risks about how the interaction is
structured during the conference. For example, one colleague reported the following experience of videoconferencing with a partner class:

“Then, in the final session, [my partner teacher] tried to get as much out of the conference as possible and because her students had like hundreds of questions and my students didn’t have time to ask any questions. And also they didn’t realise that the camera was on when we had this skype conference so my students could see her students using their smartphones and one student was reading in a book”.

Finally, there is the pedagogical challenge of achieving in depth discussions on a class-to-class level in a live videoconference. The following teacher suggests that videoconferences need to be carefully integrated with text-based communication in order to be fully effective:

“But, was [videoconferencing] helpful for learning the syllabus? I think it was an important social and cross cultural encounter, but not a learning encountering [sic] as it is meant to be. The resources and facilities didn’t facilitate a fruitful exchange – it was difficult to involve all the students in a reflexive dialogue and to make them carefully analyse each other’s contributions and to reflect and comment on it. Next time, we might need to have written contributions first, analyse it and then discuss and comment on each other’s work”.

5.5. Reaction of faculties and institutions to virtual exchange

When teacher trainers spoke about the role played by their institutions in the virtual exchange, there was a mixed set of responses. Various practitioners reported that their heads of department had expressed interest in the exchange and others mentioned how the projects had been reviewed and recognised by their faculties’ scientific committees. One colleague spoke about how she had been awarded a teaching excellence grant thanks to her work on the project. Others mentioned how their departments anticipated that their experiences using virtual exchange would lead to more teachers taking up this activity:

“They have been both interested and supportive. I have been asked to give a short report on the project at a department meeting”.

However, many others felt less institutional support. Some were critical of the lack of technical support and facilities which their institutions provided. For example, one teacher complained
“[l]ike for example the infrastructure is not very supportive, for example, we don’t have reliable Wi-Fi, the computer room is terrible” while another explained “the videoconference facilities and resources didn’t work out. Next time, I will also know better what I will need and I will make my needs more clear to our services”. This teacher offers helpful insight for creating a better understanding between teachers and their institutions as regards previewing and ensuring that technology requirements are in place prior to the virtual exchanges.

An interesting reflection that emerged from the teacher interviews was the fact that these virtual exchanges were not carried out by isolated ‘innovators’ but rather within the context of a large-scale Erasmus+ initiative. Doing so seems to have encouraged department and faculty decision makers and technical staff to pay more attention to the activity. One teacher described her institution’s reaction this way:

“Well, in my building, for example, the people in charge... they were very kind, which is very strange [laughing] mostly because I sold the [virtual exchange project]... ‘we have this Erasmus with the [partner country], we don’t want to be just like... they gave me a good class, we had good conditions, things were working, and they were more or less pretty good. They are not normally but they were very good”.

Similarly, in a different interview, one teacher explained the importance of various members of her institution taking part in the EVALUATE programme:

“I tried to get them to bring the press to our faculty years ago to show them how we were doing synchronous communication but they weren’t interested. But now, because there are more of us, they are rehabilitating the language lab so we can do telecollaboration in it. But we need more people. For these things to work, you need lots of people doing it. Until you have more people doing something, you won’t get anywhere. You need union. That’s why I think it’s so important to spread the news in the university, so others will start doing it too”.

These findings would suggest that in order for virtual exchange to take root in departments of initial teacher education, it is not sufficient for isolated innovators to begin using the activity in their classes. Instead, the experiences of the practitioners underscore the notion that decision-makers will pay more attention to these activities when they are carried out within the context of external programmes such as EVALUATE or Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange and when more than one teacher at the institution is involved in the initiative.
5.6. **What recommendations do the teacher trainers have for their institutions and their regional and national ministries?**

When teacher educators were asked what steps could be taken to promote virtual exchange more as a pedagogical tool in initial teacher education, some interesting proposals were made (these are summarised in Figure 30). First, a large number of practitioners identified the importance of awarding academic recognition for teachers who undertake virtual exchanges in their classes. The respondents constantly referred to the time which the organisation of virtual exchanges requires and they called for their institutions to award recognition of this extra work in the form, for example, of a reduction in teaching hours:

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

Another teacher suggested that virtual exchange be included among the many academic activities which lead to a reduction in teaching time:

“that’s what they are doing with everything nowadays, with all the other extra things that we do, ...including it as part of the teaching load, even if it’s just very little, like half a credit. And that might encourage some other teachers, because it is time consuming”.

However, teachers also warned that virtual exchange should not be made obligatory at universities and that teachers should not be obliged to run exchanges before they are ready to do so. This increasingly involves the amount of teacher training in this area. One teacher trainer sums this up well here:

“One thing is that it can’t be obligatory. When telecollaboration is obligatory for all students it can be destructive... So I think more should be done in the level of
teacher training and changing attitudes as opposed to writing it in documents and policy. Because there are still many language teachers who are not very good at the language or intercultural issues and the question is how to educate these teachers, enhance their intercultural skills instead of putting it in the polices. Because, as I said, in the case of etwinning it is in the policy and this results that thousands of people register in etwinning but then they do nothing because they could not find the right project or right partner or because they don’t want [to]."

This idea of having a more ‘bottom-up’ approach to upscaling the use of virtual exchange was shared by another teacher in a separate interview:

“We cannot impose top-down experiences; teachers need to know why and to believe in it in order to want to explore new practices; and they also need to be assured”.

Finally, a third of the interviewees mentioned linking virtual exchange to the internationalisation programmes of universities and possibly integrating virtual exchange with physical mobility programmes:

“Perhaps I can recommend telecollaboration as a component of future study abroad programs in the partner country?”.

As regards recommendations for regional and national ministries, it was striking to see the general lack of awareness among teacher trainers as to how decision makers at these levels could actually contribute to or influence the promotion of virtual exchange in initial teacher education. Those who did respond to this question made suggestions related to including virtual exchange in the curriculum for primary and secondary school and that this would have a knock-on effect of making the activity more relevant in initial teacher education as well. Others suggested that the ministries should use their influence to shape the curriculum in initial teacher education institutions in order to give more emphasis to online learning in general. One practitioner made this suggestion:

“They [the ministries] should definitely encourage institutions, universities to participate in virtual exchanges projects. When it comes to teacher education, it already says in the curriculum that ICT skills are vital but they should also encourage it more in teacher training... So in [my training institution] for example, there are no courses on technology which they [the student teachers] have to take”.
Teachers also mentioned the need for more training – both short-term (as in ‘get-started-quick’ workshops) and longer, continued education courses.

### 5.7. Concluding comments

The most outstanding feature of the interviews were the participating teachers’ affirmations that the exchanges had been beneficial to both their students and themselves, followed by straightforward declarations that designing and implementing such exchanges inevitably hold some challenges. However, all of the participants were equally adamant that none of the obstacles were insurmountable – in fact they should be embraced since many of their issues were simply outcomes of innovating their teaching practices. The interviewees underscored the need for bringing in and involving more teachers from their institutions as well as the necessity of fostering close collaboration with their students in the virtual exchanges and learning to mediate intercultural exchanges. Finally, the need for stronger institutional support – through both material and human resources – was highlighted.