



## Internationalization of Teacher Education in Higher Education

Theories, Concepts and Practical Approaches of Virtual, Blended and Physical Mobility



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Teacher education aims to develop intercultural and digital competencies (e. g. UNESCO, 2023). Virtual exchange (VE) is a higher education didactic format designed for this purpose. In this context, VE includes various virtual intercultural learning opportunities (O'Dowd, 2023). This article outlines four VE formats developed for teacher students at the University of Education, Weingarten (UEW). In essence, it provides a practical account of experiences in organizing and implementing VE formats in teacher training. The article begins with a presentation of experiences and concludes with a commentary on factors beneficial for instructors and university organizations.

Schlagworte: higher education; teacher education; virtual exchange; teaching faculty

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# Virtual Exchange in Teacher Training – An Overview of Four Formats Carried out at University of Education Weingarten

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## Abstract

Teacher education aims to develop intercultural and digital competencies (e.g. UNESCO, 2023). Virtual exchange (VE) is a higher education didactic format designed for this purpose. In this context, VE includes various virtual intercultural learning opportunities (O'Dowd, 2023). This article outlines four VE formats developed for teacher students at the University of Education, Weingarten (UEW). In essence, it provides a practical account of experiences in organizing and implementing VE formats in teacher training. The article begins with a presentation of experiences and concludes with a commentary on factors beneficial for instructors and university organizations.

Keywords: higher education, teacher education, virtual exchange, teaching faculty

## Outline

1. Introduction – Virtual Exchange in Teacher Training
2. Overview – Four Examples of VE Formats in Teacher Training
3. Comments and Conclusion – Teaching Staff and University Organization

## 1 Introduction – Virtual Exchange in Teacher Training

Teachers are confronted with a wide range of challenges in everyday school life (e.g. Germany: KMK, 2000). These challenges encompass issues such as managing cultural diversity, overcoming language barriers, and addressing digitalization (e.g. Germany: KMK, 2004/2019). Teachers are called upon to guide pupils in acquiring essential skills including intercultural, linguistic and digital competencies (e.g. Bildungsplan BW, 2016). Teacher education programs should prepare teacher students for these challenges by incorporating such content into the curriculum as well as by utilizing diverse higher education didactic formats (Neuweg, 2018). Additionally, such programs should facilitate opportunities for international experiences.

When possibilities of internationalization in teacher education are addressed, this encompasses both “internationalization abroad” (i. e. engaging in academic pursuits at a foreign institution) and “internationalization at home” (i. e. accessing international

learning opportunities within the home university). The latter often involves VE, which should contribute to promoting intercultural, language, and digital competencies (Hauck, 2019). VE is used to refer to many different teaching formats. We follow a broad definition of VE as referring to numerous learning opportunities in which learners with different cultural backgrounds are guided to collaborate online through various methods (O'Dowd, 2023). Formats can range from brief online sessions to semester-long collaborations between educators from different institutions, developing online courses or modules. Some formats include physical visits, such as blended intensive programs (BIP).

Despite the acknowledged complexity of categorizing VEs (Stevens Initiative, 2021, p. 11), this overview article presents four specific VE formats that have been developed and implemented for teacher education at the UEW.

## 2 Overview – Four Examples of VE Formats

The four VE formats were developed at the UEW during the period of the pandemic (2020–2022). Some were part of internationalization projects, while others were individual initiatives by instructors. The VE formats were all implemented in teacher education programs.

To describe them, a straightforward categorization based on the level of cooperation between instructors and students is used. Starting with Format 1, which required minimal cooperation, the categorization concludes with Format 4, where a high level of cooperation was necessary.

### 2.1 The Four VE Formats

#### **Format 1: Virtual Exchange – Onboarding opportunity for international students in a pre-existing course**

This VE format is a possibility for future incoming international students to participate in suitable online courses at a host university. The goal of the onboarding VE is to offer them an opportunity to become acquainted with students, instructors, and university structures before physically attending the host university.

To integrate such a VE into an existing course, the course must meet specific criteria. An example of such a course was an online version of the course “Interactive Competence for School” regularly offered to UEW student teachers of English.

The course was held entirely online and involved active student participation, mostly in small groups, allowing student interactions to be supervised and facilitated by the instructor. The smaller course size of 25 students also allowed the lecturer more time to interact individually with students. The course’s main aim was to improve student teachers’ interactive English skills through various activities and projects that required active student collaboration, therefore it was well suited to integrate the incoming students.

The course was organized with the support of the International Office, which contacted the future incoming students from the PdT and provided them with provisional student ID numbers and email addresses. This allowed them to enroll in the course and register on the university's learning platform. Through the course, they established personal contacts and familiarized themselves with university procedures, which helped them in the following semester, when they also received credits for the course.

Overall, it is a low-demanding format in terms of organization for lecturers as pre-existing online courses are opened for international students and adjusted to integrate them more actively. However, in this format as well as the following formats didactic skills of the instructor for online teaching, and their intercultural sensitivity are critical for the success of the VE.

### **Format 2: Virtual Exchange – International online compact course**

The goal of this VE format is to offer all interested students (in the sense of inclusive internationalization) an opportunity to gain international and intercultural experience in a digital context.

The VE course was offered by a UEW lecturer for UEW student teachers as well as student teachers from Universidade de Santa Catarina (Brazil) who study German as a foreign language. The contact between the lecturers arose through a joint model project.<sup>1</sup> The UEW lecturer held the course and the lecturer from Universidade de Santa Catarina advertised the course, as well as ensuring accreditation for the Brazilian students. Both sides decided in advance which digital tools were to be used in accordance with respective data protection regulations. The Brazilian students also gained access to UEW's learning platform.

The focus of the course was on the joint collaboration of students on intercultural topics. Students were given an active role in the direction of activities and discussions. The lecturer created mixed learning opportunities, and encouraged the students to collaborate through activities and assignments. In addition to fostering subject knowledge, the goal was to promote key competencies such as digital literacy, communication, critical thinking and intercultural competence.

The course took place synchronously via video conference with asynchronous elements (e. g. literature review, assignments, exercises, etc.). To make synchronous participation possible during the semester, a short-term format was chosen, limited to a few dates (e. g. 3–5 dates of 4–5 hours each).

Overall, it was a medium-demanding format in terms of both collaboration in organization for the lecturers and student participation and collaboration requirements.

### **Format 3: Virtual Exchange – International, collaborative, online courses**

In this VE format, two or more instructors from different universities (and countries) work together to develop and integrate virtual, collaborative elements within their respective regular courses. An example is a VE that was implemented between UEW stu-

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<sup>1</sup> The project is a model project for the internationalization of teacher training (Lehramt.International), initiated and financed by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) (see Bloch, 2024, in this anthology).

dents in a Master's English language teaching course, and those studying English at the Universidad de Santa Caterina in Brazil.

The VE was characterized by successive online collaborative assignments carried out synchronously and asynchronously by intercultural student working groups meeting outside the regular seminar setting. In addition to promoting knowledge and the above-mentioned key competencies (Format 2), the aim here was to promote intercultural team skills and project-related work. The following task structure was implemented: Phase I: Forming groups and getting to know each other; Phase II: Comparing and analyzing cultural practices; Phase III: Working on and presenting a collaborative "product" which in this case was a lesson plan or video promoting a global issue.

Due to different semester times, the VE was limited to a period of seven weeks. Since the course was offered through the respective home university, both the participation requirements and the accreditation of the course were regulated according to the curricular requirements of the respective study programs.

Overall, it is a demanding VE format for both the instructors and students. The prerequisite is the establishment of cooperation between the instructors, organizational and didactic agreements, as well as intercultural and digital skills. Also, students must organize themselves to collaborate effectively and create a shared "product" while also taking intercultural factors into account in their interactions.

#### **Format 4: Blended Mobility – International, collaborative, online courses plus on-site visit**

This VE format is an extension of Format 3 with an additional "on-site visit". An example of such a VE was part of an international collaboration between the UEW, and two colleges in Israel: The Arab Sahknin College for Teacher Education in Sahknin and the mixed Jewish Kibbutzim College of Education in Tel Aviv. The instructors from these three universities have been carrying out a collaborative VE for several years and had the opportunity with additional funding to organize for 20 UEW students a visit to meet their VE partners in Israel. The visit took place during the actual virtual exchange allowing for in-depth engagement and greater cultural contact than the VE alone would have provided. The "on-site visit" enabled a supervised intercultural and professional experience, the benefit of which lay in the direct contact between the participants, leading to greater intercultural understanding and empathy.

Overall, this VE format is demanding, time-consuming, and labor-intensive for the instructors in terms of planning and implementation. In addition to the aspects already mentioned above, there is also the application for and processing of separate funding (e. g. BIP via Erasmus+) as well as intensive preparation and monitoring of the trip. This requires the cooperation of different stakeholders, including instructors, international offices, and university management. However, the impact that the visit had on the students justified the effort and confirmed the added value of a VE, as the depth of interaction between the students would not have been possible through a short physical exchange alone. The students feedback underscored this added impact:

“The tasks in the Virtual Exchange were easy for us to work on and I have already learned a lot about the working methods of students from Israel, especially their differences. However, this excursion has raised my understanding to another level and I now would probably take a different approach if I were to work with people from other countries or other cultures.” (student I, translated by authors)

“As part of the seminar at the university, we worked very intensively in small groups on various tasks with students from Israel during the semester. This exchange and the relationships have been further deepened by the trip, which makes the trip very valuable from this point of view. The exchange between the two study groups became much more intensive. This has greatly enhanced my ability to navigate such an environment. This skill will also benefit me in my professional life as a teacher.” (student II, translated by authors)

## 2.2 Reflection on the Four VE formats

As shown, various aspects play a role in the planning and implementation of VEs:

- organizational (e.g. cooperation partners, finances, university “infrastructure”, digital platforms and tools, academic recognition, etc.),
- temporal (e.g. semester times, times zones, preparation and follow-up times of the teachers, etc.),
- technical (e.g. tools that can be shared, data protection, etc.),
- learning framework (e.g. learning objectives, learners’ backgrounds, role of learners and instructors, etc.),
- didactic (synchronous: lecture/presentation, group work, discussion etc.) + (asynchronous: text work, tasks, projects etc.),
- language (L1 vs. L2, materials, etc.),
- content-related (e.g. one topic/one subject; one topic/different subjects etc.) and
- degree of collaboration (e.g. onboarding of international students corresponds to a low degree of collaboration...).

Moreover, these aspects are not to be considered independently of each other, but are closely interrelated. For example, time and technical requirements make didactic and learning approaches possible or impossible. In a VE such as Format 1 or 2, with mainly synchronous sessions using video conferencing tools and other collaboration tools, it is more appropriate to integrate discussions and group work with the aim of developing content and exchanging perspectives. VEs such as Format 3 or 4 with synchronous and asynchronous parts and the tools mentioned above are also well suited for project-based approaches, in which participants can learn to collaborate on project work in international teams.

Therefore, it is recommendable to coordinate organizational and temporal requirements, learning objectives, content, and didactic and technical possibilities for collaboration.

### 3 Comments & Conclusion – Teaching Staff & University Organization

As a summarizing commentary for instructors, we refer to the points presented under “2.2 Reflection”. Furthermore, it is critical to point out that instructors allow enough time for planning as the process is quite complex, and, if necessary, for training (linguistic and pedagogical-didactical for online teaching). It is especially helpful if one cooperation partner already has experience in carrying out a VE. Another critical aspect is to what extent the participating students receive accreditation.

At an organizational level certain factors have been found to be conducive to VE implementation (Rubin & Guth, 2022), some of which have been previously mentioned. These factors can make a great difference in the willingness of faculty to engage in VEs. Some factors include but are not limited to administrative support, available resources, technological infrastructure and support, professional development, faculty incentives, and international opportunities to network and travel. Herein lies great potential to attract faculty and staff to developing and implementing VEs within a university. In addition, some not-for-profit initiatives, such as COIL Connect<sup>2</sup> that promote VEs are also encouraging universities to establish coordination positions. Such a position can bundle information about VEs, initiate contacts to potential partners and, if available, secure financial resources for training, technology and suchlike. This can contribute to the university’s implementation of VEs and support internationalization efforts.

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2 For more information see: <https://coilconnect.org>

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