

# 8 Virtual exchange for teaching EU economics: building enriching international learning experiences for European students

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## Abstract

This chapter presents a Transnational Virtual Exchange (VE) Project (TEP) developed in partnership between a Spanish and a Hungarian university. During this semester-long project, students worked in mixed virtual teams exploring selected topics related to the economics of the European Union. This report provides the details of the planning, design, and implementation of the project and reveals its Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) from the students' perspectives. The in-depth SWOT analyses elaborate on students' disciplinary learning, 21st century skills development, engagement and motivation, use of digital tools, international online teamwork and collaboration, online communication, and intercultural competence.

**Keywords:** virtual exchange, transnational Erasmus+ virtual exchange project, technology-supported learning, EU economics, SWOT analysis.

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## 1. Context

The UNIOVI-PPCU<sup>4</sup> VE project was born out of a partnership formed between two professors teaching the ‘Economics of Spain and the European Union’ course at the School of Economics and Business at the University of Oviedo in Spain and a professor running the ‘English for European Union Contexts’ course at the Institute of International Studies and Political Science at the Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Hungary. The professors were brought together by the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (E+VE) initiative and decided to design a TEP focusing on the shared disciplinary area of EU economics involving second-year Bachelor of Arts students studying at the two universities. The motivation for setting up this project was threefold: (1) to engage students in meaningful discussion on key topics and current issues of the EU with international peers from other EU member states; (2) to broaden students’ horizons by sharing diverse perspectives of tackling common problems in the EU; and (3) to enrich the students’ learning with international project experiences and provide an opportunity for skills development. VE initiatives and practices are now gaining ground in European Higher Education (HE) with the aim of extending local teaching and learning contexts, introducing new methods to teaching and learning, adopting a multidisciplinary approach to stimulating students’ academic performance, deepening their disciplinary knowledge, and developing their transversal skills (Helm, 2015; O’Dowd & Lewis, 2016). While these aims go hand in hand with the new trends in European HE (EPSC, 2017), they also play an important role in increasing students’ future career prospects, and therefore narrowing the gap between education and work (Burke, 2019).

The first iteration of our project was implemented in the autumn semester of the 2018/2019 academic year after a three-month-long design phase between June and August 2018. During this preparation phase, we dedicated time to planning the project logistics, designing the student assignments, setting up the project working environment, and preparing all project documentation, background

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4. UNIOVI stands for University of Oviedo (Spain); PPCU stands for Pázmány Péter Catholic University (Hungary)

materials, and handouts for the students. This was a very important step to take as there were fundamental differences in our two course curricula in terms of course objectives, content, learning approaches, teaching practices, term holidays, the number of weekly classes, grading and assessment of students' performances, and the number of credits. The fact that our courses had to be aligned to cater for the goals of the collaboration experience, yet leave enough space for pursuing the individual objectives of our own courses, posed great challenges for the design and the implementation process of our project. For the second iteration of the project, which ran in the autumn semester of the 2019/2020 academic year, we decided to make some adjustments to the original agenda and project outline. These decisions are explained in the last section of this chapter.

## **2. Aims and description of the project**

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of our TEP project, we still kept the individual objectives of the two courses, while also setting the shared goals and learning outcomes of the virtual collaboration. The main objectives of the 'Economics of Spain and the European Union' course at UNIOVI were to allow students to explore concepts and theories related to EU economics and develop a coherent discourse to describe, interpret, and discuss the Spanish and EU economy by using new technologies as a means of communication and information search, working in groups to apply and integrate knowledge. This course followed the English as Medium of Instruction (EMI) approach and the 'English for European Union Contexts' course at PPCU applied a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) design, set out to introduce students to the key EU terminology in English through topics related to the EU institutions, procedures, and policies. PPCU students enrolled on this course had a high level of proficiency in English, ranging from upper-intermediate to advanced levels<sup>5</sup>. These two different linguistic approaches determined the Lingua Franca spirit of the exchange and highlighted the importance

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5. Equivalent to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) from B2 to C1

of the preparatory phase of the project in which the professors were able to go beyond the limits of their own course objectives in terms of content and language. They found shared aims focusing the exchange on innovative teaching practices and competences (Dearden & Macaro, 2016; Guarda & Helm, 2017), which included offering the Spanish and Hungarian students the opportunity to (1) gain international experience, (2) engage in disciplinary research and academic activities, (3) practise and develop 21st century skills (i.e. collaboration, intercultural communication, critical thinking, creativity), and (4) actively use their English language communication competences.

### **3. Pedagogical design and tools**

Throughout this 14-week-long collaboration project, students worked in mixed teams of four students each (two Spanish and two Hungarian students) on a series of shared authentic assignments and project tasks (Dee Fink, 2003). It was fortunate that the Spanish and Hungarian academic years coincided, so the students at both universities started the project at the same time. The first weeks of the project were called a preliminary phase and were devoted to: (1) the introduction and orientation of the students on the project objectives, tasks and activities, tools, final deliverables, assessment, and grading; (2) the formation of student teams; (3) the engagement in ice-breaker and team-building activities; (4) the assignment of research topics to teams; and (5) the presentation of the online tools for collaboration.

The aim of this preliminary phase was to encourage students to socialise with their team members, to build trust, and to start a conversation within the team. One of the students' tasks in the preliminary phase was to organise a synchronous online meeting with their team with the agenda of finding a name and a logo for it. These had to be related to the content of the courses, i.e. to the EU, its social, political, economic, or institutional framework. After these team-building activities, we assigned key topics to the teams to work on collaboratively during the project. We initially offered the following four main topics: (1) the EU's history, philosophy, and integration process; (2) the

EU's internal market; (3) the EU's foreign trade; and (4) the Euro as a common currency in the Eurozone. During the design of the project, we created separate presentations to introduce each of the topics<sup>6</sup>. Each team watched the presentations online, ranked the four main topics according to the team's preference, and wrote a detailed justification for their choice. The professors then assigned the topics to the teams making sure that the teams' preferences, claims, and arguments were taken into account.

The first phase of the project started with an analysis of the given topic including its background, key facts, institutions, policies, and the related issues. The analytic activities started in the form of textbook reviews and individual research. First, each student had to find a piece of news related to the team's topic, write a brief summary of the article, and share and discuss it online within their team. Second, each team reviewed op-ed articles<sup>7</sup> and more analytical papers selected by the professors with the aim of developing a deeper insight into the issues concerning their topic of research. The students also shared their written reviews of the articles online with their team members. The findings of their overall background analysis were then discussed separately with the whole group in their respective classes, providing opportunities for face-to-face feedback from their peers and guidance from the professors.

The second phase of the project was dedicated to the development of the final project deliverables based on all the team members' findings in the previous phase. The teams had to narrow down their topic and identify a specific issue that would become the focus of their final video presentation. In the presentations, they had to summarise their previous research findings, state their issue or problem, as well as their research questions, provide a critical analysis, and suggest possible alternatives for the solution to the problem. The video presentations were then uploaded to a video-sharing platform and were evaluated by the students following pre-set assessment criteria. At project close, we had an

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6. Two examples of the topic presentations can be found here: <https://spark.adobe.com/page/BQNQzzE1cYTnd/> and <https://spark.adobe.com/page/53qqZS96EZLUT/>

7. op-ed, short for 'opposite editorial page' expressing the opinion of an author usually outside the publication's editorial board

in-class discussion with the students on their achievements, performances, and learning experiences.

At the start of the project, the students signed a General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) consent form and agreed to use and share their email addresses within the two cohorts for communication purposes. During the project, we asked the students to use a third-party platform called Moxtra to manage their collaboration activities and communication with their team members and professors. Besides Moxtra, we used various online tools such as Google Docs, Forms, and applications for video and presentation design (e.g. SparkAdobe). For the online meeting, each project team used Zoom as a videoconferencing tool.

#### 4. Evaluation, assessment, and recognition

Students' academic performances and achievements in the project were assessed and graded separately at the two universities. The teams' deliverables, however, were co-reviewed and co-evaluated by all three professors and feedback to student groups was given accordingly. As the form of assessment, the equivalence of project participation to the percentage of the grade, and the number of credits to be earned differed at the two universities, the professors had decided to grade and assess their own students' performances only. Both the Spanish and the Hungarian participants who completed the project successfully were given official E+VE digital badges as a proof of their online collaboration experience and as an acknowledgement of the skills they had developed. The course credits and the evaluation scheme of the two universities is summarised in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Credits and evaluation scheme at the two universities

	UNIOVI	PPCU
Course module	9 ECTS	2 ECTS
Students project performance	40%	80%
Non-project related performance (exam)	60%	20%

## **5. Lessons learnt**

At the end of the project, we randomly selected participants from both Spanish and Hungarian student groups and asked them to provide feedback on their project experience in the form of a SWOT analysis and identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to the project in which they had participated. The SWOT analysis allowed students to assess the critical elements of the project and provide a thorough, in-depth exploration into the advantages and the challenges they encountered in the educational context (Leiber, Stensaker, & Harvey, 2018; Romero-Gutierrez, Jimenez-Liso, & Martinez-Chico, 2016). We wanted to collect information from students with the aim of creating a critical analysis of these factors from the students' perspectives and draw conclusions for the future iterations of the project. The results and discussion of the students' SWOT analyses are summarised here following the four main components of the framework.

### **5.1. Strengths**

Both the Spanish and the Hungarian students claimed that the project was a new experience for them and online collaboration represented an innovative approach to learning which made the course different than other university courses and took them out of their comfort zone. Students' motivation was high for completing the project successfully. Another strength of the VE was that it promoted the use of various online tools and applications, which they became familiar with and began to use more confidently. Students also appreciated the variety of project tasks they had to carry out. They thought that these activities gave them the opportunity to hone their academic skills, collaboration skills, use their creativity, and practise their English language communication skills. According to respondents, our VE promoted openness and communication with students from other countries.

### **5.2. Weaknesses**

Among the weaknesses of the project, some students highlighted the lack of effective teamwork and communication among some of the Spanish and

Hungarian team members, which affected the quality of their collaboration negatively. Others were more successful in managing their teams, but reported that unequal distribution of project tasks and activities among the team members was evident. In the opinion of one of the respondents, the students at the two universities were doing different majors, therefore their subject knowledge and understanding of the issues involved varied. Some of the groups could not work on their first preferred topic and students believed that this had a negative effect on their level of motivation and project engagement as they lost interest in the assigned topic. Also, students felt that they had to invest more time and effort into the completion of the project than they would have needed to in a regular course. The execution of some of the tasks required more time than planned by the professors, so the interim deadlines of certain tasks had to be extended and rescheduled.

For the next iterations of the project, we decided to include more ice-breaking activities at the beginning of the project with the aim of building better rapport among the team members, ensuring more effective teamwork and better task management. As for solving the problem of the varying expertise of the student groups, in the second year we asked them to approach the same topic from two different angles complementing each other by focusing on their own discipline and specific perspective. Furthermore, we changed our practice and allowed student teams to select their preferred research topic, rather than assigning the topics to the teams. We believe that it helped maintain students' high initial motivation and interest in the project. For the sake of keeping the deadlines, we revisited our course schedules and reduced the number of tasks, so that enough time is now allocated to the completion of each deliverable.

### **5.3. Opportunities**

Engaging in a meaningful intercultural exchange with students from another European country was one of the opportunities of the project. Students appreciated the opportunity of getting to know other cultural perspectives, especially how issues about certain areas of the EU are perceived by students in another member state. Also, our online collaboration project fulfilled its potential not only to



develop students' subject knowledge in the area of the EU's economy, but also their creativity, teamwork, leadership, and organisational skills. Some students highlighted that their digital skills greatly improved and they were given the opportunity to practise online communication in English.

#### **5.4. Threats**

In their reflection, students believed that the threats to the success of the project were the instances of misunderstanding and miscommunication among the team members and the difficulties of managing these situations. Another issue for some teams was student drop-outs leaving some teams with fewer members to work with or even without international partners to collaborate with. Students also believed that their concurring university obligations of other courses sometimes made it difficult to meet the deadlines of the project, thus hampering their successful completion of the project as well as the course.

To avoid external threats during the implementation of the project, we tried to set up contingency plans in case of student drop-outs. Also, in future iterations we increased the number of students assigned to each team with the aim of reducing the damage of any potential drop-outs and reducing the students' workload.

## **6. Conclusion**

This chapter presents an example of a TEP that offers students a virtual international experience using new approaches to learning and providing opportunities for online collaboration, which would not be possible in standard university course settings. Working in teams with university students of another country opens doors to new perspectives and contributes to the development of students' 21st century skills, which would be limited in a local national environment. Nonetheless, this case study also highlights some complex and subtle elements that educators have to take into account when planning this type of exchange.

Initially, one of the main drivers to set up a TEP is to find a suitable partner who runs a very similar module with the same disciplinary content and approach. In our experience, it is very difficult to find a partner module in the same discipline at other foreign universities that fully match our own course. An interdisciplinary approach to the TEP provides a more enriching experience and gives way to a more sophisticated and elaborated design. Curricular differences allow for shared learning goals along with the course-specific objectives and direct the focus on skills and competences beyond the subject content specific knowledge, thus requiring innovative ways of teaching. We believe that matching content modules that are taught in English (following an EMI approach) with modules of English for specific purposes (applying a CLIL approach) is an ideal combination to construct shared knowledge embedded into English communicative competence. Therefore, we would encourage university educators who are seeking TEP partners to look beyond their specific content and disciplinary area and explore other bordering realms to establish interdisciplinary partnerships.

The main ramification of this recommendation is that it requires a considerable preliminary effort put into project planning and preparation in advance, involving multiple discussions, coordination, as well as agreements and compromises. Also, trust and partnership need to be built within the teaching team to ensure close cooperation. Clear statement of expectations, equal work distribution, and recognition of individual contributions are essential to lead the project, and consequently to form a community of practice that maintains the partnership and results in multiple iterations of the TEP (Martin, 2005; Wenger, 1998).

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