Building Connections During a Time of Global Change: An International Snapshot of Virtual Exchange

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Virtual exchange has expanded in recent years, with more regional, national, and multinational initiatives being established. Yet the dynamics of the field have not been adequately studied, and little is known about the diversity and spread of programs that leverage technology to foster knowledge and cultural exchange. Individual educators are often left wondering how much virtual exchange is happening beyond their campus context and if it varies from what they provide. Based on a 2021 survey of global virtual exchange conducted by the Stevens Initiative, which aims to fill this gap in knowledge, this article shares key findings about the landscape of global virtual exchange, while also discussing lessons learned and implications for implementing virtual exchange.

This survey included responses from 233 virtual exchange providers who implemented global programs between September 2020 and August 2021. Of these, the 177 providers who shared detailed data on their virtual exchange programs reported implementing a total of 3,073 distinct programs that in turn served a total of 224,168 participants. A highlight of the 2021 survey, the second in a series, is its attempt to go beyond programs that involve the United States, capturing programs in other world regions and including South–South exchanges.

Abstract
Virtual exchange has witnessed unprecedented growth in recent years, yet much remains to be known about types of programs globally; characteristics of participants and content of programs; and countries engaged in these activities. Based on a 2021 survey of virtual exchange, this article presents key findings about the landscape of global virtual exchange, while sharing lessons learned and implications for implementing virtual exchange. Further, the variable impact of COVID-19 on virtual exchange is also examined.

Virtual Exchange Providers and Participants
Most virtual exchange providers were higher education institutions (56 percent), followed by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that operate in more than one country (21 percent). The higher education sector is most represented in the survey, whether as the largest group of providers of virtual exchange programs or with postsecondary students being the largest participant group (66 percent of providers reported serving undergraduates; 29 percent reported serving graduate/postgraduate students). About 35 percent of programs served high school students.

Providers increasingly reported joining virtual exchange networks around the world, with a majority (60 percent) indicating they were part of one or more such consortiums, including the Stevens Initiative's own network (24 percent), the SUNY COIL Global Network (13 percent), UNICollaboration in Europe (9 percent), and Red Latinoamericana COIL (6 percent).

Types of Virtual Exchange Programs

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) courses, a specific virtual exchange model that is developed by pairs or small groups of educators and connects two or more academic courses in different places, were the most common type of program (36 percent) reported. The second most frequent type of program (24 percent) was a single virtual exchange program run mostly the same way across several sites, locations, or classrooms. Most programs (63 percent) were offered in English only, with about 20 percent being offered in English and another language, and only 4 percent offered solely in a language other than English.

A notable change in this second survey was to account not just for virtual exchange programs, but also for training and advocacy provided by many large institutions and initiatives. While 53 percent of providers reported offering such training, this year's survey allowed for a mere glimpse into this important aspect of the field.

Where Virtual Exchange Is Occurring

While virtual exchange has clearly expanded its global footprint, capturing this data remains a challenge. The United States is overrepresented in the survey, whether as the country where the program originates (75 percent of all providers) or as the home country of a key partner in a virtual exchange. The reasons for this could include: (a) the possibility that virtual exchange is more established in the United States; (b) the fact that respondents have a connection to the US-based Stevens Initiative; (c) or that virtual exchange providers in other countries are still building their capacity to report data. The second largest group of virtual exchange providers was based in Europe (11 percent). Virtual exchange activity in Latin America is likely more extensive than our survey suggests, especially given the growth of virtual exchange networks in the region.

The survey also attempted to capture the countries in which virtual exchange participants reside, as well as the number of participants per country (a level of detail that most respondents were unable to report). While participants resided all over the world, the top 10 countries (in descending order) are: United States, Germany, Japan, France, India, Mexico, China, Spain, Egypt, and Colombia.

The How and What of Virtual Exchange

Most virtual exchange programs (38 percent) use a blend of asynchronous (sharing information and engaging at different times) and synchronous (engagement in real time) approaches. Both categories encompass a wide range of activities and applications that are constantly evolving in response to pedagogical and technological advances. The top three content areas on which programs focus are: intercultural dialogue and peacebuilding (67 percent); STEM (25 percent); and global or international affairs (24 percent). Respondents also indicated covering timely and emergent topics such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); media literacy; communications; racial and social justice; and environmental issues, ecology, and sustainability.

Impacts of the Pandemic

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With teaching and learning mostly shifting from in-person to online since early 2020, most virtual exchange providers (69 percent) reported an expansion of their programming and anticipated future growth. Forty-six percent plan to offer more programs next year (2022), while 39 percent plan to retain their current level of programming. However, the impacts of the pandemic are complex, and the challenges faced by some practitioners should not be discounted: Even where virtual exchange programs were not canceled outright, some saw a drop in participation. It is possible that virtual exchange programs focused on the K-12 student population and run by NGOs were significantly affected by the interruptions to students' in-person learning, since participation in virtual exchange often occurs in formal classroom settings.

Lessons Learned

The current survey offers some important lessons for the field, while also surfacing some inherent limitations.

- ◤ Defining and understanding virtual exchange: Despite attempts to define and classify virtual exchange (such as with the Stevens Initiative Typology), programs around the world are complex and varied, resisting easy categorization. More research is needed on these variations, in particular the presence, rationales, and models of virtual exchange in the Global South.

- ◤ Maintaining and reporting data: Depending on the structure and size of an organization/institution, it can be difficult to report data at the organizational level.

- ◤ Measuring change: Measuring program-level change in virtual exchange remains challenging. It is hoped that the continuing annual survey effort will yield higher response rates and wider global representation, thus enabling an understanding of change over time.

- ◤ Understanding the quality and context of virtual exchange: This survey focused on quantifying and mapping virtual exchange globally, yet not much is known about the quality of virtual exchange programs, including how institutions ensure quality in their delivery of virtual exchange.

Looking ahead

Data limitations notwithstanding, this second survey points to a growing and evolving field and offers a useful snapshot and metrics for the virtual exchange sector. These findings also come at a critical time, given the global pandemic, the disruptions to in-person education and exchange, and a rising tide of nationalism. This confluence of factors has sharpened the need for virtual exchanges that foster mutual understanding and educational diplomacy. Looking ahead, it is possible that virtual exchange programs will have an even stronger role to play in addressing some of these shifts, in diversifying teaching and learning, and in enabling students and educators from a range of backgrounds to develop global competencies. Data that quantifies and explores virtual exchange qualitatively will help equip international education professionals with the tools to make important decisions regarding their students and communities. ◤

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