

12 Continuous professional development on virtual exchange in Europe: insights from the Erasmus+ VE introductory online course

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Abstract

This presentation focuses on the Erasmus+ online introductory training course, which aims to introduce university educators and administrative/technical staff to Virtual Exchange (VE). The training, which requires no previous experience with VE, engages the participants in tasks that help them understand the requirements to successfully integrate an Erasmus+ VE project into existing courses and curricula, while gaining experience in digital literacy, including communicating and collaborating online. After a brief presentation of the structure of the four-week course, we will show how the design of the course – based on an experiential learning approach – elicited reflections and discussions on pedagogical and technological issues crucial to successful VE projects. Finally, we will show how forum interactions between teaching and administrative staff helped all the participants understand the pedagogical, technological, and administrative implications of setting up VE projects, and identify the necessary steps to engage the different stakeholders (teachers, administrative and technical staff, top management, and students) within their institutions. The overall evaluation of all training courses was highly positive: respondents reported discovering that the course boosted their confidence in communicating or working in a culturally diverse setting. They also felt that the training helped

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them develop their intercultural awareness, digital competences, active listening, communication skills, and acquire ideas for new teaching practices.

Keywords: Erasmus+ VE, continuous professional development, internationalisation at home.

1. The Erasmus+ VE initiative

Erasmus, the European Commission's flagship mobility programme, was initiated in 1987, and since then has allowed over 10 million citizens to spend a period of time studying or working abroad (European Commission, 2019). Erasmus + VE is an innovative pilot project established by the European Commission in order to expand the reach of the Erasmus+ programme through VE, seen as a complement to physical exchange programmes. Launched in 2018, its overall aim is to allow as many young people as possible to benefit from a meaningful intercultural learning experience online, as part of their formal or informal education.

The project's objectives are twofold: on the one hand, it is about fostering mutual understanding and dialogue; on the other, it aims to increase digital equity in internationalisation by promoting the development of skills including critical thinking, intercultural communication, empathy, and media and digital literacy (for an overview of the programme, see Helm, Guth, Shuminov, & Van der Velden, 2020).

The project is being implemented by a consortium of eight organisations: Search for Common Ground, Anna Lindh Foundation, UNIMED, Sharing Perspectives Foundation, Soliya, Kiron Open Higher Education, Migration Matters, and UNICollaboration. UNICollaboration is a cross-disciplinary professional organisation for telecollaboration and VE in Higher Education, and is responsible for the training courses offered regularly within the Erasmus+ VE initiative.

These include a four-week introductory training course for Higher Education Institution (HEI) teaching, administrative and technical staff, a six-week advanced training for teaching staff focusing on designing and implementing VE projects, and training for youth workers. The aim of this paper, which focuses on the first of the three training courses, is to examine the motivations of trainees when enrolling in the course, to explain the pedagogical principles in the design of the course, and to review the feedback given by the participants at the end of the training.

2. The introduction to VE training course

The aims of the introductory course (Basic Training) are to first introduce university educators and staff to the concept of VE and its different opportunities; second, to enable participants to understand how to successfully integrate an Erasmus+ VE project into existing courses and curricula in their particular contexts; third, to enable participants to gain experience in digital literacy, including communicating and collaborating online; and finally, to discuss the challenges involved in VE and the solutions to these challenges.

The course is structured so that each week focuses on a different theme, including VE, online presence, and digital literacies (Week 1), VE from the perspectives of students and educators from various disciplines (Week 2), matching pedagogy and technology, and engaging stakeholders (Week 3), and pre-empting potential challenges (Week 4).

During the past three years, a number of changes were made to the contents of the course, based on the feedback received from the participants after each iteration. Thus, tasks were added that clarified the concepts of digital literacies and online presence, and activities were added aimed specifically at increased participation by administrative staff, in particular from international relations offices. At the request of some participants, who wished to stay in touch after the course, we also created a community space where, for example, webinars were organised with experienced VE implementers to showcase their experience and

advice. These webinars were also recorded and used as a resource during the training courses.

3. Motivation to enrol in the course

The motives for enrolling in the Basic Training course vary, and recall observations made in the literature: many trainees see VE as a tool which can support their involvement in other European projects (for example physical and virtual mobility programmes), or within the new University Alliances. The training also fills a perceived gap in professional development for both academic and non-academic university staff (Brighton, 2020), in supporting internationalisation at home (O’Dowd, 2017) and online international collaborations (Hildeblando Júnior & Finardi, 2018). More recently, many participants state their need to find alternatives to physical mobilities as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Hildeblando Júnior & Finardi, 2020; Kelly, 2021).

“[My university] is a partner in ERASMUS+ KA2 project. **VE is foreseen as a big part of total project mobilities.** We deeply need knowledge about what it is, where to start and how to implement VE between project partners” (participant, Latvia).

“Our institution would like to enhance its **activities in internationalisation.** Although we are active in the mobility of students and lecturers, this programme seems to provide a wide range of opportunities. Furthermore, we hope it will encourage students – and of course lecturers – for mobility since it could be **a first step towards an international experience**” (participant, Turkey).

“This academic year we are focusing on **internationalisation @home.** As part of **lecturer professionalisation** we would like to create an offer for lecturers that are interested to introduce VE in their courses” (participant, Belgium).

“We are trying to develop VEs for our institution and train our academics and support services as part of our **internationalisation strategy 2019-2025**” (participant, UK).

“I believe that VE will be useful for the development of the activities of our **European University Alliance**, therefore I would like to learn more about how it works in order to help the alliance implement it” (Participant, Italy).

“I am the institutional coordinator of one of the **European University Alliances**. VE will be something that we will launch in the alliance, and all the support and knowledge in that field will be needed. We have allocated resources to create new online courses, and now **we need more training in how to put things in practice**” (Participant, Germany).

4. Learning by doing, reflecting, and discussing

Reflections and discussions on all aspects of project design and implementation are crucial to successful VE projects (Guasch, Alvarez, & Espasa, 2010; Vinagre, 2016). For this reason, emphasis was placed on providing opportunities in the form of weekly discussion forums for interaction between teaching and administrative staff, as this helped all the participants understand the pedagogical, technological, and administrative implications of setting up VE projects, and identify the necessary steps to engage the different stakeholders (teachers, administrative and technical staff, top management, and students) within their institutions.

“This overall situation is very hard, and of course will affect mobilities next year all around the world! This is why we need new forms of mobilities like the VE projects, which I see as a complementary and not a substitution of face-to-face mobilities” (administrative staff, Italy).

“I agree with your stance on VE not replacing physical contact. However, it could be an excellent opportunity to introduce our students

to other people (and for students to develop mutually beneficial learning experiences). Their time together in a VE project could possibly trigger a need for traveling abroad and to meet face to face” (teacher, Israel).

“What I have seen happen here in Madrid as in the rest of the world has called me to a need for meaning, even in my work. And this is already a victory. The work done and what we are doing on VE can be an instrument of change, of growth” (teacher, Spain).

“Covid, mixed with Brexit for us, has changed the way we look at internationalisation and I personally think online work and virtual activity is a great enhancement/addition to what we already do. VE is not a replacement for real exchanges **but it is definitely more inclusive and has impact on more students/staff**” (administrative staff, UK).

“I completely agree with you on **the importance of the democratic nature of VE**. This kind of activities **could help economically disadvantaged students or disabled students** who have difficulties in travelling to experience internationalisation at home” (teacher, Italy).

5. Feedback from participants

Following each iteration, participants were sent a feedback questionnaire, used by the trainers to reflect on the course and make any necessary adjustments.

Below, we report the feedback from two iterations: January 2020, before universities were forced into lockdown due to the Covid-19 health emergency, and June 2020. The January course had a total of 76 participants, evenly distributed between teaching and administrative staff, whereas in June 2020 the number of participants doubled, with 142 enrolled staff, of which about two thirds were administrative staff mostly from international relations offices, in charge of finding alternatives to their physical mobility programmes thwarted by the travel restrictions put in place during spring 2020.

Figure 1 shows the skills that the participants considered they had developed during the course: in both iterations, these were digital competences, active listening skills, and intercultural awareness. Figure 2 shows the extent to which the participants developed their understanding of VE, and were considering future engagement with VE activities.

Figure 1. Course evaluation – skills developed

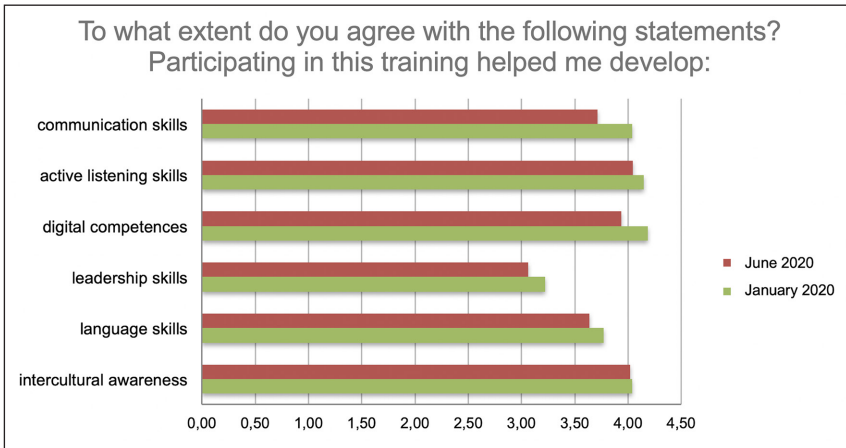


Figure 2. Course evaluation – understanding of VE

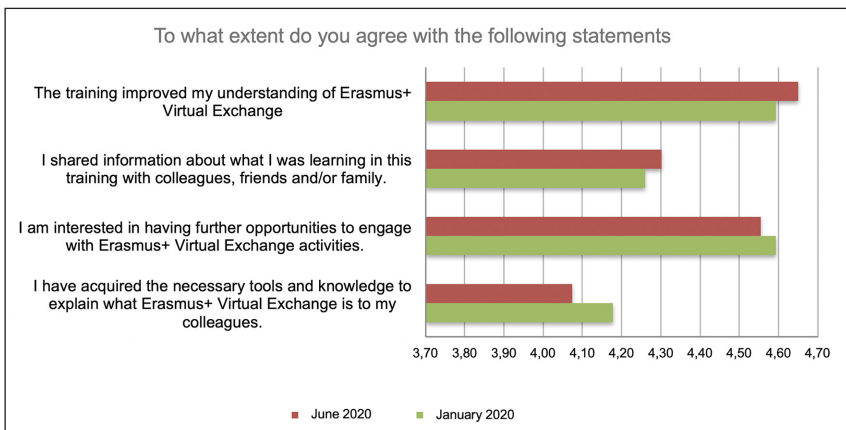
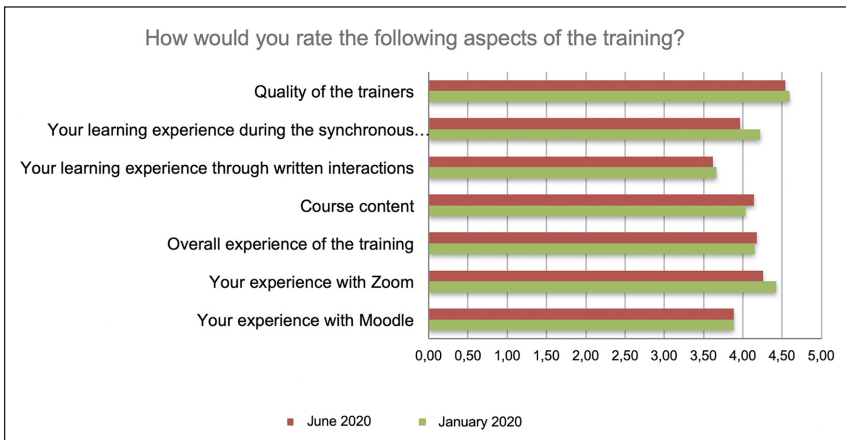


Figure 3 shows the overall course evaluation, which shows general satisfaction with all aspects of the course. The Moodle platform was not appreciated by all, but the use of Zoom during the weekly synchronous sessions (in particular the interactions in small groups through use of the Breakout rooms), was particularly appreciated by many and provided ideas on how this synchronous communication tool could be used in their own VE projects.

Another aspect worth reflecting on concerned tools: some participants expected to have more information on the different tools that could be used in VE. However, the focus of the course was on the pedagogical use of technologies rather than the tools themselves, as the choice of tools is an aspect that needs to be negotiated between the two partners, without losing sight of the specific learning objectives of the VE project being implemented.

Figure 3. Course evaluation – overall experience



Generally, then, the participants were very satisfied with the training they received. Their feedback comments shed light on some of the aspects they appreciated more, in particular the opportunity to explore how VE could contribute to internationalisation at home and to more inclusive practices, as well as the pragmatic approach of the course.

“Although VE will not, and should not, substitute physical mobility and exchanges, **VEs present us with the opportunity to multiply our internationalisation activities, and to promote our institutions and programmes to a broader audience**” (Participant, Italy).

“I enjoyed the synchronous sessions on Saturday mornings. **I liked that the group was mixed**, with administrative staff (of different levels), and teaching staff” (Participant, Italy).

“**I feel that the project integrated perfectly both realities, teaching and admin staff, and provides them with a space, not only to learn the basics of VE but also to dialogue and understand each other’s perspectives.** I also appreciated the project’s pragmatism” (Participant, Spain).

“By taking part in this programme I was powerfully **reminded how it felt to be the student.** I will bring this renewed insight back to teaching and preparation. **The interactive activities within the synchronous elements stand out for me and remind me that these things can be done well in a virtual world and therefore open a range of possibilities for students who may not have the option to travel**” (Participant, Ireland).

“Having started this course with a very low level of knowledge about the subject area, **I now feel that I am well equipped with ideas, suggestions, and practical steps that I can take to put VE onto the radar of key stakeholders at my university**” (Participant, UK).

6. Conclusion

As the Erasmus+ VE initiative comes to a close in December 2020, we can confidently say that the training provided has focused on some of the areas that the Erasmus+ programme seeks to address with staff mobility, including the

promotion of innovative teaching methods, in particular teaching making use of information and communications technology and learning in multidisciplinary groups.

In addition, it has provided opportunities for teaching and administrative staff to discuss these projects together and see VE design and implementation from both sides. Erasmus+ VE has also directly addressed some of the competences that Erasmus+ staff mobility targets: transversal skills, intercultural and social competences, as well as digital competences, with many participants valuing the course as professional development.

There is thus a strong alignment between Erasmus+ mobility and Erasmus+ VE for staff as well as students. The initiative has been a way of making Erasmus+ more inclusive in that it can offer a quality international and intercultural learning experience to HEI staff that are hindered from accessing mobility for personal reasons and work responsibilities. At the same time, it can create opportunities and networks for staff that want to use Erasmus+ mobility as it supports the creation of international networks. We therefore hope that there will continue to be political and financial support for VE in the new European programme starting in 2021.

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