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Using Virtual Exchange to Elevate Learning from an Integrated Set of High Impact Practices

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This paper explores the transformative potential of Virtual Exchange (VE) in international business education by analyzing three innovative VE projects implemented at Georgia State University in partnership with institutions in Morocco, Tunisia, and Portugal. These projects integrate High-Impact Practices (HIPs) such as collaborative assignments, diversity/global learning, and experiential case research, fostering cross-cultural competencies and practical skills for students. The study highlights project design, implementation, and outcomes supported by qualitative and quantitative assessment. Recommendations for educators and administrators aim to enhance the scalability and sustainability of VE initiatives, ensuring their long-term impact on global education.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual Exchange (VE) has not just revolutionized traditional educational and communication frameworks, but it has also harnessed the vast capabilities of online platforms to create a dynamic environment that fosters profound, transformative cross-cultural interactions. These platforms transcend time and space, enabling educators and students from around the globe to participate in various collaborative activities, from joint discussions and debates to co-taught courses, thereby creating the ‘global classroom’. VE significantly enhances students’ learning experiences, immersing them in new cultures, languages, and perspectives and amplifying their global awareness.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, VE became an essential strategy to continue offering impactful international experiences. The shift to online learning platforms enabled educators to enhance pedagogical methods, ensuring that learning remained engaging and effective despite the many constraints imposed by the pandemic. By facilitating internationalization at home, virtual exchange breaks down economic and geographic barriers to global education, making it more inclusive and accessible to a broader range of students. With heedful planning and a commitment to access, equity, and inclusion, educators and administrators play a crucial role in ensuring that virtual exchange can provide enriching and impactful educational opportunities that prepare students to thrive in a globally connected world.

This paper describes three successful virtual exchange projects based on qualitative and quantitative assessment. All three were implemented by Georgia State University (GSU), the largest institution of higher education in the State of Georgia through its Robinson College of Business, with ESCA Ecole de Management (ESCA) in Morocco, South Mediterranean University (SMU) in Tunisia, and Instituto Português de Administração de Marketing (IPAM) in Portugal. All projects integrate a subset of High-Impact Practices (HIPs) that generate higher levels of engagement and learning success (Finley, 2019). Students created knowledge and competencies through the projects by transforming experience, reflective observation, conceptualizations, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). We hope these evidence-based practices offer educators guidelines for incorporating international signature experiences with proven impact in their courses. All VE projects described here are embedded in a core undergraduate international business course at the GSU senior level. The matched courses at the partner institutions were either management or marketing upper-level offerings.

SELECTED CASES

CASE 1: VIRTUAL TEAMS TACKLE GLOBAL INNOVATION CHALLENGES

GSU and ESCA have maintained a multifaceted partnership for over a decade, which began with study abroad programs. The collaboration commenced in 2014 when students

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worked in mixed teams to analyze the “Hollywood Influence on Global Cultures” case virtually and then presented their findings and recommendations in person at ESCA. In this context, VE became a tool to enhance the experience of studying abroad.

GSU and ESCA closely collaborated to institutionalize VE, involve more faculty members, and select innovation-related projects. They leveraged the global innovation challenges available through Agorize’s open challenge platform. Agorize, a Paris-based organization, works with firms, nonprofits, and government agencies to offer engaging innovation challenges via a well-integrated online platform. Utilizing open innovation and crowdsourcing, Agorize helps companies connect with over 5 million innovators and hundreds of universities.

The lead faculty members at GSU and ESCA identified common learning objectives in their respective courses and integrated the innovation challenge as a term project. One project involved mixed teams addressing sustainability challenges faced by TD, a prominent Canadian multinational financial and insurance services firm. Due to semester timeframe constraints, teams generally participated in the first stage, with selected teams moving to subsequent stages.

To facilitate interaction, the partners included a fun ‘starter’ task. Students met virtually, discussed, and proposed a team name representing something they all shared. Teams then completed a Team Charter, a binding agreement outlining expectations and responsibilities. The team naming exercise and the team charter became staples in all VE projects at GSU. To support student teams outside of joint class sessions, the lead faculty members at GSU and ESCA held weekly drop-in hours for teams to seek guidance while working on the innovation challenge.

This VE project integrates two High-Impact Practices (HIPs): collaborative assignments and projects where students solve problems together and diversity/global learning, where students explore different cultures by working with peers from other countries. Across all projects, students complete a pre-and post-project survey and reflect on their experiences. To motivate U.S.-based students and their VE teammates, VE Badges are issued, which can be displayed on students’ LinkedIn profiles and CVs.

CASE 2: VIRTUAL TEAMS TACKLE REAL CONSULTING PROJECTS

In the innovative experiential learning activity “VE Consulting Project,” U.S.-based students collaborate with peers at IPAM in Portugal to devise investment strategies for an actual company. The primary goals are to learn to work and solve problems in multicultural teams and to sharpen understanding by considering diverse perspectives. This team-based assignment involves creating a webpage to facilitate cooperative projects and group research.

Students analyze and select a country for investment using international business frameworks, such as PESTEL and CAGE, to assess market opportunities and risks and propose an optimal entry mode. The project culminates in an interactive website report created with Google Sites, leveraging

technology for creativity, collaboration, and practical application. Google Sites provides a user-friendly interface for creating websites. This hands-on approach to environmental assessment in a VE context, combined with presenting the report as a website, prepares students for the complexities of global markets and enhances their employability.

The consultancy project presented unique challenges due to differing time zones, complicating the scheduling of live meetings with company stakeholders. Additionally, working on a project where the company aimed to expand the presence of products with a strong Portuguese identity in leading African markets added complexity. Students had to navigate cultural and institutional differences while developing a deep understanding of the products’ cultural significance and brand transferability.

Teams start by selecting a team name reflecting something all members have in common and completing a Team Charter. Members initially conduct a PESTEL or CAGE analysis individually, which is then submitted to the team for critical assessment and integration. The VE project concludes with a recorded video presentation summarizing the analysis and recommendations embedded into the team-created website.

This consulting project offers a rich, practical learning experience through virtual exchange. Students work in geographically dispersed virtual teams, leverage web design technologies, and employ IB tools and data visualization for decision-making. As such, this VE project integrates the two high-impact practices of collaborative assignments and diversity/global learning. The lead faculty members at GSU and IPAM support student teams throughout the project and jointly provide feedback on deliverables at different stages.

CASE 3: VIRTUAL TEAMS ENGAGE IN ORIGINAL CASE RESEARCH AND WRITING

Traditional case teaching methods are widely used to foster critical thinking and decision-making. Students analyze case facts to develop opinions, propose alternatives, and make informed decisions. A more engaging approach to the case method is the *Student-Written, Instructor-Facilitated* (SWIF) model (Swiercz, 1998). In this model, students take on roles beyond case analysts, becoming researchers, negotiators, interviewers, writers, petitioners, editors, and team members. Many have highlighted the value of original case-writing research as a tool for developing skills in storytelling, qualitative and quantitative research, and writing. Additionally, SWIF fosters collaboration among educators, students, and practitioners from different regions, benefiting all participants (Bailey, Sass, Swiercz, Seal, & Kayes, 2005).

In the VE program, teams from GSU and SMU select a topic of common interest, identify a compelling angle, and draft a narrative around it. Faculty members from both institutions review case topic proposals for approval. Student teams receive case-writing guides, instructional videos, and sample short cases as references. Lead faculty members from GSU and SMU jointly conduct synchronous class ses-

sions and hold weekly drop-in hours to support the mixed teams through the case development process.

The successful implementation of the SWIF technique within international VE collaborative projects highlights its potential as a valuable tool in international business education. This supervised case-writing initiative, while challenging, proved to be highly rewarding. Top-performing teams had the opportunity to present their work at an international conference. A case competition was organized for this project, with the top three teams receiving prizes. Representatives from both universities jointly selected the winning cases.

In addition to collaborative assignments and global learning, this semester-long VE SWIF case-writing project integrates the High-Impact Practices (HIPs) of undergraduate research and writing intensity ([Appendix 1](#)).

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF VIRTUAL EXCHANGE PROJECTS

To assess the impact of Virtual Exchange on the acquisition of cultural competencies, we collected pre- and post-project surveys on students' performance and intercultural competencies during the first year of VE projects with Tunisia, Morocco, and Portugal. We used existing validated surveys, objective exam scores, and student reflection essays.

Participants: The participants were GSU undergraduate business students enrolled in the core Global Business senior-level course. Data were collected from 123 pre-tests and 132 post-tests, resulting in a final sample of 106 matched pre- and post-tests after removing incomplete cases. Pre- and post-surveys were based on the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) by Chen and Starosta (2000), which includes five subscales: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness.

We used paired-sample t-tests to compare pre- and post-survey scores for the ISS subscales and combined scale. Independent sample t-tests assessed variance between scores, and Cronbach's alpha was calculated to validate the reliability of the ISS and its subscales. Multiple regression analysis examined the impact of VE participation on student performance, using final exam scores as the dependent variable. One section of the Global Business course without a VE project served as a control sample. In this study, the control group comprised participants from BUSA 4000, a highly coordinated course with identical content and delivery methods but without VE components. This uniformity ensures that performance differences are attributable to VE participation, offering a robust foundation for claims of superiority. Summary Results are outlined below.

Our results show participation in VE programs to be positively associated with higher final exam scores. On average, students who participated in VE programs scored 3.17 points higher on their final exams than non-participants. On the self-reported measures of Intercultural Competencies, Interaction Confidence showed significant improvement from pre- to post-participation ($p < 0.05$). Interaction

Engagement showed a marginally significant improvement ($p = 0.071$). The combined ISS Scores showed an overall improvement, though not statistically significant. Most subscales demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's alpha > 0.70), except for the interaction attentiveness subscale (pre-survey: 0.2883, post-survey: 0.414).

In their totality, these findings suggest that VE programs can positively impact student performance and aspects of intercultural competence, particularly interaction confidence and engagement, indicating better student readiness to communicate and navigate effectively in multicultural settings ([Appendix 2](#)).

In terms of global strategic thinking, enhanced cross-cultural interactions through VE allow students to appreciate diverse perspectives, aligning with the goal of cultivating global strategic thinkers in International Business (IB). Two comments from student reflections highlight this point: Student A: *"The group assignment was beneficial for me. We experienced working with people from different countries and cultures. The biggest lesson was time management and dealing with time zone differences. The assignment helped me learn about PESTEL analysis and understand what it's like to collaborate internationally."* Student B: *"This project provided a real-life experience of working with people from different cultures. I feel more confident now about collaborating with people outside the US."*

CHALLENGES OF COORDINATING VIRTUAL EXCHANGE PROGRAMS

Coordinating VE programs presents unique challenges, particularly when integrating participants from diverse cultural and institutional backgrounds. One major hurdle is managing time zone differences, which require careful scheduling to ensure equitable participation across regions. This becomes even more complex in programs involving multiple institutional partners, as aligning learning objectives and semester schedules across diverse academic calendars is challenging. For instance, combining sessions from two courses necessitates meticulous planning to align synchronous sessions while accommodating asynchronous learning components for flexibility.

Institutional variations further complicate coordination. For example, support teams at some universities may need more resources or expertise to manage VE logistics effectively. This underscores the need for institutional commitment—from faculty champions and administrators who can provide sustainable infrastructure. Programs risk failure if they remain individual-led initiatives rather than institutionalized with adequate policies, resources, and incentives for long-term adoption. Additionally, differences in course modalities (e.g., hybrid, fully online, or in-person) influence how VE activities are designed, implemented, and supported.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS AND COLLEGE ADMINISTRATORS

Based on our extensive experience with global Virtual Exchange projects, we offer the following recommendations for faculty members looking to internationalize the student learning experience and for college administrators supporting these virtual international linkages.

ENSURE PARTNER FACULTY TRUST AND COLLABORATION

- A clear understanding of the projects from professors is crucial to the success of VE assignments. They codesign the project, supervise teams, offer mentorship, monitor progress, provide feedback during virtual drop-ins, and address team challenges.
- Professors work closely to offer synchronous and asynchronous sessions on project-relevant topics such as macroenvironmental assessment tools, entry modes, and case-writing techniques.
- Partners ensure academic rigor and practical relevance by guiding students through iterative edits and drafts, leveraging jointly developed grading rubrics.
- Building VE projects on existing relationships, such as faculty research collaborations, visiting scholars, or other established ties, ensures stronger commitment and smoother collaboration.

EMPLOY RIGOROUS ASSESSMENT TOOLS

- Multiple assessment tools can be used beyond specific project rubrics. These include pre- and post-project surveys, peer evaluations, and reflection essays.
- End-of-project reflection essays provide rich insights into the challenges and rewards of international collaboration. Time zone differences, technology, and task assignments were the most cited challenges in the cases described above. Working with students at other universities and developing personal connections were commonly cited as the VE experience rewards.
- Peer evaluations address free-riding effects and offer additional insights into team dynamics. Undergraduate students need to pay more attention to virtual, cross-cultural teamwork challenges as they often overestimate their cultural readiness. Peer evaluations can provide additional insight into team dynamics beyond the surveys and reflection essays.

PROVIDE FACULTY SUPPORT

- VE requires significant investment in time and effort, and support from college leadership is critical.
- Sufficient time should be spent designing VE projects embedded in matched courses at partner institutions well-aligned with shared learning objectives. Often, in-person faculty collaboration can be especially beneficial.

- Dedicated graduate assistants to support faculty members engaged in VE projects can reduce the burden of managing many international virtual teams.
- VE projects should be considered examples of 'Teaching Innovations,' an essential criterion in faculty performance evaluations.

SUPPORT AND MOTIVATE STUDENT TEAMS

- Including project mentors and experts to support students with challenging team assignments is beneficial. Here, VE projects can be excellent ways to engage international alums.
- Reward teams and students who successfully complete the VE projects by offering VE Badges ([appendix 3](#)). These rewards can motivate team members to collaborate effectively. Infusing competition could also serve as a motivator, as was the case for the SWIF case-writing assignment, where top teams received certificates of achievement.

UTILIZE SYNCHRONOUS AND ASYNCHRONOUS MODALITIES

- Deliver content, facilitate teamwork, and provide feedback using synchronous and asynchronous methods.
- Group management tools like Zoom, Teams, or other online collaboration systems maximize engagement and interaction effectiveness (Nguyen, Liwan, & Mai, 2020), and the use of AI tools such as [Read.ai](#), Copilot, or Zoom AI Companion for meeting summaries and follow-up items can be especially helpful.

HANDLING VE ADOPTION IN DIVERSE EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

- Collaboration with experienced partners fosters a smoother implementation process. Shared goals and mutual respect across institutions are critical.
- Flexible office hours or virtual spaces provide ongoing support for students, addressing technical or content-related challenges as they arise.
- Regular assessments and adjustments based on student and faculty feedback enhance the effectiveness of VE programs over time. Iteration ensures alignment with evolving educational priorities and technological advancements.

SUSTAINING VE INITIATIVES

- To ensure the longevity of VE programs, institutions should prioritize paths that secure sustainable financial resources for technology, training, and administrative support. Institutions could explore grants, sponsorships, or internal funding opportunities.
- Continuous faculty training ensures they are equipped to design and manage VE effectively. Peer learning sessions and workshops can be valuable.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

For further research, we propose to examine the impact of VE projects on students' intercultural competencies and team dynamics within compressed timelines. This future research could explore how students develop teaming skills under tight deadlines, focusing on challenges such as communication barriers and conflict resolution. Additional future research direction is to investigate the balance between synchronous and asynchronous VE activities, assessing their effectiveness in achieving learning objectives. Future studies could analyze how these modalities influence student engagement and performance. Research should also focus on how VE activities impact student engagement compared to courses that do not use VE projects.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents three sample VE projects from a broad portfolio that leverage communication and video-conferencing technologies to enable international virtual teams from partner institutions to collaborate on joint projects. When well-designed, VE projects can be impactful and life-changing, allowing the students to experience working with others across geographies, cultures, and time zones. VE enables students to learn at home through an international virtual experience (Nava-Aguirre, 2019). Experience is recognized as a superior learning methodology (Gonzalez-Perez & Taras, 2015; Kolb, 1984), and the three VE cases described in this paper provide educators with examples of using experiential learning to develop cultural competencies, increase student cultural awareness, and develop the skills to function effectively in geographically dispersed virtual teams. These skills are essential today and represent important college-to-career bridges in international business education.

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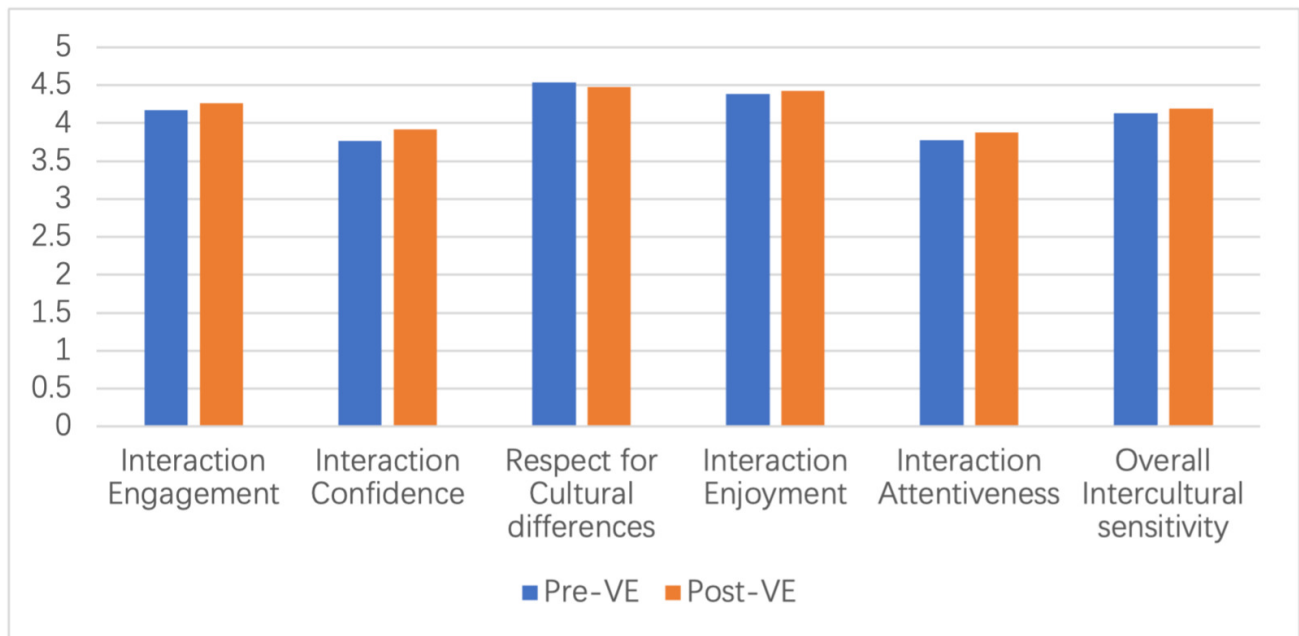
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Appendix 1. Three Virtual Exchange Projects and Associated High-Impact Practices

High-Impact Practices (AAC&U)	Global Innovation Challenge	Consulting Project	SWIF Case Writing
1. First-Year Experiences			
Common Intellectual Experiences			
Learning Communities			
Writing-Intensive Courses			
Collaborative Assignments & Projects			
Undergraduate Research			
Diversity/Global Learning			
Service/Community-Based Learning			
Internships			
Capstone Courses and Projects			
ePortfolios			

**Appendix 2. Pre- and Post-ISS Survey Summary Results**



Virtual Exchange

 Public

Created on **Apr 28, 2021**

A Virtual Exchange badge represents successful participation in an online academic project that pairs students with peers from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of course work under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators. Virtual Exchange experiences help develop many 21st century professional skills, such as global citizenship, digital literacy, and intercultural competence. [View Less](#)

Appendix 3. The Virtual Exchange Badge