

# Foreword

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This collection of case studies could not come at a more auspicious time, and not only because of the global pandemic that is affecting all of our lives. Virtual exchange is often presented as an innovative approach to teaching and learning across cultures, but inherent in the word ‘innovative’ is the concept of something being ‘new’. As a practice, as well as a focus of research, different forms of virtual exchange have been around for over three decades. What is perhaps ‘new’ is the exponential growth of the field in the past five years, and the coming together of a community of practitioners, researchers, and funders who now place their different models under the umbrella term of ‘virtual exchange’.

As early as the 1990’s, when the Internet began to make it possible for people who were geographically distant to communicate more easily, teachers across the globe and across disciplines saw the value in using this new tool to connect students. Of course it took hold more easily in some areas than others. For example, foreign language teachers saw the value in giving their students access to authentic conversation and dialogue with peers who lived in countries where the target language was spoken. This practice was called ‘telecollaboration’. At the turn of the century, other forms of this type of activity began appearing in different contexts, with different names. Educators at McGill University in Canada began engaging their learners in ‘globally networked learning’, others at the State University of New York (SUNY) in Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and others yet at East Carolina University in ‘global classrooms’, to name just a few. At the same time, not-for-profit organisations such as Soliya (USA) and Sharing Perspectives Foundation (Europe) were developing programmes to bring together young people to engage in facilitated dialogue on sensitive topics such as tensions between the Middle East and the ‘West’ and hate speech. The practice had different names, but the aims were similar: to offer

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intercultural, international experiences to students and young people in general, as a complement to mobility for those who are fortunate enough to travel, and as an opportunity for a meaningful international experience for those who are not.

What was *not* happening was communication amongst these different practitioners, educators, and researchers. This inevitably led to people reinventing the wheel without the benefit of learning from the experience of others who had already been engaging in this type of activity for some time. Although experience and research were often disseminated through publications, these were almost exclusively in discipline-specific journals thus inhibiting learning across disciplines. The founding of the SUNY COIL Center in 2006 in the United States and UNICollaboration in 2016 in Europe, and their respective conferences and professional development opportunities, began to break down these barriers. But perhaps what truly led to the boom the field has seen in the past five years were the government-funded Stevens Initiative in the United States (2015) and Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (2018) in Europe. It is in many ways thanks to the latter that we are fortunate to have this collection of case studies. A volume such as this one *is* innovative because it will allow practitioners, researchers, administrators, and decision makers to be inspired, and to not have to continue reinventing the wheel. Although each case study is situated in a different context, two of the fundamental characteristics of virtual exchange are creativity and flexibility. So I invite you, reader of this collection of case studies, to read through them and while doing so imagine how what others have done before you may be applied in your specific context to enrich teaching, learning, and internationalisation. Only by listening to one another and learning from one another may we hope to create future generations equipped with the skills needed to face the many challenges that we are experiencing now and those that the future holds.



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