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Editorial

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We are very pleased to bring you this Special Issue (SI) for the Journal of Virtual Exchange entitled *Virtual Exchange and the Development of Transferable Skills: A Review of Practices Across Disciplines*. The idea for this issue was born during the conference 'Virtual Exchange in Higher Education: Charting the Irish Experience', which took place online in September 2021, in what was a very different environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, organised virtually at our universities with presenters from around the world. This SI features one research article and four practice reports which highlight recent advances in VE design and practice in the timeframe immediately before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Each submission went through a process of anonymous double-blind reviews, including further editing and revising thereafter.

The overarching theme of the papers, each one integrating online pedagogical practice within a virtual exchange (VE), is the development of participants' transferable skills to other work and study contexts. While there is no one universally-accepted definition of what transferable skills are, or consensus on what they include or exclude, they are as a blanket-term increasingly sought after by employers in recruitment and job descriptions to complement professional knowledge. O'Dowd in the Foreword provides a succinct discussion of the term. We understand transferable skills as a concept embracing a wide spectrum of cognitive, affective and behavioural competencies; examples featuring in the manuscripts below include intercultural communication and global citizenship,

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digital literacies, critical-thinking and mentoring. Expanding the concept of transferable skills, the newer term transversal skills can include ICT, language and cognitive skills (e.g., collaboration, negotiation and information-sharing) (Goggin et al., 2019), and these learning outcomes can also be seen in the Special Issue.

More widely, much has been written about the need and requirement for transferable skills in EU contexts, seen as key competencies for life-long learning (cf. the European Commission in their 2020 Research Report on Transversal Skills Frameworks). These multifaceted skills are also increasingly being appraised by third-level practitioners as they seek to align with educational institutions' strategic planning on a macro-level. Most universities have, for example, in recent years thematised the importance of Internationalisation at Home (Beelen and Jones, 2015) and bi-/multilingual, bi-/multicultural fora afforded by VE are seen as an important cog to advance this internationalisation wheel. In the context of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals or "education for sustainable development and global citizenship" (Tuke et al., 2021), task completion through VE is seen as beneficial for making participants world-ready and gain sought-after graduate attributes (Guadamillas Gómez, 2017). Furthermore, with increasing importance being placed on the learning environments of Gen Z students, today's youth generation who have been raised with web-based technologies, virtual exchange has also come into increased focus as universities seek to enhance and develop the digital literacies of all their students at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Last but not least, VE has also gained in university-wide recognition and support particularly since the emergency travel restrictions in 2020 and 2021, and continues to remain an important pre-mobility endeavour to prepare students for a stay abroad (Lee & Song, 2019; O'Regan et al, 2023; O'Reilly, 2021).

The Special Issue opens with a Foreword by Professor Robert O'Dowd, University of León, setting out the current global workplace context, and discusses how VE and Task-Based Language Teaching can play their part in developing transferable skills and boosting participants' employability.

In the first contribution[3] which is a research article, the authors (Pintado Gutiérrez, Gómez Soler and Fernandez Gutiérrez) present a case study exploring the benefits of pedagogical mentoring in students in the context of learning through and with videoconferencing. The aim of the VE was to develop global and ecological mindedness in students. The authors delve into the effect of pedagogical mentoring on students in videoconferencing scenarios, but also discuss the transversal skills students

3. Please note that the page numbers of each contribution reflect the order in which they were published online

acquired during the exchange and how the students saw application of their learning to real-life tasks. These real-life tasks included discussions of local ecological problems and engagement with specialised FL-vocabulary through the VE.

The first (Schrage-Früh and Wehrmann) of four practice reports explores the lesser-known concept of autoethnography in VE settings, and explains how the authors' narrative approach of their students' own cultural context and experience contributed to raising their glocal cultural awareness and skills of interpreting and relating, among other transferable skills.

In the second practice report (Dey-Plissonneau, Gómez Soler, Lee, Liu, Scriney and Smeaton), the focus shifts to the context of videoconferencing in VE. The authors present a novel web-based system called L2L and the characteristics of its visual metrics, which enables students to reflect critically on their online interaction and learn from them for future teletandem sessions. In this cross-disciplinary approach to student learning – which was integrated into several language courses across ten European universities and deployed for three consecutive semesters involving 926 students – evidence shows the development of confidence and learner-autonomy, as well as metacognitive skills in learners.

The third contribution (O'Regan, Le Baron-Earle and Batardière) highlights the value of VE in facilitating Internationalisation at Home. It reports on the recently developed *Erasmus Speaks* project, which was implemented during COVID-19 travel restrictions and involved over 600 students across Europe. The award-winning project illuminates how the task design helped to foster intercultural awareness, hone digital literacy and develop linguistic competence as students worked together.

Continuing with an environmental theme seen earlier, the final paper (Evain, Moore and Hawkridge) focuses on an online pedagogy in what the authors term 'Virtual Environmental Challenge' (VEC). This timely intervention discusses the integration of Challenge-Based Learning (CBL) within VE taking a cross-disciplinary approach, and showcases mentoring opportunities for teachers-in-training which the authors describe as 'teamchers'.

We believe that the papers presented in this Special Issue on transferable/transversal skills reflect some of the real-world challenges in the classroom; shedding light on how students learn well in virtual exchange, engaging them in web-based learning and developing their digital literacies, unfolding learning about self in bicultural and bilingual settings, and finally here, showcasing evidence for the sustainable development of VE as an increasingly persuasive and dialogic mode of teaching and learning in higher education.

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