

COVID-19 impacts on virtual exchange around the world

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Keywords: global learning during COVID-19; impacts of COVID-19 on VE; VE opportunities and challenges; digital equity; inclusion; access.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has simultaneously created both opportunities and challenges for the emerging field of virtual exchange: On one hand, institutional administrators and funding organisations saw virtual exchange as the solution to global learning needs while physical travel was restricted and traditional mobility programmes were suspended. On the other hand, instructors felt overwhelmed by transitioning all of their teaching online, and without physical access to their educational institutions, many students and instructors lacked reliable internet connections or safe places to engage in learning, not to mention the financial burdens of the pandemic.

This moderated panel discussion which took place during the IVEC 2020 conference invited diverse perspectives to explore the impacts of the pandemic on virtual exchange in various contexts around the world. Central to the discussion were issues of equity, inclusion and justice: Is virtual exchange truly a more accessible and equitable form of global learning, as it is often promoted to be?

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In this video contribution, Eva Haug moderates the conversation between Maha Bali, Paulo Goes, and Anita Patankar around the following questions.

- How is virtual exchange a solution to global learning during COVID-19?
- What have been the two to three most relevant impacts of the pandemic on virtual exchange activity at your institution, in your country, or region of the world?
- How can we as a field of practitioners maintain and sustain the current momentum and interest in VE in a post-COVID-19 world?
- Can intercultural exchange be apolitical?
- If an institution is in a position of power or privilege, how can they create space in virtual exchange for institutions that are less represented?

The video recording is accessible on: <https://vimeo.com/459415071> (CC BY-NC-ND)

2. Contributors

2.1. Moderator

Eva Haug, Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences

Eva Haug is Educational Adviser for Internationalisation of the curriculum and COIL at Amsterdam UAS. The focus of the AUAS is on Internationalisation at Home (IaH), which includes COIL as a tool to facilitate cross cultural learning. Eva is a Steering Group member of the Expert Community IaH of the EAIE. As Senior Lecturer in intercultural competence she trains students and lecturers to work in multicultural and virtual teams. She has been teaching university students for over 20 years and has eight plus years of COIL experience. Eva provides professional development for COIL at universities in Europe, South Africa, Latin America, and the US.

2.2. Panellists

Maha Bali, American University in Cairo (Egypt)

Maha Bali is Associate Professor of Practice at the Center for Learning and Teaching at the American University in Cairo. She is an open and connected educator, with research and teaching interests in open education, critical digital pedagogy, and intercultural learning. She is the co-founder of Virtually Connecting, and an editor at the journal Hybrid Pedagogy. She has blogged for the Chronicle

of Higher Education's Prof Hacker, DMLCentral blogs, and Al-Fanar media. She also has her own blog <http://blog.mahabali.me> and tweets at [@bali_maha](https://twitter.com/bali_maha).

Paulo Goes, Federal University of Pernambuco (Brazil)

Paulo Goes is Associate Professor, Department of Clinical and Preventive Dentistry, Olinda Medical School at the Federal University of Pernambuco, Brazil. He has an MSc in Pediatric Dentistry (UFPE) and PhD in epidemiology and public health from University of London. Paulo Goes was Vice-Provost for undergraduate studies at the Federal University of Pernambuco (2015-2019). Together with the Vice-Provost for international affairs, he coordinated the Collaborative Online International Learning initiative at UFPE.

Anita Patankar, Symbiosis International University (India)

Anita Patankar is Director of the Symbiosis School for Liberal Arts and has been involved in the field of education for over 37 years. Since setting up India's first four-year liberal arts programme, she has focused on developing faculty competencies for inclusive, democratic, and innovative learning processes, and the nurturing of a deep acceptance among all stakeholders of the long-term benefits of internationalisation of higher education. At present she serves on the board of trustees of ECONET, an NGO dedicated to the welfare of tribal and disadvantaged populations, is the Deputy Director of the Symbiosis Centre for International Education, and is a founding member of the Alliance of Asian Liberal Arts Universities.

3. Highlights

How is virtual exchange a solution to global learning during COVID-19?

“First of all, there are still some people who don't have the access, whether it is infrastructure or language or even cultural access to just have this kind of exchange” (Maha Bali).

“Without virtual exchange travelling did not mean that you had a good cultural experience because that experience might not have been facilitated. You can travel as a tourist and come back unchanged” (Maha Bali).

“It was a great opportunity for us to share experience around the world to bring intercultural knowledge to deal with Covid-19, ... not only for internationalisation ... but also ... as a kind of humanity issue” (Paulo Goes).

“COVID-19 had a few unexpected, good consequences. We realised that Global North-South, all of those terms, suddenly didn’t mean anything because countries everywhere were struggling ... we started to have more conversations” (Anita Patankar).

“Overnight colleges were shut, teachers had to transition from physical teaching to suddenly teaching online. To be honest, in India, it didn’t happen for everyone; a majority don’t have access. The urban elite in India had that access, the others didn’t. So suddenly you came face-to-face with your privilege” (Anita Patankar).

“Teachers realised that my job is not just to teach calculus, my job is also to ensure that my students have someone who is there to give them emotional support. ... Emotional wellbeing, inclusion, social justice – these are issues that suddenly came to the front” (Anita Patankar).

“It [virtual exchange] does not always have to cross international borders but it has to cross experiences, the experiences that students live in” (Eva Haug).

What have been the two to three most relevant impacts of the pandemic on virtual exchange activity at your institution, in your country, or region of the world?

“COVID-19 pandemic gave us an opportunity to re-think about our teaching and learning methods. ... I believe that virtual exchange projects will have a positive impact post-pandemic time because we crossed the frontier to be in front of a computer in classes, in our everyday life and our own language. I do not need to convince my lecturers anymore that it is possible” (Paulo Goes).

“Students enjoyed virtual exchange this semester ... because they saw how well-facilitated online synchronous conversations could be at a time when their teachers were still trying to do it for the first time and still not very comfortable with it” (Maha Bali).

“There was an opportunity for, what I call ‘glocal’ professional development. ... There is potential for local, across-institution learning, but also global learning. ... How do you organise these kinds of professional development that are online in ways that are engaging, and allow people to have

a voice, and allow people to develop relationships, and not just broadcast type of conversations” (Maha Bali)?

“Not seeing virtual exchange as a sort of emergency response for something else not being possible, but really thinking about nurturing this development of solid projects” (Eva Haug).

“One of the most interesting things for me with virtual exchange has been the response of students. ... The country, the infrastructure, the nightlife, the restaurants, the food, music plays a very big role in how they enjoyed their semester abroad or exchange abroad. Now with all of that taken away, even the fancy buildings, fancy classrooms, now suddenly, you’re at home, and your bedroom looks maybe more or less like mine. ... Suddenly you realise that that kid is just like me. That kid is struggling just like me. And I think that brings a sense of ‘I can be an equal, or a collaborator in this conversation’ ... that now this is an equal space” (Anita Patankar).

“COVID and virtual exchange proved once and for all that students know so much more than us, in so many areas, especially related to technology and tools. ... The teacher’s role is now that of a facilitator” (Anita Patankar).

“The third impact for me has been the shift from curriculum and content ... [to] process of learning. ... Student empowerment has become important” (Anita Patankar).

“Teachers became students. ... However, I believe, I don’t think people became the same because not everyone’s home is as camera-ready as others. ... I don’t think it’s fully equal. ... I agree with you that there seems to be a shift from content to process, but some teachers have not done that. ... It’s a traumatic time. ... People struggled differently” (Maha Bali).

“It is impossible to think about virtual exchange without talking about equity and access to information technology. ... We are a huge country with 27 states and each one has its own policy for education, for health, how to manage the pandemic, et cetera. To talk about equity and access, we discovered that one quarter of students at our university don’t have access to the net, the web, we need to fund it” (Paulo Goes).

“In Brazil, we have started to do some collaboration with countries in Africa that speak Portuguese. ... How can we live with our language differences to overcome this problem of equity and access? ... I think that’s what Paulo Freire called global empathy. I think that we can achieve this with virtual exchange” (Paulo Goes).

“Technology follows pedagogy. It is really about what it is we want the students to do together, and then figure out what technology supports that learning because it is about human interaction. We don’t miss technology, we miss each other, we miss people, interaction with one another” (Eva Haug).

As a field of practitioners, how can we maintain and sustain the current momentum and interest in virtual exchange in a post-COVID-19 world?

“It opens up opportunities ... if well-trained facilitators can manage this, and if both partners respect each other. ... Virtual exchanges need a lot of training and if we can do that as an investment; investment in terms of energy, time, effort because teachers the world over overwork” (Anita Patankar).

“There used to be a slightly more patronising attitude between the more developed countries and the less developed ones, I think we now realised that intelligent minds don’t just speak English, and they don’t always live in fancy homes, and go to fancy colleges” (Anita Patankar).

“If it’s just about learning content, you can study that in your own country. You don’t need to go on an exchange, you don’t need to have virtual exchange for that. Virtual exchange is not about content, it is about what you learn while you are studying and interacting and collaborating. These are things that I think now the world is waking up to” (Anita Patankar).

“How do you make sure that a virtual exchange is not a one off, doesn’t remain a novelty? That’s the biggest challenge. Everyone might do it once. ... In India, I don’t know about the other countries, if the employer thinks it makes sense and hires people with such experiences, then universities, and higher education institutions, and governments will follow their cue” (Anita Patankar).

“I had the title of VE advocator. You need this kind of advocacy. ... We need to advocate the idea for managers and for policy makers in the education field. ... VE is a kind of important, innovative method to give people a kind of knowledge, a kind of global knowledge. ... We need to be in the pirate boat that Mirjam talked about yesterday, to navigate this innovative ocean, we need to be brave to be on that, inside of advocacy” (Paulo Goes).

Question from the audience: “International collaboration, empathy, and understanding amongst people is surely where we can find resilience and hope; but what about the forces, for example powerful anti-democratic and nationalistic politicians in many countries that are trying so hard to stop this and set us up against each other. Can cultural exchange be apolitical?”

“Can cultural exchange be apolitical? No. All kinds of education, every conversation cannot be apolitical; we cannot remove power from it. ... The question for me is, for us as teachers ... is what you do in your class outside of the virtual exchange to discuss power issues. I think if you go into virtual exchange without a discussion about equity and social justice and power, and oppression and the potential of all different dimensions of language and infrastructure and culture, and how they play out in virtual exchange, then you’re not, you might get a coloniser’s gaze” (Maha Bali).

“Nothing is apolitical, everything is political, and I think increasingly so, but I think, as an optimist, cultural exchanges at least help, again well-facilitated, but otherwise very difficult ... Teachers’ role has become hugely important, digital literacy, and media literacy, critical literacy is so important right now, but for that you need to teach the trainer first. Teachers themselves have not learned these skills, so therefore that’s doubly difficult, that’s a double whammy” (Anita Patankar).

“Also, I was wondering, how much of a problem is it if things are somewhat political, mainly to address the elephant in the room to help facilitate the dialogue” (Eva Haug).

“Well, you don’t put anyone at risk. Some of us have authoritarian regimes, you don’t know who is there, who is recording, even locally because everything is online. People who teach political science students, teachers are worried about who might get arrested. ... Of course someone can record you in a face-to-face class too, but online it seems easier” (Maha Bali).

“I agree. It’s impossible to have apolitical education. ... We need to be clear about political position, and we need to talk about inequalities, access, democracy, social justice, gender, minorities, aging, disease for humanity, hunger, food. It is a part of our survival. COVID-19 made us reflect about that. We are talking about our survival on this planet. Brave virtual exchange projects are based on sustainable development goals” (Paulo Goes).

“It is time for teachers to realise ... that they have tremendous power. ... They have power to bring the right kind of readings to students. Our curriculum, our course outlines, they are political. ... We need to be able to help students to learn and gather and be able to process multiple perspectives. ... We have the ability to influence them in how they think but not what they think” (Anita Patankar).

If an institution is in a position of power or privilege, how can they create space in virtual exchange for institutions that are less represented?

“This is a difficult one because it requires a systemic change. ... In an institution like mine, can we open up our labs, for example, to people from outside the institution to come and use our

infrastructure for certain times? Can we give free English language lessons to enable them to join? Can we lobby the government? Finding ways for public/private partnerships... Include people who are less privileged in the decision making” (Maha Bali).

“We are putting together, with the government of India, an Indian network for international education, trying to bring together the top universities in India that have a strong internationalisation agenda with the rest of the 900+ universities in the country. ... Sharing of spaces is something that has already started with labs. The government has started a campaign for digital India. ... We’ve already set up a network and started collaboration with the schools in the area ... training and offering our facilities. ... We are offering training to teachers across the region” (Anita Patankar).

“We try to create our expertise nationally to offer necessary training for teachers. ... The most important word is collaboration. ... Nobody leaves the other hand alone. Let’s bring our hands together” (Paulo Goes).

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