Possibilities of virtual exchange for Internationalization at Home: Insights from the Global South

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Abstract

The paper discusses the potential of virtual exchange (VE) to promote the development of Internationalization at Home (IaH) approaches. With that aim, the GAZUFES VE project was undertaken in the COVID-19/post-pandemic scenario between two universities in the Global South: one in Brazil and another one in Turkey. The theoretical framework informing the research is that of VE as a strategy to internationalize higher education and English teacher education. The methodology employed is qualitative, using content analysis to analyze data collected through reflection reports, interviews, journals, and observations produced by the project informants: pre-service English teachers, researchers, teacher trainers and international relations office (IRO) staff in the two institutions involved in the GAZUFES project. Results of the analysis suggest that the GAZUFES project made a significant contribution to English Language Teaching (ELT) education and IaH in the contexts researched, not least by raising the awareness at the IRO offices and the two institutions about the potential of VE for IaH approaches. The implementation of the GAZUFES project was a teacher-led innovation in the two institutions involved and more work is required to institutionalize VE projects beyond individual teachers' efforts. Results are discussed in terms of the challenges and benefits of VE for ELT education in general and IaH in particular through the inclusion of voices and perspectives of different agents in the two institutions (student teachers, researchers, teacher trainers and IRO staff) involved in the GAZUFES project.

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1. Introduction

Virtual exchange (VE) is also known as telecollaboration (Helm, 2013) or Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) (Wimpenny et al., 2022). In this study, we opted to use the term 'virtual exchange', following O'Dowd (2021), as an umbrella term to cover all similar pedagogical practices (O'Dowd, 2018). This term is used to describe a variety of online communities of practice and related events (e.g., IVEC conference) and in relation to the process of internationalization of higher education.

Moreover, VE can promote global citizenship education (Finardi & Ortiz, 2022; Guimarães & Finardi, 2021) understood as an educational approach that fosters understanding, empathy and a commitment to address global challenges collaboratively through the development of a sense of global identity in individuals that share responsibility in an interconnected world. In higher education, VE can help this by raising the awareness of the role of institutions in the education of citizens to address global and local problems.

This paper discusses a VE project undertaken in the COVID-19/post-pandemic scenario between two universities in the Global South, one in Brazil and another one in Turkey. The theoretical framework informing the study is that of VE as a strategy to internationalize higher education and English teacher education. The methodology of the study is qualitative using content analysis techniques. The informants of the study are pre-service English teachers, researchers, teacher trainers, and International Relations Office (IRO) staff in the two institutions involved in the VE project. Qualitative data were collected through reflection reports, interviews, journals, and observations, which were carried out during the VE project implemented in the ELT departments of the two universities involved, in the first semester of 2022. The eight-week VE project coined GAZUFES (an acronym for the VE between two university names) was carried out under the umbrella of VALIANT project – which provides and involves a virtual innovation and support network for teachers – and involved tasks such as comparing and contrasting English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts in Turkey and Brazil and co-creating materials for the development of intercultural communicative competence.

2.   Literature review

The process of the internationalization of higher education can be defined as the integration of an international or intercultural component/aspect/dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of higher education activities. This integration can be oriented inwards or outwards as in the Internationalization at Home (IaH) and internationalization abroad (Altbach et al., 2009) approaches. To be comprehensive, the process of internationalization of higher education should be part of the teaching, research and service actions of the university and shape institutional ethos and values, reaching the entire higher education community and society at large. More discussions on the internationalization of higher education were held with the rise of critical internationalization studies, which is "an area of study that problematizes the overwhelmingly positive and depoliticized approaches to internationalization in higher education" (Stein, 2021, p. 1771). These studies argue that the equal redistribution of power and resources and the redesigning patterns of relationships are necessary to overcome the problems of an uneven global higher education context.

IaH is defined as the "purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments" (Beelen & Jones, 2015, p. 69). It includes a wide range of strategies and approaches, such as the offer of courses in English as a Medium of Instruction (Finardi & Helm, in press; Guimarães & Kremer, 2020; Taquini & Finardi, 2021; Taquini, Finardi & Amorim, 2017), developing international partnerships, recruiting international students and staff and adding an international dimension to the curriculum (Altbach et al., 2009). With the interruption of international travel during the pandemic, many countries in the Global South, among which Brazil, increased the opportunities for IaH through the substitution of physical academic mobility for VE (Finardi & Guimarães, 2020). This in turn promoted the inclusion of voices from the South as well as more actors involved in international conversations, while also serving to recalibrate Brazil's relationship with the Global North (Guimarães, Finardi & Amorim, 2021) once the economic barriers associated with academic exchange were reduced in VE.

VE has also been used as a strategy to develop IaH approaches and more horizontal relationships between the North and South (e.g., Wimpenny et al. 2022; Guimarães, Finardi & Amorim, 2021), as well as in ELT education, reflection, and digital inclusion (Orsini-Jones et al., 2021). Before discussing how a VE project was used in Brazil and in Turkey to develop IaH and ELT education, a brief contextualization of these two countries and the institutions involved in the GAZUFES project is provided in what follows.

2.1. Internationalization in Brazil

Brazil is the 13th largest country in the world with a population of almost 220 million people, 8 millions of whom are enrolled in higher education, and with the largest academic production in Latin America (Céspedes, 2021; Finardi, França & Guimarães, 2022). Thus, Brazil is an important player in the production of knowledge and the process of internationalization of higher education. The Brazilian educational system is complex, comprising more than 2,500 institutions, of which about 88% are private, though more than 90% of research is produced in public institutions that represent only 12%.

Notwithstanding De Wit's (2017) and Knight's (2011) warnings about the misconception/myth of seeing internationalization as a synonym for academic mobility, the process of internationalization of higher education was very much seen and practiced as such before the pandemic. This is despite the fact that less than 1% of the academic population in Brazil could engage in academic mobility because of the cost involved or the languages needed for the exchange. In this regard, despite the potential of VE to boost IaH in Brazil and in the Global South (Finardi & Guimarães, 2020), issues of curriculum reform, access to technologies, teacher/digital training and institutional recognition of VE must be discussed and addressed to allow the inclusion of online activities in the curriculum of Brazilian higher education institutions. Woicolesco et al. (2022), in their study of six Brazilian higher education institutions, suggested that the virtualization of IaH activities would continue after the pandemic, in what could be seen as a more sustainable model for higher education institutions.

2.2. Internationalization in Turkey

According to the strategic plans of 44 Turkish universities, internationalization is seen mostly as focusing on increasing student and teaching staff mobility, applying for international research funds, and increasing international publications (Bulut Şahin, 2017). Therefore, although internationalization is part of the agenda of most Turkish higher education institutions, student and staff mobility (particularly the Erasmus exchange program with European partners) is the most common way of implementing an internationalization strategy. According to the models of internationalization proposed by Knight (2015), the higher education institution in Turkey follows the classical model of the internationalization of higher education. Yet, and as stated by Kondakçı (2007), there is a discrepancy between the published strategy documents and the actual strategic emphasis of operational activities.

According to Bulut Şahin (2017), IaH activities have not been integrated effectively and appropriately in Turkish higher education institutions, possibly due to reasons such as lack of knowledge, awareness and/or resources. Thus, more IaH activities are suggested for both inclusion into institutional policy documents and actual implementations. To the best of our knowledge, VE projects and their connection with IaH are not mentioned at the institutional level (such as strategic documents related to internationalization) in Turkish higher education institutions.

2.3. The aim of the study

This study addresses the potential of VE in Brazil and Turkey to promote the inclusion of the Global South in international conversations and in the development of IaH approaches in the two universities involved in the project by exploring the following questions:

1. What is the current status of VE projects in the two universities involved in the GAZUFES project?
2. What is the potential of VE projects to improve IaH in the universities involved in the GAZUFES project?
3. What are the challenges of VE implementations in the universities involved in the GAZUFES project?
4. What are the needs of the universities involved in the GAZUFES project to improve VE for increased IaH opportunities?

3. Method

3.1. Context

3.1.1. Brazilian University (BU)

BU is a public institution, which in Brazil means that students do not have to pay any fees to attend graduate or undergraduate courses there. BU is a medium-sized university by Brazilian standards with slightly over 20,000 undergraduate and 4,000 graduate students, 1,700 faculty members, and almost 2,000 staff. The ELT degree is the largest foreign language course offered at BU, training English teachers to work in basic education, and the only one offered in a language other than Portuguese. It lasts four years and has about 15 professors and 40 students enrolling every semester. As part of the national network of federal higher education institutions in Brazil, BU has been trying to become more international following inductive internationalization calls and programs launched by the Brazilian government (Science without Borders, English without Borders, Languages without

Borders). The Capes PrInt internationalization program was launched in 2017 to induce institutional internationalization plans focusing on graduate students and scholars, both from and to Brazil (Finardi & Archanjo, 2018).

3.1.2 Turkish University (TU)

TU is also a public university in Turkey, one of the leading and largest universities in Turkey, which is specially known for its teacher training program. With more than 37,000 students and over 4,000 academic staff, TU offers a wide range of undergraduate and graduate programs. In addition to the students coming from all around the country, TU also enrolls about 1,500 international students from neighboring countries and the Turkic states and their communities. TU has acted as a coordinator and partner of several EU projects (e.g., Erasmus+ projects, Horizon) and has been an active participant in several national and international projects and exchange programs. The faculty of Education of TU offers a variety of teacher training programs in mathematics, science, foreign languages, instructional technologies, and social sciences. The ELT Department trains nearly 750 pre-service English teachers to become English teachers at primary, secondary and tertiary levels in Turkey. In terms of numbers, size, and role of the two universities nationally and regionally, both universities (BU and TU) are comparable, though BU is more focused on outbound mobility in what can be seen as a outbound orientation (Finardi, Mendes & da Silva, 2022), whereas TU attracts more international students than BU in an inbound orientation.

3.2. The GAZUFES VE project

The GAZUFES project utilized the VALIANT Moodle platform, a free learning management system, to arrange the tasks and the participants online. All participants registered to the Moodle platform to track the schedule and complete the tasks. The VE lasted eight weeks, including three tasks (see Figure 1 below). BU offered the course as an optional activity to the ELT Practicum course and so students engaged on a voluntary basis. TU integrated the VE into the course called 'Teaching English to Young Learners II', in which student teachers are trained in teaching main language skills to young learners through both theoretical and practical aspects (microteaching). Although the VE was integrated into the syllabus of the course of TU, the participants were included on a voluntary basis. Their participation in the VE was evaluated and graded at TU.

Figure 1. Tasks of the GAZUFES project (adapted from O'Dowd & Ware, 2009)
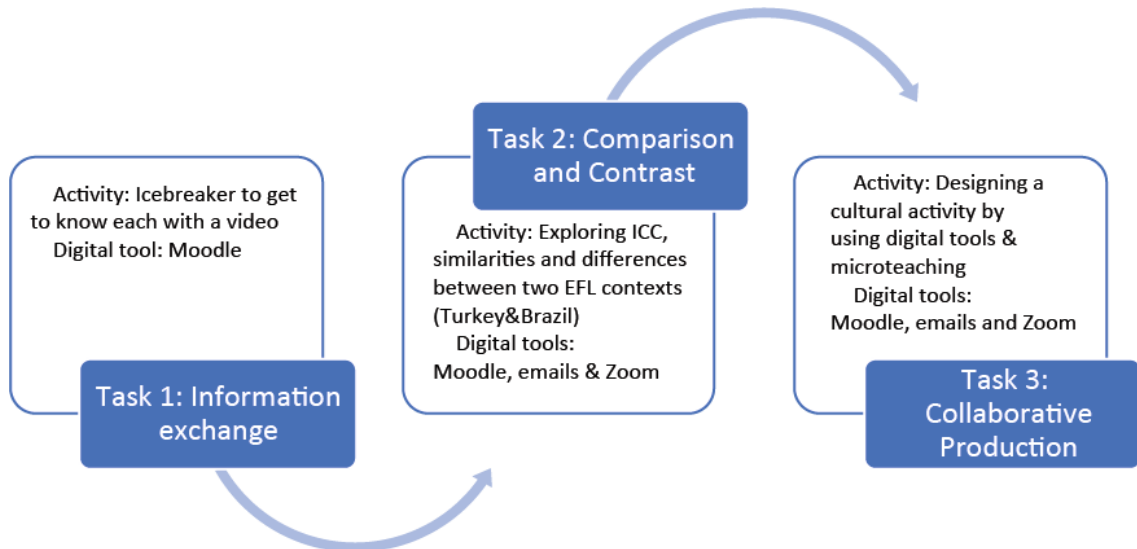
3.3. Participants

The research included three different groups of participants from (a) institutional level, (b) faculty staff level and (c) student level, as shown in Table 1. The first group at the institutional level includes the IRO staff (one participant from BU, three IRO members from TU). The second group includes teacher trainers (one from BU, one from TU) in the ELT Programs of both universities, who are also the researchers/authors of this study. The third group includes 20 student teachers studying at ELT programs at both undergraduate and graduate levels in the two institutions involved. Sixteen student teachers from TU and four student teachers from BU participated in the GAZUFES project. With qualitative research methodology in mind, the identification of participants was done through purposive sampling by choosing individuals who can enable rich and in-depth insights with their experience (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). All participants gave written consent to their data being used for research purposes, by approving before the interviews and/or the start of the VE project.

Table 1. Information about the participants

Type of group	Brazilian University (BU)	Turkish University (TU)
International Relations Office staff	1	3
Teacher Trainer	1	1
Student Teachers	4	16

3.4. Data collection

The study employed a qualitative research design with the use of a wide range of data such as interviews, journals and video data, which allowed a rich insider perspective (Dörnyei, 2007). To this end, the dataset included semi-structured interviews with the IRO staff and teacher trainers, and post-VE reflections reports of the student teachers. Interviews were held individually and took between 15-20 minutes. The interview questions with the IRO staff focused on their experience and familiarity with VE and IaH, challenges and opportunities of VE for IaH (see Appendix A). The interviews with the teacher trainers were carried out by the researchers with a post-reflection session. Teacher trainers who implemented the GAZUFES project were also the researchers of the current study reflected on the VE and IaH with the follow-up interview questions and discussed the potential and challenges together (see Appendix B). The third data collection instrument was a post-VE reflection report (see Appendix C), written by student teachers who participated in the GAZUFES project after the completion of the VE project.

3.5. Data analysis

The data collected from interviews and reflections were analyzed qualitatively. The open-ended answers from the semi-structured interviews and written reflections were analyzed using content analysis. Content analysis was conducted by the researchers by following a generalized sequence of coding for themes, looking for patterns, making interpretations, and presenting the findings (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). The data analysis process included reading the data several times, finding out the patterns and displaying the common themes with interpretation. The researchers analyzed the data together and negotiated the common themes that emerged in relation to the research questions of the study. The data were collected in English, the lingua franca of all participants. The researchers worked collaboratively on the data deciding on the common themes by analyzing, discussing, interpreting and categorizing processes. The findings of the analysis are presented and discussed below from three perspectives (institutional, academics, and student teachers) for each research question with the support of relevant data excerpts.

4.   Results and discussion

RQ1. What is the current status of VE projects in the two universities involved in the GAZUFES project?

To analyze the potential of VE projects for IaH, firstly a descriptive analysis of the current implementation of VE was needed. To this end, the qualitative data were analyzed to present the existing implementations of VE at both universities. The findings are presented from different perspectives: institutional (IRO staff), departmental (teacher trainers), student (student teachers). The main themes and subthemes are given in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Current status of VE projects

Level	Main themes	Subthemes
Institutional level	Lack of adequate VE projects	Individual efforts of few academics Lack of knowledge & experience on VE projects Few VE projects limited to one field
	Lack of integration of VE at the institutional level officially	No mention of VE in strategic plans No integration of VE into any administrative decisions
Departmental level	Lack of adequate VE projects	Integration of VE into only ELT field The relationship between VE and pandemic period
	Lack of institutional support	VE projects through individual efforts and interests No official integration of VE into curriculum
Student level	No previous knowledge and experience on VE projects	

From the institutional and administrative perspective, the IRO staff from TU stated that the current offer of VE projects is not satisfactory and their familiarity with and knowledge of VE are limited. Only few VE projects were implemented at the university, as the result of individual efforts of some academicians, as stated in the following excerpts.

> I do not think that it is satisfactory as only very few academicians are aware and studying (…) it. *(IRO2, Interview)*

> Currently, I am not involved with VE/COIL projects, but in the recent past I was able to follow some projects developed by some of my colleagues, especially in the field of teacher education. *(IRO4, Interview)*

The IRO staff from BU stated that they were familiar with the VE projects and had some experience. However, like at TU, the VE implementations were limited to the initiatives/efforts of one professor. In both contexts, the VE projects were carried out in ELT programs considering the difficulty of implementing VE in other courses since these were carried out in the two national languages (Portuguese and Turkish, respectively). The possibility to have VE in English (as a foreign language) was also challenging since some students might not have enough proficiency in English to engage in these exchanges. At both universities, VE projects were not mentioned in any official document or administrative decisions in relation to internationalization.

Teacher trainers also supported the viewpoints of the IRO office. They stated that only few VE projects were implemented at both university contexts. At BU, four VE projects (one VE before the pandemic period, two projects during the pandemic period and one project in the post-pandemic period), while at TU two VE projects (one VE during pandemic, one VE in post-pandemic period) were carried out. The findings revealed that teacher trainers also found the number of VE projects were below expectation, but they agreed that the pandemic period provided several opportunities for teacher trainers to experience and implement VE projects during pivot to online /remote education. The following excerpt illustrates how one teacher trainers started VE projects during the pandemic period.

> The VE projects that I conducted so far were the work that I did voluntarily. I took some trainings on VE from an Erasmus+ project and UNICollaboration network. But I did those because I was interested in VE during the pandemic period. As far as I know, I have not met any colleague from my university who is interested in VE projects or had not institutional training. *(TT2, Interview)*

They also mentioned that VE projects and IaH activities were not included in the official documents or decisions nor in any form of institutional or formal teacher training. They agreed that they started VE projects with their own motivation and academic interest. Similarly, the student teachers participating in the GAZUFES project reported that it was their first VE experience.

The VE projects conducted at the two universities from the Global South are not integrated at the institutional level and were are led mainly by teachers, thus at practitioner level. Also, the IRO staff mostly believe that these practices belong to the domain of the teachers, not the international offices. A similar finding was reported by O'Dowd (2021) for the pre-pandemic period, describing that 2020 was the year in which VE projects increased significantly for internationalization strategies. Therefore it can be concluded that both institutions are still in the initial stages of integrating VE into their internationalization of higher education strategies and the type of the VE projects were practitioner-driven (O'Dowd, 2017). The results correspond with Woicolesco et al.'s (2022) prediction that the virtualization of IaH activities would continue after the pandemic in Brazil, only if there was more institutional support and validation, which is also confirmed by Bulut Şahin (2017) in Turkey, referring to the need for more integration of IaH activities in Turkish higher education institutions.

RQ2. What is the potential of VE projects to improve IaH in the two universities involved in the GAZUFES project?

The findings revealed that there are similar themes related to the institutional and departmental level. Both the IRO staff and teacher trainers reported positive outcomes and opportunities provided by the VE projects, while student teachers additionally stated some problems related to VE implementations (Table 3).

Table 3. The potential of VE projects for IaH

Level	Main themes	Subthemes
Institutional level	Opportunities for internationalization	Increased inclusion of student and academic staff Increased opportunities for international research
Departmental level	Opportunities for internationalization and skills of pre-service teachers	Increased mobility number of students and academic staff Increased cooperation for academic research and networking Increased intercultural communicative competence of student teachers of ELT
Student level	Improved competences and outcomes	Increased intercultural competence Increased awareness of other ELT contexts
	Organizational problems	Time differences and task descriptions
	Preference of physical exchange instead of a VE	Lack of authentic experience More cultural understanding

The findings related to the interviews with the IRO staff revealed that all IRO staff at both contexts agreed on the potential of VE to improve IaH directly. They listed the potential contributions of the

VE project for increased IaH regarding: (1) increased inclusion of students and academics in the exchange programs, (2) increased opportunities for international research by the academic staff.

Due to the limited funding opportunities for exchange programs for students and academic staff, the IRO staff reported that the VE projects could give chances for more exchanges for more students and academic staff and inclusion of disadvantaged groups. Moreover, the IRO staff also stated that the VE projects had the potential to provide more collaborative international research and increased professional development for academics, as stated in the following excerpt.

> Also they (academics) should be aware that working on these subjects would help them expand their network as well as develop their own international awareness which is another self-improvement way. *(IRO1, Interview)*

From the practitioners' viewpoint, the results showed correspondingly that the VE projects have great potential for IaH. The most significant contribution stated by the teacher trainers was again related to the number of academics and students benefiting from international and intercultural experience (a kind of virtual mobility). The second most common theme that emerged was increased international cooperation among academics for research purposes (such as writing collaborative research articles and presenting at international conferences). Furthermore, teacher trainers reported that the VE projects increased intercultural communicative competence (ICC) for student teachers in language teacher education by collaborating with other student teachers from all around the world (no boundaries in terms of geographical distances). Results suggest that the two universities have fewer resources (when compared to other institutions in the Global North) to enable an international and intercultural learning experience (Celis & Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2021) or even a GCE.

The participants of the VE projects also expressed mostly positive comments on their VE experiences. Only three student teachers stated that the VE was not effective and not useful due to organizational problems. The findings revealed that most of the student teachers expressed the potential of VE to increase their intercultural competence and understand different contexts for ELT purposes, as stated in the following excerpts.

> I am always in favor of the fact that having intercultural experience as a language teacher will be very beneficial for our future career. My peers agreed with me throughout this process. *(S13, post-reflection)*

> It was very enjoyable to work with my student teacher friends. As I mentioned before, the information we learned about teaching English was parallel, so we completed our projects and studies without any difficulties. In this regard, I also got an idea about the English teaching and education system in Brazil. *(S10, post-reflection)*

Despite the potential stated above, all students agreed that they would prefer a physical exchange to expand the intercultural experience. They also stated that the VE can support the physical exchange in several aspects. The following extracts are taken from the student teachers' post-VE reflections:

> As being currently a virtual and an Erasmus exchange student, virtual exchange focuses on sharing your perspective or sharing the others' experience about culture and building on each other's opinions to make conclusions while physical exchange emphasizes learning about a culture by experiencing it on your own. Although Erasmus gives a chance to get to know a culture in the first place by living it, the virtual exchange is more practical in terms of its applicability to reach lots of people all at once, economical convenience, and flexibility in duration. *(S3, post-reflection)*

> Thanks to the tasks given in the context of teaching English, we understood the context, system, and similarities and differences of our university with which we cooperate. I think the virtual exchange program has the potential to prepare students for pre-mobility because it allows us to become effectively familiar with the process. *(S10, post-reflection)*

The findings related to each level revealed that the participants believed in the potential of VE projects for several reasons such as student learning outcomes, professional development, and increased internationalization profile of the universities. Recent studies and the impact reports (Baroni et al., 2019; Nissen & Kurek, 2020) also clearly displayed similar findings. However, it should also be noted that increased awareness is needed to understand that the VE projects are not to replace the physical exchanges and its affordances, since they are different experiences which should not be compared but considered as complementary (e.g., blended mobility) (O'Dowd, 2021).

RQ3. What are the challenges of VE implementations in the two universities involved in the GAZUFES project?

In addition to the potential impact of the VE projects for IaH, the current research study also aimed at investigating the challenges of VE projects and their implementations. The findings presented below show common aspects from three different viewpoints (Table 4).

Table 4. The challenges of VE projects

Level	Main themes	Subthemes
Institutional level	Lack of awareness and knowledge of academic staff	Low proficiency in English Lack of interest & knowledge on VE
	Lack of institutional support	Insufficient trainings on VE No recognition of VE projects
	Problems of integration of VE into curriculum	Insufficient number of courses in English Problems of integration and adaptation Increased teacher workload
Departmental level	Lack of institutional support	Lack of academic recognition/validation of VE Lack of flexibility in course design Lack of technical support and equipment Lack of awareness of the administration
	Difficulty of VE integration into curriculum	Academic calendar differences Assessing student workload during VE
	Difficulty of VE implementation	Time differences Lack of synchronous meetings Course delivery modes (f2f or online)
	Extra teacher workload	Several meetings and workload before the VE The increased workload for assessment Lack of assistance from the department/institution
Student level	Difficulties during VE project	Time differences The difficulty of arranging synchronous sessions The balanced number of the participants from each context Lack of learner autonomy for VE tasks

From the institutional perspective, the IRO staff listed the challenges of the VE project implementations in two broad themes. The first theme was the lack of awareness and knowledge of academic staff on VE projects. The underlying reasons for this lack of knowledge were the low proficiency level of English of academic staff and lack of interest and knowledge on VE. The results also showed that the institutions did not support the academic staff for VE through training and recognition. Secondly,

the IRO staff at both contexts also reported that VE was not integrated into the curriculum/syllabus. There were not enough and no appropriate courses in English for integration and adaptation, as shown in the following excerpt.

> VE courses should be about interdisciplinary subjects or new courses should be developed to incorporate the ICC approach and VEs. Or the existing ones should be altered. *(IRO2, Interview)*

Another challenge stated by the IRO staff was related to the considerable amount of teacher workload for VE projects, which was also stated as one of the main challenges by teacher trainers. From the practitioners' perspective, teacher trainers mostly discussed and agreed on the following aspects regarding the challenges. The lack of institutional support was stated as one of the main challenges. This theme includes the lack of academic recognition/validation both for teachers and students, lack of flexibility in the design of VEs, lack of technical/technological equipment such as computers and Wi-Fi on campus and the lack of awareness of the university administration.

Another common theme for both contexts was the difficulty of VE integration into the current courses, which includes the problems regarding the academic calendar differences and assessing the student workload during VE. For the challenges that occurred during the VE project's implementation, teacher trainers stated time differences for synchronous meetings, the problems of f2f classes and online classes at the same time, or only f2f classes without any online mode.

> In terms of flexibility, what I mean is that, even the students would like to do that, and even if I want to include, I mean, I was teaching in person and would like to include the activities in the virtual exchange to evaluate, for example, I wouldn't be able to do that, because once we return to in-person, I can not include any components that are mandatory or grade that are online. *(TT1, Interview)*

Finally, the findings revealed that VE projects required extra teacher workload even before the start of VE exchange. Arranging VE and tasks took a considerable amount of time and workload, all of which was not realized by the administration, resulting in the teachers using their own resources to arrange and implement VEs. The following extract shows the differences of VE implementation before and after the pandemic period.

> I think this was perhaps what affected most, as I said, I did not have any institutional support, but although I didn't have any support, during the pandemic I had at least the authorization and the possibility to include virtual exchange to online, it was easier to implement the virtual exchange, I share my room/office but before I was at home organizing everything easily. It made a huge difference before and after the pandemic to implement the project. *(TT1, Interview)*

> We had several meetings before the exchange, nearly 10 Zoom sessions, and a great number of emails to decide on the tasks. Rather than any motivation from outside or from my university, without my motivation, I would not be able to do this project, I guess. *(TT2, Interview)*

The challenges stated by the participants were mostly related to the process of the VE project implementation. The common themes are different time zones, the difficulty to arrange more synchronous sessions due to workload and time differences, the difficulty to have an equal number of participants from each context, and a lack of learner autonomy since VE also requires a self-regulatory process. The common challenges listed here can also be discussed with De Figueiredo et al.'s (2021) suggestion for more South-South collaborations that go beyond Northern understandings of higher education and build new ways of internationalization upon local realities.

RQ4. What are the needs of the universities to improve VE for increased IaH opportunities?

To improve VE for increased IaH opportunities at both contexts, the needs were analyzed. Table 5 below displays the main themes and subthemes.

Table 5. The needs for improving VE for IaH

Level	Main themes	Subthemes
Institutional level	More institutional support	More IRO activities on VE More courses in English More technical/technological support Incentive mechanisms for VE Official integration of VE and IaH
Departmental level	More institutional support	Recognition/validation of VE projects Flexibility to teachers for integration Technical/technological support Reducing teacher workload
Student level	Better VE implementations	Better organization of VE projects More synchronous sessions

The IRO staff suggested some improvements of VE projects for increased IaH opportunities by focusing on more institutional support in the following aspects: (1) more IRO activities on VE to raise awareness towards the importance of VE by arranging seminars and trainings for academic staff, (2) more courses in English for effective integration, (3) including e-learning/distance learning centers into the VE development and implementation processes to increase digital competency and providing technical and technological support, (4) establishing incentive mechanisms (financial or academic support, reduced teacher workload), (5) including VE and IaH into the university's governing boards and official administrative documents, and (6) recognition/validation of VE projects for students and teachers. The following excerpt illustrates the need for more institutional organizational support.

> First, there is a 'regulatory' challenge, because I am not aware of any legislation at BU (currently, at the local level) which deals with the specific topic of virtual exchange/ COIL. For example, how the academic management system may attribute credits/hours to COIL experiences? Will this information be displayed in the transcript of records of students? Will the participation in COIL projects be useful for funding/scholarship applications? If these issues are not solved, teachers and students may not feel encouraged enough to participate in COIL/VE. *(IRO2, Interview)*

> Also, our Distance Education Training Center (...) should support teachers with technical infrastructure to arrange online courses for VE projects. *(IRO3, Interview)*

In line with the needs suggested above by the IRO staff, teacher trainers also reported similar aspects. The results showed the following steps to be taken for more effective VE implementations, as stated by the teacher trainers: (1) recognition/validation of VE projects for students and teachers, (2) offering flexibility to teachers who want to arrange VE projects in their courses, (3) providing technical and technological support to students and teachers, and (4) reducing the teacher workload with more support and assistance. The participants reflected that their needs for VE implementation are more synchronous sessions to be arranged and more support from the teachers during VE task completion.

In conclusion, the last question was focused on the needs of the universities involved to improve VE projects geared towards more IaH approaches (Beelen & Jones, 2015) and results of the analysis suggest that most of the needs could be catered for by more institutional support in the form of validation and training of staff to offer VE projects, something that could be done by IRO offices. Also, when relating this finding to the literature review it is possible to see how Stallivieri's (2020) gaps for VE in Brazil (proficiency in English, access to technology and institutional support) may be relevant for other contexts such as Turkey, especially the third gap.

Taken together, the literature reviewed in this study confirms our analysis that VE projects can promote global citizenship education (GCE) (Finardi & Ortiz, 2022; Guimarães & Finardi, 2021), embedding it in teacher education courses (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021; O'Dowd & Dooly, 2022; Orsini-Jones et al., 2022) such as the ELT courses where the GAZUFES project took place. Moreover, our study aligns with Finardi and Guimarães (2020) in that we see VE to include the Global South in internationalization strategies such as the one analyzed in the GAZUFES project, carried out between Brazil and Turkey as part of a larger European VE project. O'Dowd (2017) suggests that VE can internationalize university classrooms and that is what we saw in the two ELT classes involved in the GAZUFES project analyzed in this study.

5.   Conclusion

This study aimed to address the potential of VE to promote the inclusion of the Global South in the development of IaH approaches and in international conversations that are not limited to the South-North direction. Overall, the results of the study revealed that the VE project was seen as having a significant potential for IaH in the two universities analyzed, as stated by the perspectives of agents of different levels in the two institutions. Notwithstanding the potential of VE for IaH that was found, the implementation of VE in the two contexts analyzed was still seen as an innovation and a teacher-led initiative, considering that the practice of VE was not normalized or institutionalized in the two

universities. More institutional support and holistic approaches to integrate VE projects into the internationalization process of the universities are needed. The study also revealed that the universities that carried out the VE project might lack the institutional support for the integration of VE projects in the curricula across all levels and dimensions of higher education so as to promote IaH in the institutions involved.

Despite the increased awareness and a variety of practices of VE in several countries, the cases explained here can give us several insights to further explore the potential of VE for IaH in the Global South. Firstly, these insights can be interpreted from the critical discussions held by Stein (2021) such as either the need for capacity building and the development in the Global South (internationalization for the global public good approach) or the need for more decolonial practices not focused on prescriptive mainstream approaches (internationalization otherwise). Secondly, more South-South collaborations through VE can also be encouraged to increase the internationalization of higher education in the Global South and provide a more inclusive approach to internationalization commonly shared. Moreover, the lack of institutional support and validation of VE and the limited resources of the universities in the Global South when compared to the ones in the Global North should be dealt with to increase the inclusion of the Global South universities for successful internationalization processes. Lastly, by adopting a bottom-up approach and implementing a needs analysis, the needs of the students and academic staff should be identified pre/during and post-VE project phases.

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