



## Special issue editorial: Virtual mobility: opening up educational mobilities

### Editors:



Gemma Tur-Ferrer

[gemma.tur@uib.es](mailto:gemma.tur@uib.es)

University of the Balearic Islands  
(Spain)



Ilona Buchem

[buchem@beuth-hochschule.de](mailto:buchem@beuth-hochschule.de)

Beuth University of Applied Sciences Berlin  
(Germany)

Internationalization and online learning have been increasing in higher education in recent years all around the world (Kahn & Misiaszek, 2019). In particular, the uptake of virtual mobility has been extended due to the current COVID-19 pandemic and the response of the European Commission has included the launch of the 'coronavirus: online learning resources' website, the recognition of digital learning mobility components and the continuous work on blended mobility opportunities under the new Erasmus Programme (Eriksson Waterschoot, n.d).

Research has argued about the possibilities of virtual mobility for the internationalisation and digitalisation of higher education (Rajagopal, 2020), the democratisation of education by extending access (Ruiz Corbella & García Aretio, 2010), the potential for educational inclusion (Buchem et al., 2019), innovative learning designs (Buchem et al., 2019; Otto, 2018), the impact on students engagement (Bedenlier & Marín, 2020) and the development of an array of skills like language learning, and intercultural, digital or professional skills (Ruiz Corbella & García Aretio, 2010; Maček & Ritonija, 2016; Otto, 2018). Although positive assessment and perceptions by students participating in virtual mobilities are common in a range of studies - see for example, assessment of virtual mobility projects by Otto (2018), Maček and Ritonija (2016), Andone et al. (2018), it has also been argued for the need for greater preparation for digital learning to reduce students' difficulties in participating in virtual mobility and drop-out (Maček & Ritonija, 2016; Otto, 2018).

This call was initially based on the concept of Virtual Mobility (VM) laid out by the Erasmus+ initiative (2020), which, in turn, is aligned with an early definition of virtual mobility, which has been defined as ICT-based collaborative learning activities among international participants at institutional level (Op de Beeck & Van Petegem, 2013). The characterization virtual mobility is based on three main conceptual pillars – international, digital and collaborative. We understand that these characteristics are common to other related concepts like Virtual Exchange (VE) or Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and support the argument by Bedenlier and Marín (2020) of generating similar educational practices. However, an institutional agreement and the transcript of records for the exchange and recognition of credits seems to be a distinct characteristic of virtual mobility (Ubachs & Henderikx, 2018; EADTU, 2019).



A recent approach to virtual mobility has added the dimension of open education as the fourth pillar of virtual mobility and the new concept has been framed as Open Virtual Mobility (Buchem et al. 2018; Ubachs & Henderikx, 2018; Poce et al., 2020). The concept of Open Virtual Mobility has been defined as virtual mobility with open online courses including MOOCs and opening other educational offers such as virtual seminars, projects, educational games, virtual labs, especially in non-formal and informal educational contexts (EADTU, 2018). In this line, one of the most recent definitions addresses virtual mobility against the backdrop of Open Education as a new strand in practice and research: “(...) Virtual mobility as where learners participate through joint or shared curricula or other forms of exchanges in Open Universities, Open Education Resources, MOOCs or other online sites.” (Breznik & Skrbinjek, 2020, p. 106). This definition addresses the potential of Open Educational Practices (OEP), which is linked to autonomous and self-regulated learning (SRL) in digital environments for formal, non-formal and informal learning. Open education and self-regulated learning have also been the underpinning conceptual frameworks for the exploration of the skills needed for successful engagement in Open Virtual Mobility initiatives (Rajagopal et al., 2020). In this way, the concept of virtual mobility has been extended to encompass open education practices and has been explored as such in the Erasmus+ Open Virtual Mobility project<sup>1</sup>. Also, the early definition by Ruiz Corbella and García Aretio (2010) questioned the possibilities of virtual mobilities for intercultural learning as the distance element would not allow students to share informal spaces. However, with the current addition of open digital contexts we argue that new opportunities for informal learning will enhance intercultural learning. Additionally, the support of open digital environments in virtual mobilities has been observed as one of five successful and effective strategies to enhance intercultural learning (Mehrvarz et al., 2019). These different ideas show that the concept of virtual mobility can be interpreted and designed from diverse perspectives depending on the actual objectives and practices of educators and students in different educational contexts, as shown in the articles in this special issue.

Going beyond a single perspective on virtual mobility, and focusing on commonalities, we are proud to introduce the collection of five articles which present different approaches to virtual mobility in the sense of facilitating international and collaborative learning experiences among students, teachers and faculty staff in online learning environments. Among the five articles presented in this special issue, three offer an analysis under the original concept of virtual mobility (Rajagopal & Mateusen, 2021; Kerexeta et al., 2021; Poce & Amenduni, 2021), whereas two focus on the virtual exchange (Lafont et al., 2021; Angelini & Muñiz, 2021). Two articles report on learning experiences at a micro-level (Rajagopal & Mateusen, 2021; Angelini & Muñiz, 2021), from which one is focused on language learning (Angelini & Muñiz, 2021); one reports on an online conference as a professional development event for teachers (Kerexeta et al., 2021); one analyses the characteristics of virtual mobility and exchange experiences at a regional level (Lafont et al., 2021) and one reports on the design and implementation of a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) for virtual mobility training (Poce & Amenduni, 2021). It

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.openvirtualmobility.eu>



is also remarkable that there is a theoretical framework that lays down a common ground for the diverse projects reported, which again supports the idea of the great commonalities among the diverse terms. On the one hand, the most frequent references are the ones derived from research in the EVOLVE Erasmus+ project<sup>2</sup>, in particular by Robert O'Dowd on his own, with different teams of authors or even in earlier related work, and by other authors in the field of virtual exchange like Sarah Guth or Francesca Helm (Rajagopal & Mateusen, 2021; Angelini & Muñiz, 2021; Lafont et al., 2021). On the other hand, there are also quite frequent references to the work by Darla Deardoff and by Hans de Wit on intercultural learning (Rajagopal & Mateusen, 2021; Lafont et al., 2021; Angelini & Muñiz, 2021). Finally, the early work in Spanish on virtual mobility by Ruiz Corbella and García Aretio with different teams support the main framework for the article by Kerexeta et al. (2021).

The first article by Rajagopal and Mateusen (2021) contributes with an inspiring analysis from which diverse typologies of both Virtual Mobility and Virtual Exchange are described from the perspective of their potential for transformational learning. The authors claim that transformative learning involves changes for the learner and has individual and social dimensions. They also point out that it is a relevant framework for physical mobility for which the learner lives in unknown contexts where he or she can carry out re-assessment processes that eventually may involve changes of self-identity and other personal and professional personalities. Rajagopal and Mateusen (2021) suggest that this framework is also suitable for virtual mobility and that for both physical and virtual mobility to be potentially transformative, students need to be involved in critical reflection which has to be carefully designed and supported. In order to explore this issue, the authors depict a total of three programs in higher and secondary education towards the Activity-Centred Analysis and Design (ACAD) framework. The results of the analysis show that the intended learning design for students' agency and self-directedness is fostered in higher education through dialogue and self-paced learning. Secondary education, on the other hand, is mainly based on students' choice and self-organization for teamwork, especially in the context of social sciences. As for reflection, it seems to be mainly focused at the final stages of the project reflection in the higher education context is particularly enhanced in terms of intercultural skills. Authors observe that transformational learning is not, therefore, promoted from design stages but it might happen during learning enactment and so they call for more intended support by teachers. Authors conclude that transformational learning in virtual mobility occurs when critical reflection is aimed at developing intercultural skills, as it is inherently related to the self, and suggest that the model is transferable to other skills involved in (open) virtual mobility.

Poce and Amenduni's (2021) article is the report on students' perceptions of a course design in terms of self-regulated learning of two of the eight miniMOOCs designed in the Open Virtual Mobility Erasmus+ project. The MOOC was built to prepare all those interested in taking part in virtual mobility in the development, assessment and recognition of the eight competency areas identified in the research conducted in the project. The article presents the model of the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://evolve-erasmus.eu>



SRL cycle and previous research in the context of MOOCs, and each of the design elements of the MOOC in regards to its role in supporting SRL. With each miniMOOC being composed of three subMOOCs, each MOOC level course includes a wide variety of elements supporting self-regulated learning, such as introductory messages, pre-assessment, Open Badges, description of tasks, list of Open Educational Resources (OERs), teamwork activities, reflective eportfolios, discussion forums, and peer-assessment activities. The research presented in this article is aimed at exploring learners' satisfaction with the MOOC experience and the supporting roles of the elements in relation to SRL. Since the questionnaire was highly specific, the authors collect only data from the miniMOOCs on autonomy-driven learning and active self-regulated learning. Results show a general satisfaction towards the courses and particular elements such as the quizzes and OER. Likewise, the results on the supporting role of the elements for SRL show that the MOOC pathway and its visualization, the hints and variety of OERs and quizzes were positively received by the learners. The assessment of these elements towards the diverse SRL phases shows other promising results like the potential of OER in more SRL phases than expected or the usages of eportfolios both for performance and assessment skills. These conclusions among others open relevant discussions for the future along with the need for further work with this MOOC in the context of virtual mobility initiatives.

Kerexeta et al. (2021) analyse an online congress from the perspective of open virtual mobility which is a very innovative approach to viewing virtual conferences, including the ones for K-12 teachers' professional development. The authors build from the idea of mobilities based on bilateral agreements and suggest the alternative of virtual mobilities in case of difficulties in terms of the budget, time availability, as well as work and family situation. The authors point out that virtual mobility allows not only the development of epistemic knowledge but also digital and intercultural knowledge. Very appealing are the parallels showing the possibilities of virtual mobility to build communities of practice and how virtual conferences can emerge as forms of virtual mobility where diverse participants can meet and learn in intercultural contexts. The study is aimed at exploring the International virtual congress [conectandoescuelas.org](http://conectandoescuelas.org) as a virtual mobility activity. Results show a highly international context and the positive perceptions of participants. The authors discuss the characteristics of the conference such as its accessibility with the usage of streaming, the synchronous and asynchronous communication to enhance participation and, the open collaboration with the usage of social platforms and its transdisciplinarity. The article concludes with the idea that online conferences can become unique experiences for K-12 teachers who can have an opportunity to be involved in the creation of an international virtual network for further online professional development as a form of virtual mobility.

Angelini and Muñiz (2021) report on a case study about a simulation activity in virtual exchanges for future English language teachers. The article introduces a short and relevant summary of the characteristics of virtual exchanges and the diverse typologies depending on the aims and content focus, the construction of curriculum and the participation of other agents as providers of these virtual learning exchanges. Also, the design of the activity as described by the authors includes simulation as a key element of the virtual exchange, In this regard it differs from role-playing mainly because the information to understand the context is given for students to be able to act with what would be their real answer. In the learning



experience described, eight institutions across the world participated and a total of eight mixed teams were made up by the coordinating university. In total four online meetings were held in the autumn season of 2020. The research was aimed at exploring experts' perceptions. The qualitative analysis allowed the distinction of two main categories: the potential of virtual exchanges and the role of simulation in teacher education. In general, results show positive perceptions about satisfaction towards virtual exchanges, the accessibility of technology, inclusive and intercultural approaches. However, the authors also point out some limitations regarding the organisation of the meetings and difficulties of some roles that were particularly complex in the context of intercultural exchanges. Although the virtual exchange included language learning as a relevant element due to the future roles of student teachers, conclusions also discuss the opportunity for cross-cultural collaboration and critical reflective process through the contrast with colleagues from diverse nationalities and settings.

Finally, Lafont et al. (2021) work is a very relevant contribution which reports about the wide variety of designs, countries and backgrounds in context of the Colombian Caribbean. Readers can take away many lessons learnt from the conclusions of this article. The authors first present the state of the art not only about the conceptual terms used in the field but also about the different focus points, assessment practices and challenges observed in the research. The research presented in the article is based on a quantitative and descriptive approach carried out by institutions which are members of the networked called The Caribbean Node of the Red Colombiana para la Internalización de la Educación Superior (RCI). For example, from data collected it can be seen that academic virtual exchanges are the most frequent whereas language exchanges and virtual events are least popular. This is coherent with the greater frequency of these virtual learning events between institutions of closer areas, mainly with Spanish language countries. Also, the data collected shows that most of the learning experiences are aimed at developing intercultural competences, that written reports and exams and project-based tasks are the most frequent way to assess learning while eportfolios and surveys are the least popular. The authors show that virtual learning events are more frequent in business programs and social sciences at bachelor levels, with formal agreements between institutions. Challenges observed by the authors are related to sustainability, time and calendar constraints. Finally, recommendations by authors suggest the need for digital and pedagogical teacher training and syllabus flexibility along with other strategies such as the edition of guides to support the whole process of virtual learning events. With this work, Lafont et al. (2021) contribute with a very interesting perspective which can be used as a reference for further regional and global studies about trends in virtual mobility.

With this collection of five articles this special issue offers a wide perspective on virtual mobility, which includes different approaches, methodologies and models towards designing and exploring virtual mobility experiences in practice and research. Although there exist collections of good practices for diverse specific approaches more research is needed to extend the knowledge on how virtual mobility experiences are taking place, how learning designs are being developed to support virtual mobility and what the personal impact of virtual mobility on students and teachers including their skills. The relevance of virtual mobility and all other forms of virtual exchange and internationalization at home is not only paramount in pandemic times because of the difficulties in physical mobilities. It is also relevant because virtual mobility



promotes equity and inclusion, as it has already been argued by numerous authors. Furthermore, the co-construction of the syllabi by international and intercultural teams may contribute towards a more multifaceted and diverse epistemic background of the curricula. Moreover, virtual mobility offers value added for social and collaborative learning, as well as project and problem-based learning in which innovative methodologies and pedagogical approaches may emerge. We believe that virtual mobility has a lot to contribute towards the improvement of current practices at all educational levels and that going beyond personal experiences it has a transformative potential for the whole international community. We hope that this special issue can contribute to the current discussion and promotion for internalization through virtual mobility and other related modalities at all educational levels and involving diverse stakeholders.

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\*Articles that are part of the special issue.

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