8. Concluding comments

It was seen at the outset of this report that European policy documents on initial teacher education underline the need for 21st century teachers not only to be digitally literate but also to be able to engage their students in online learning activities which are based on collaborative and intercultural principles of learning. The European education monitor, for example, reports that currently in European schools “ICT is mostly used as a remedial tool” and “few teachers report using ICT for communication in which students are involved, leaving untapped the potential to connect students together” (European Commission, 2015b, p. 59).

In response to this situation, this study presented virtual exchange, an approach to online learning which simultaneously engages learners in digital and international learning and which is clearly based on the principles of collaborative learning. The European policy experiment carried out the largest study of class-to-class virtual exchange to date which involved 25 virtual exchange field trials bringing together institutions of initial teacher education in 16 countries. The study found that not only did students and teachers find virtual exchange to be a highly positive learning experience, but they also believed the experience would be useful for their future careers as teachers. The study also established that virtual exchange contributes to the development of students’ digital, intercultural, and foreign language competence sets. While the quantitative learning gains of the study were quite modest, the qualitative findings allowed us to demonstrate how this method opens up students to new international experiences, helps them to learn by overcoming communicative and organisational barriers and challenges, and gives them first-hand experience of using digital tools for educational purposes. Many of the participants in the study reported coming from quite homogeneous societies and virtual exchange offered them their first experience of working in an international team. Participants reported building confidence and losing personal fears through the exchange, learning to negotiate with peers who have different opinions or ways of thinking, managing to see issues from different perspectives, and solving problems.

The teacher trainers also confirmed to us that participating in a virtual exchange provided their students with invaluable intercultural learning experiences as well as the opportunity for authentic use of their foreign languages. The teachers reported that the virtual exchange had impacted on their own professional practices by providing them with opportunities to collaborate with colleagues internationally, to innovate their classes and to improve their own teaching methods.
However, the study and its accompanying case studies also clearly show that virtual exchange is not easy to implement and that it requires teachers to be aware of the principles of good practice which have been outlined in the pages of this report. These include, for example, ensuring the integration and academic recognition of virtual exchange in their study programmes and overcoming the barriers which distance and technology can put up in relationship building through the use of videoconferencing.

Thanks to the training initiatives offered by EVAluate and other European-sponsored projects such as EVOLVE and Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, virtual exchange will undoubtedly continue to grow as a method in initial teacher education across Europe at a grassroots level; but for it to have large-scale impact and sustainability, the role of public authorities and the European Commission are vital. Decision makers need to refer to virtual exchange explicitly in their policy documents, to provide specific sources of funding for virtual exchange initiatives and to encourage universities to integrate virtual exchange into their internationalisation policies. Virtual exchange should be seen as a compliment to, not as competition or as alternative for, physical mobility initiatives. It was seen in this study that the public authorities that took part in EVAluate have already taken steps to promote this method in their own regions and countries but much more remains to be done. We hope that this report will contribute to the achievement of this goal.