Pathways to PRACTICE

A PRACTITIONER'S TOOLKIT

GETTING STARTED WITH VIRTUAL EXCHANGE/COIL

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EAIE
European Association for International Education

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TOPIC IN CONTEXT

As the world of higher education continues taking stock of the numerous challenges and chances the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about, one opportunity has undoubtedly been the accelerated global acceptance of digital forms of learning and teaching. 'Virtual exchange' has become an incredibly popular topic within international higher education, with more and more educators and professionals coming to appreciate the powerful role it can play on the internationalisation stage. Long-felt concerns about access to physical mobility as the way to gain international experiences have emerged in parallel with a growing awareness of the negative impact of the international higher education sector on our climate. More and more institutions are making the conscious decision to invest in Internationalisation at Home strategies, to which virtual exchange – one form of which is referred to as 'COIL' – is especially relevant.

When discussing this topic, it is essential to make a distinction between concepts and define a clear terminology. 'Virtual exchange' (VE) is an umbrella term used to refer to the many different ways in which students are engaged in online learning with partners from other countries and cultures. It should not be confused with 'virtual mobility', however, which is generally taken

to mean following one or more online courses from a higher education institution in another country and receiving academic recognition of the credits acquired. Under the umbrella of virtual exchange, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) emerged, with a focus on intentionally planned collaboration between students. Typically, a COIL model is applied to a module within a larger degree programme. COIL activities must by definition be collaborative, online, international and provide learning, but can take many different shapes and sizes. As COIL is both largely used synonymously with VE and in practice is the most specific implementation of it, this publication will use the term 'VE/COIL' to refer generally to these activities.

The main goal of VE/COIL is to collaborate across difference – cultural, linguistic and disciplinary – to learn from others in order to solve problems that one could not solve by oneself. VE/COIL by itself is important only insofar as it serves a larger purpose: its significance has to be seen within the context of internationalisation of the curriculum. VE/COIL projects, when done strategically and intentionally developed and implemented, can support institutional Internationalisation at Home goals. Currently, VE/COIL is often used as an elective part of educational programmes, but ideally institutions will work towards making it an integral part of the core curriculum.

WHAT
PROBLEM DOES IT SOLVE?

Higher education institutions want to provide access to the benefits of international experience to as many students and staff as possible. Traditional physical mobility is limited, though, and not of interest or accessible to all. Only a small proportion of students (and staff) actually goes abroad for study-related reasons. Additionally, growing concerns about the carbon footprint of travel have led to increased scrutiny of the idea that physical mobility is the only or the best form of internationalisation. VE/COIL has the promising potential to bring internationalisation within the reach of all students, including the non-mobile majority, with limited environmental impact. However, VE/COIL should not be seen as merely an alternative to or replacement for physical mobility, but rather as a complement to it.

Internationalisation of the home curriculum is a powerful tool, but academics often lack the skills and/or knowledge to implement it. When collaborating on a VE/COIL project, however, academics will work together with their international partner on project development, which helps them to professionalise and learn the skills necessary to internationalise their teaching. Furthermore, internationalisation is often perceived as the responsibility of an international office or a specific colleague. VE/COIL projects not only engage academics, but also educational developers, managers and others across the institution. In this way, stakeholders with different roles and backgrounds within an institution are more actively involved in internationalisation activities.

WHO
SHOULD BE INVOLVED?

Implementing VE/COIL involves diverse stakeholders, such as international relations officers, curriculum developers, educational technology experts and, of course, teaching staff. By bringing together these stakeholders, a more sustainable VE/COIL ecosystem can be created.

- The **teaching staff** or **lecturers** are the key players here, given the primary role they can play in including VE/COIL into their existing modules.

- **Educational developers** can help to write learning outcomes and design collaborative activities and assessment.

- **International relations officers** can support in finding VE partners.

- **Blended learning specialists** can support with the technological needs for the project.

- **University leadership** will be involved in the broad sense of support for internationalisation, and the needed facilitation and coordination.

TERMINOLOGY

Virtual exchange (VE):

An umbrella term used to refer to the engagement of groups of learners in online interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of course work, and under the guidance of teachers or trained facilitators.[1]

COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning):

A process of collaborative intercultural engagement between two or more classrooms, their teachers and their students in a collaborative intercultural engagement.[2]

Virtual mobility:

Following one or more online courses from a host university in another country and receiving academic recognition of the credits acquired.[3]

Internationalisation at Home:

Internationalisation at Home is the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students, within domestic learning environments.[4]

SOURCES

1. O'Dowd, R. (2023). *Internationalisation of higher education and the role of Virtual Exchange.* Routledge.

2. https://coilconnect.org

3. www.eaie.org/blog/words-matter-virtual-mobility.html

4. Beelen, J., & Jones, E. (2015). https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-319-20877-0

TERMINOLOGY

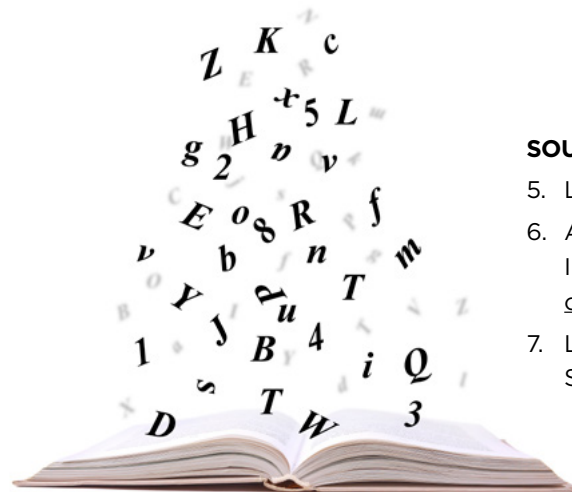### Internationalisation of the curriculum:

The incorporation of international, intercultural and/or global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods and support services of a programme of study.[5]

Educational development:

Educational development supports the improvement of the quality of education through the development of educational knowledge and practices, to enhance and support teaching and learning in the university. The term serves as a generic and inclusive descriptor for the field as a whole, and has thus found currency on the international scene.[6]

Educational technology:

A set of tools, techniques, theories and methods from multiple knowledge domains that are applied in a goal-oriented problem solving approach to: (1) design, develop and evaluate human and mechanical resources efficiently and effectively in order to facilitate and leverage all aspects of learning; and (2) guide change agency and transformation of educational systems and practices in order to contribute to influencing change in society.[7]

SOURCES

5. Leask, B. (2015), Internationalisation of the curriculum. Routledge.

6. Adapted from Susan Wilcox, The Role of the Educational Developer in the Improvement of University Teaching, https://journals.sfu.ca/cjhe/index.php/cjhe/article/view/183312.

7. Luppicini, R. (2005). A Systems Definition of Educational Technology in Society. *Educational Technology & Society, 8* (3), 103-109.

KEY STEPS
IN THE PROCESS

1. Orientation:

    1.1   Review curriculum for opportunities to internationalise
    1.2   Educate yourself on COIL and best practices
    1.3   Find an international partner

2. Design your collaborative project

3. Implement and facilitate project

4. Evaluate project

5. Share experience

1. ORIENTATION

Make sure to plan your VE/COIL project well ahead of its intended starting date. For your first VE/COIL project, it's recommended to dedicate one semester to the orientation process.

1.1 REVIEW CURRICULUM FOR OPPORTUNITIES TO INTERNATIONALISE

First, identify topics or graduate skills that can be enhanced through international online collaboration. Try to be more specific than 'intercultural communication' – focus instead on specific skills for functioning in an international team or acquiring global learning skills. The main question you should ask yourself is: what will my students learn from this experience and how will this make them better professionals and citizens?

1.2 EDUCATE YOURSELF ON COIL AND BEST PRACTICES

There is no need to reinvent the wheel, since there are already many useful resources and good practices out there. What expertise is there that you can learn from, and are there specific examples at other higher education institutions that might provide you with inspiration for your own project? Also do not forget to ask around within your own institution, or partners that you already work with. There might be colleagues in another department of your institution with relevant VE/COIL experiences that you could learn from.

1.3 FIND AN INTERNATIONAL PARTNER

Conduct an orientation exercise to find potential partners. Should the partner be the same discipline as your own, or are you aiming for interdisciplinary cooperation? What language(s) will be used? Do you prefer to work with a partner in a certain region of the world?

You can also engage with the international relations office or your institution's VE/COIL coordinator for assistance in finding a partner. Besides the institutional partner network, there are several globally oriented VE networks that might also provide you with inspiration. Do not forget you can always try to reach out to existing partners: they might have some relevant experience or be interested to dive into the unknown with you!

2. DESIGN YOUR COLLABORATIVE PROJECT

With your VE/COIL partner, discuss anticipated learning outcomes for your and their students and what you understand by such terms as 'learning outcomes', 'assessment', 'evaluation' and 'reflection'. Also discuss the education system, the educational culture and each partner's (unspoken) expectations. Will this be part of an elective or part of the (compulsory) core curriculum? Will students receive credits (ECTS) for their effort, or do they participate on a voluntary basis? How many credits will students get?

Identify the appropriate period for the VE collaboration and make sure there's sufficient overlap between the partners' academic calendars. Ideally, there should be a minimum of four weeks overlap where students are in class and have time to dedicate to this project.

Make sure there is a good balance between synchronous and asynchronous collaboration. For example, by creating a weekly schedule that details how and when students will collaborate, and which tasks require a synchronous group effort as well as which tasks can be done in parallel asynchronously.

Discuss technical and administrative issues with your partner. Issues like bandwidth, educational online platforms and data protection should be explored. Is there tech support for digital or blended learning that you could benefit from?

Also discuss issues of knowledge and data security since the increasing focus on these topics may impact a VE/COIL practice.

Once the tasks and activities have been decided on, choose the appropriate educational technology that will allow students to collaborate.

3. IMPLEMENT AND FACILITATE THE PROJECT
Collaborative activities should ensure students need each other to complete the tasks: go beyond 'describe and compare'.

Develop icebreaker and reflection activities, coaching opportunities and, if needed, language support sessions.

The role of the VE/COIL lecturer is often perceived as different from traditional teaching. The lecturer facilitates the process and is an expert on the content. The facilitation focuses more on coaching than teaching.

In addition, the process of collaboration will include intercultural experiences. To help students maximise their learning, the facilitators provide more coaching questions or suggestions than answers and solutions. This could be described as 'cultural mentorship'.

If the aim is to activate students and encourage collaboration, the VE/COIL facilitators practice what they preach: frequent check-ins with their international partner ensure an equitable facilitation.

To make sure students actively participate, the project activities should focus on exchange and co-creation: making sure the students collaborate synchronously as well as asynchronously in tasks such as brainstorming, presenting, discussing *etc.*

4. EVALUATE THE PROJECT

It is important to take the time needed to evaluate the project in order to improve any future similar exercises as well as sharing your findings. Are there any particular lessons learned? What was the quality level of the project? How did the collaboration with the partner go? How did the students feel about the experience?

5. SHARE EXPERIENCES WITH OTHERS

Once the project has finished, the experience might be shared with colleagues and your institutional partner network to promote best practices for curriculum internationalisation. Before the project wraps up, consider recording some student testimonials. Did the students produce output you might share with others? How can you share the experience with leadership and colleagues? Finally, you might even consider producing a publication with your VE/COIL partner.

6. ADDITIONAL BENEFITS

VE/COIL is a powerful motivator for additional teacher and student opportunities. VE/COIL motivates mobility, additional language study, research projects between academics (in the discipline of teaching and learning), applications to grants such as Blended Intensive Programmes (BIP) and new institutional partnerships.

DON'T FORGET

Having a VE/COIL project in the early stages of a study programme puts international collaboration on the map for students. Don't wait until students are near graduation.

Partners that are excellent for physical student exchange are not necessarily the best partners for VE/COIL.

Make sure to consider language, access to educational technology and pedagogical preferences. Be mindful of inequalities in power relations.

Consider professional development for lecturers and their VE partners and make sure to include the educational developers.

Don't forget that by engaging a range of stakeholders, the VE practice becomes more sustainable. If done well, people from many parts of the institution will need to contribute their skills, expertise and time.

For VE/COIL to flourish, institutional embeddedness, recognition, and support are required.

TAKE-AWAYS

A successful VE/COIL project results in more students and staff collaborating with international partners, thereby providing more people with an international experience. Students are given the opportunity to learn from others anywhere in the world whom they would otherwise never reach (in other words, it brings the world to them), and staff get to meaningfully work with partners they could never visit physically.

One successful VE/COIL project can also lead to a more sustainable VE/COIL practice at an institution, with the right stakeholders engaged and the right support in place. This way VE/COIL can successfully complement any existing physical mobility strategy as well as objectives connected to internationalisation of the home curriculum.

EAIE Blog: These blog articles published by the EAIE give an insight into the terminology and context of VE/COIL.

[Virtual exchange and Internationalisation at Home: the perfect pairing](#)

[Your virtual exchange reading list: 7 resources to explore](#)

[Virtual exchange and Internationalisation at Home: navigating the terminology](#)

[COIL: what's in an acronym](#)

Pathways to Practice:
[Implementing Internationalisation at Home for international officers](#)

Robert O'Dowd
[Internationalising Higher Education and the Role of Virtual Exchange](#)

The Guide to COIL Virtual Exchange, this comprehensive publication takes the reader through the process of COIL institutionalisation:

[The Guide to COIL Virtual Exchange Author Flyer (coilconnect.org)](#)

[The Guide to COIL Virtual Exchange: Implementing, Growing, and Sustaining Collaborative Online International Learning](#)

SUNY COIL Centre →

COIL Connect →

Podcast Connecting across the borders of difference, Connecting Across the Borders of Difference with the COIL Program →

Padlet of EAIE Online Academy (Password: VE2023) →

EVOLVE project →

FIU COIL Office →

FURTHER READING

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