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***Virtual Exchange for Teaching and Learning:
Crossing Borders Without Travel***

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VIRTUAL EXCHANGE AS A KEY ELEMENT OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

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Introduction. Even a decade ago, no one could have imagined this form of collaboration, such as virtual exchange, because face-to-face teaching was the norm.

Furthermore, we should keep in mind that even five years ago, online learning or teaching was something out of the ordinary. Regardless of how quickly our lives change, it is critical to keep up with the times, to create something new, and to try what is generated. Not only is online learning in universities becoming more popular, but virtual exchange (VE) is also becoming more popular.

The **aim** of this thesis is to outline the benefits of Virtual Exchange as an element of Distance Learning System (DLS).

A mixed **method** was used for the purpose of the current study. The qualitative approach included observation and interview.

Discussion. According to Knight's commonly recognized definition internationalization of higher education can be understood as an ongoing and continuing effort, "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (Knight, 2004, p.5). Internationalization and VE have arisen as significant but distinct tendencies in higher education (De Wit, 2016).

Virtual exchange can be defined as a practice that is supported by research and consists of ongoing, technology-enabled, people-to-people education programs or activities that promote constructive communication and interaction between individuals or groups who are geographically separated and/or from different cultural backgrounds, with the assistance of educators or facilitators. The deep influence of intercultural discourse and exchange is combined with the great reach of digital technology in VE. As a result one of the characteristics is eclecticism and even self-awareness, because participants have to be ready to talk and listen, work and develop. Admittedly students can be more interested in creating new projects or solving some problems than in communicating with people from different cultures, because they can do it on a daily basis using social media.

Universities are increasingly concerned with the task of preparing graduates to be active and responsible global citizens in a world, which is intrinsically digitalised, globalised and multicultural in nature. For many years, international mobility programmes were considered the most effective way to prepare students to be ‘global citizens’ and develop their capacity to critique the world they live in, see problems and issues from a range of perspectives. However, the number of students who have participated in study abroad programs remains stubbornly low, and research has shown that study abroad has a limited impact on students' intercultural attitudes and awareness. As a result, educational institutions are more concerned with "internationalisation at home."

We consider that universities are interested in active students, their great works as much as their own reputation, because these things are connected. Having different VE programs can be a way for universities to present themselves. Figure 1 below demonstrates the advantages of VE.

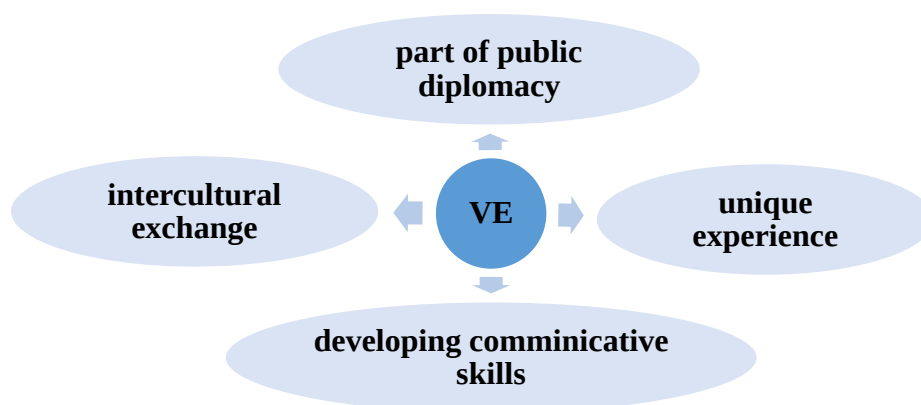


Figure 1. *Advantages of VE*

National Technical University of Ukraine “Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute” (KPI), as one of the most popular and the biggest university in Ukraine, has paid attention to VE. For example, 180 students of KPI were involved in such programs in 2019. Moreover, KPI took part in Global Case Study Challenge 2022 - a great project, dedicated to goals of sustainable development as well. Participation in such projects is also about public diplomacy, which is highly essential to Ukraine.

We can use it as a way to tell people about our culture, mentality etc. Such programs can help not to judge a book by its cover: students can learn more about other countries, cultures, languages, educational systems and make themselves free from stereotypes. VE lets us create something unique and productive. However, there may be some issues: students who are having difficulty working online; technical problems. Teachers must take into account these issues, predict them and try to avoid.

VE is an excellent opportunity for students to develop the skills and literacy required for transnational online teamwork. Furthermore, VE offers a great opportunity for students to acquire the skills and literacies needed for transnational online teamwork. We

consider that the virtual exchange process is the main way to understand each other fully, in addition it is an opportunity for students to develop their soft skills, their ability to find something in common with strangers online.

Conclusion. To sum up, we can say that VE is the useful tool in the modern world, where people are ready to be helpful. For universities it is an opportunity to build new communications and partnerships, to be active actor of educational diplomacy. For teachers it is a great way to try themselves in cooperation with foreign teachers or organizations as well, also for them it is a way to see their students' capacity and behavior in new conditions. Teachers must observe how their students interact with others, not only how they represent the institution or department, but also how students represent the country and what cultural characteristics they discuss. It may also be beneficial to learn what kind of knowledge they share and how they communicate about their profession in order to determine what to include in classes.

For students, this is a great option to find new acquaintances and friends. Students exchange experience, knowledge, and just facts. Students admit that their university cooperates and supports international activities, which also affects their perception of their institution. VE is a great opportunity to show yourself and prove that people should be one and solve various issues and problems together, only in this way we will be able to live in a better world. Therefore, it is necessary to develop and work on a better ability to organize VE, attract more partners, and generate new ideas for creating new projects.

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