



Stiftung
Innovation in der
Hochschullehre



LEUPHANA
UNIVERSITÄT LÜNEBURG

Feature your future: A digital and international summer school

Handout for designing and organizing a three-day virtual
exchange course

Anna Sundermann
2025

The project “Digital Transformation Lab for Teaching and Learning (DigiTaL)” is funded by the Foundation for Innovation in Higher Education under the funding number FMM2020-26.



Feature your future: A digital and international summer school. Guidelines for organizing and designing a three-day virtual exchange course © 2025 by Anna Sundermann is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

METADATA

Abstract

A teaching concept for first international experiences

This guide offers higher education lecturers practical support in organizing and conducting virtual exchange summer schools to enable intercultural experiences from home. It presents a proven concept for designing short digital exchanges. It shows how intercultural experiences can be facilitated and developed in the digital space for a heterogeneous group of participants from different study programs and institutions. As an Open Educational Resource (OER), it provides design advice, sample assignments, and practical implementation guidance in English, easily transferable to other contexts. The design and implementation were funded by the Foundation for Innovation in Higher Education as part of the *Digital Transformation Lab for Teaching and Learning Project* at Leuphana University Lüneburg.

Two pilot projects

The concept was piloted at the Leuphana Graduate School in cooperation with the Institute for the Future at KU Leuven and the Researcher Development Centre at the University of Glasgow (July 12-14, 2023), and again with KU Leuven (April 2-4, 2025).

In 2023, the event was titled *Feature your future: International career perspectives for master's students and doctoral candidates*. The content focused on the future of higher education.

In 2025, the event was held under the title *Feature Your Future: Envisioning Research Culture in 2050* in cooperation with subproject 6 *Skills for a Digital Future*. The content focused on the future of research culture.

Evaluation results

Lecturers, facilitators, assistants, and participants report high satisfaction with the course concept. They find the intercultural learning experience enriching and the digital and didactic design conducive to exchange. Although no direct quantitative increase in intercultural competence was measured, the course is recommended as preparation for physical exchanges and as a valuable component in a series of international learning experiences.

Learning objectives for students

Enable acquisition of **intercultural competence (Schnabel et al., 2015)**

- Recognizing and solving communication problems and dealing effectively with different approaches to teamwork
- Awareness and reflection of one's own cultural identity
- Empathizing with another person's train of thought and considering a situation from their perspective



- Flexibly changing communication behavior and adapting communication style to the situation.
- Effortlessly integrating into an existing group and interacting successfully in different systems.
- Targeted search for relevant information about a foreign country/culture to gain practical knowledge

Objectives of the handout for lecturers:

- Supporting lecturers in organizing and designing short virtual exchange courses
- Inspiring teaching approaches in international and digital higher education

CLASSIFICATION

Target group of the OER: lecturers and staff at higher education institutions

Target group of the teaching concept: doctoral candidates, advanced master's students

Type of content: Handout

Type of material: Practical instructions and detailed course description

Keywords: virtual exchange; internationalization at home; digital internationalization; DigiTaL; Digital Transformation Lab for Teaching and Learning; graduate education; higher education; teaching material; teaching concept; intercultural competence; intercultural experiences; future-oriented competencies; future skills; summer school; spring school; intercultural competence; future-oriented competencies; reflective competencies;

PEDAGOGIES

Type of course: optional additional offer (5 ECTS/150 hours workload)

Number of participants: up to 30 (with balanced representation of master's students, doctoral candidates, and institutions recommended).

Level: advanced lecturers

Teaching mode: virtual exchange course

Pedagogical function: The OER enables lecturers to plan and implement a virtual exchange course independently.

Requirements for lecturers:

- Teaching experience with diverse groups
- Confidence in the language of instruction
- Intercultural competence, e.g., awareness of dynamics and participant needs in intercultural settings.
- Prior knowledge of transferring learning activities to the digital learning environment





- Proficient with learning management and exchange platforms (LMS, MS Teams).
- Experience with digital teaching tools
- Competence in the use of video conferencing software (e.g., Zoom, MS Teams)
- Experience in dealing with complex teaching situations (advantageous)
- Ability to design digital learning environments (advantageous)
- Project management skills: At least 12 months' time for planning and implementation (advantageous)
- Coordination and cooperation skills for successful collaboration with international partner institutions (advantageous)

Requirements for participants:

- Advanced-level participants (graduate/postgraduate programs)
- Confidence in using the program language: Ability to comprehend presentations, participate in discussions, and complete written assignments in the designated language
- Openness to working with diverse participants from different cultural, subject-specific, and institutional backgrounds and readiness to contribute to a heterogeneous learning community
- Basic familiarity with digital collaboration tools and virtual learning environments
- Comfort participating in online synchronous and asynchronous learning activities.
- Conceptual requirements:
- Clear content-related topic as a boundary object for joint work in the course
- If the acquisition of intercultural competencies is a learning objective, then this should be a central theme of the course, and the subject-specific content should be linked to the intercultural experience (Tan, 2024a).

Optimal conditions for implementing a virtual exchange course:

- Possibility of recognizing 5 ECTS credits for participants' study programs
- Human resources: one e-tutor, one coordinator; recommended: additional moderators



Table of contents

1. Introduction	5
2. Virtual exchange as a measure of internationalization	5
3. Concept and objectives of the virtual exchange summer school	7
4. Designing learning activities in the virtual exchange format.....	8
Get-to-know tasks: Getting to know each other and building trust.....	8
Comparison and analysis tasks: Exploring diversity of perspectives	10
Collaborative tasks: Joint knowledge production	11
5. Community engagement and digital environment	12
Technical infrastructure	12
Structuring the learning and exchange environment	12
Communication guidelines and best practices	16
Didactic role of the digital environment	18
6. Recommendations for teaching virtual exchange courses.....	18
7. Recommendations for organizing virtual exchange courses	19
Organization and planning	19
Schedule and organizational phases	19
Marketing and communication strategy	21
Human resources and collaboration	21
Operational implementation	22
8. Performance assessment	22
9. Additional resources	23
References	23



1. Introduction

This handout supports lecturers in designing short virtual exchange courses that promote intercultural competencies and international cooperation, using digital tools. It shows how intercultural learning experiences can be systematically designed as a central component of future-oriented university teaching to prepare participants for the demands of an increasingly globalized, digital, and connected world. The interdisciplinary and cross-institutional teaching concept makes productive use of heterogeneous horizons of experience and establishes connections between different academic cultures, international perspectives, and personal development goals.

The teaching concept was developed at the Leuphana Graduate School. It has been implemented and evaluated twice in cooperation with the Institute for the Future at KU Leuven (July 2023, April 2025) and the Researcher Development Centre at the University of Glasgow (July 2023). The design and implementation were funded by the Foundation for Innovation in Higher Education as part of the Digital Transformation Lab for Teaching and Learning.

This handout presents the organizational structure, didactic design, and practical implementation of an evaluated virtual exchange course. It provides a framework for planning and implementing comprehensive intercultural experiences in graduate education. The teaching concepts thus offer a low-threshold opportunity for participants to gain international experience and therefore contribute to the promotion of intercultural and reflective competencies. As an Open Educational Resource (OER), the handout serves as an orientation and inspiration for lecturers, researcher-developers, and curriculum designers to implement virtual exchange formats. It includes interdisciplinary learning activities, design tips, and methodological suggestions that can be transferred to various thematic contexts and integrated into one's own teaching practice.

2. Virtual exchange as a measure of internationalization

Internationalization in higher education involves the systematic and strategic integration of international dimensions into teaching, research, and university organization to prepare students for the demands of a globalized society, economy, and world of work (Bedenlier & Bruhn-Zaß, 2021; Deardorff & Jones, 2012; Wit & Altbach, 2020). While traditional internationalization measures often rely on the physical mobility of students and lecturers, digitalization introduces new opportunities for international learning experiences without physical mobility. Virtual exchange courses are a central measure of *internationalization at home*, which aims to integrate global and intercultural dimensions into the curricula for all students, regardless of their opportunities for physical stays abroad (Beelen & Jones, 2015). Virtual exchange is defined as intercultural interaction and collaboration between participants from different cultural and/or geographical backgrounds, facilitated by digital tools as an integral part of a course (O'Dowd, 2018). In virtual exchange courses, students study and work together virtually from their home university with students from one or more partner



universities, with interactions being supervised and didactically structured by lecturers from all partner institutions.

In most cases, students continue to be assessed by lecturers at their home university. The primary learning objective is to acquire intercultural (communication) competencies that enable students to act effectively in a globalized society in which the boundaries between cultures, people, and nations are increasingly blurred (Deardorff & Jones, 2022). In addition, virtual exchange formats promote the acquisition of other transversal competencies such as digital literacy, perspective-taking, and international networking (Altinay et al., 2024; Hochschulforum Digitalisierung, 2015; O'Dowd, 2021). Additionally, as a low-threshold alternative to physical stays abroad, these formats help break down barriers to mobility, make international experiences more democratically accessible, and strengthen partner networks between universities (Bruhn-Zaß, 2022).

Studies investigating the effects and effectiveness of virtual exchange approaches for the acquisition of intercultural competencies present a generally positive but heterogeneous picture of virtual exchange effectiveness. The results of the pre-post survey on intercultural competence from the EVOLVE project show a significant increase in students' cooperation and mediation skills after completing the Ves in Higher Education, particularly concerning their self-assessment of communication in culturally diverse contexts and the application of translation and explanation strategies in intercultural communication (EVOLVE Project Team, 2020). On the other hand, no significant improvement was demonstrated in empathic abilities, the perception of language-specific politeness conventions, or interest in cultural value systems. However, the latter may be due to an already high initial level of interest. Furthermore, Commander et al. (2022), for example, report a positive effect of virtual exchange on intercultural effectiveness of undergraduate and graduate students in a pre-post study without a control group. In contrast, Zhang (2015) shows no change over time in intercultural communication competence in either the treatment or the control group in a mixed-methods pre-post study on virtual conversations between international and domestic students. Overall, substantial variability exists in reported outcomes, partly due to different measurement methods and methodological rigor across studies; for example, requirements for statistical tests are often not met, or sample sizes are relatively small. The dosage-response relationship presents conflicting evidence requiring contextualization. Zhang (2015) reports a threshold effect at five hours of virtual conversation, with significantly better outcomes for participants who exceed this duration. However, Commander et al. (2022) found no clear relationship between dosage and gains. This discrepancy likely reflects differences in the quality of virtual exchange rather than contradictory findings. Zhang's (2015) study involved one-on-one video conversations with freedom to choose topics, potentially requiring a minimum threshold of interaction to develop rapport and meaningful exchange. Commander et al.'s (2022) interventions involved structured collaborative projects across disciplines, where the quality of task design and group dynamics may vary.

Thus, the existing evidence suggests that the effectiveness of virtual exchange depends mainly on the quality of the didactic design, the structure of the tasks, and the duration of



interaction. Based on these findings, the concept of the Virtual Exchange Summer School was developed, integrating both synchronous and asynchronous interaction phases and drawing on implications from prior practice reports, for example, guided intercultural learning activities (Köster et al., 2022; Stevens Initiative, 2019; Tan, 2024a).

3. Concept and objectives of the virtual exchange summer school

The virtual exchange course combines a three-day digital main event with a six-week asynchronous preparation phase. It aims to create intercultural learning experiences for advanced master's students and doctoral candidates. The concept pursues two central objectives: At the individual level, international cooperation of students and lecturers from various partner universities is intended to promote the acquisition of intercultural competencies. These competencies are considered essential for navigating and shaping future social and academic transformations (Ehlers & Kellermann, 2019; Meyer-Guckel et al., 2019). At the institutional level, the concept aims to create a joint learning opportunity for master's students and doctoral candidates, thereby strengthening the relationship between these two academic status groups. At the inter-institutional level, the concept is designed to promote cooperation between strategic partner universities.

Furthermore, the virtual exchange concept is characterized by its flexibility and adaptability: it can be tailored to different thematic focuses and uses contemporary digital teaching and learning tools, making it suitable for diverse educational contexts. The heterogeneous composition of participants across various subject areas, academic status groups, or institutional backgrounds is not seen as a challenge but as a productive resource for intercultural and interdisciplinary learning processes. The didactic structure combines synchronous and asynchronous virtual exchange phases using a specifically selected mix of digital tools.

The course concept is designed for five ECTS (150 working hours) and is divided into four central phases. The preparatory phase begins with a four-hour digital kick-off event six weeks before the main event, which is designed to create a welcoming and engaging atmosphere (Table 1).

Participants get to know each other, form peer groups for the asynchronous learning elements, and work together to develop a code of conduct. In the following weeks, engagement with the topic is encouraged through reflective tasks, so-called *Reflection Nuggets* and *Deep Dives*, as well as readings that enable thorough content-related preparation (Köllner, 2025a, 2025b). Participants write blog-based thematic reflections that are shared before the main event and reviewed by peers to encourage first intercultural experiences.

The three-day main event itself is structured around a daily thematic focus. It combines traditional summer school activities such as international keynotes, interactive workshops by external experts, with experiential learning activities such as self-organized reflection spaces and informal exchange formats such as career talks. This structure enables participants to



progress from knowledge acquisition to method testing to practical application, while consistently creating space for intercultural encounters and reflective deepening.

Table 1. Overview of the workload distribution in the virtual exchange course concept.

Learning activities	Workload (hours)
Kick-off event	4
Program	24
Preparation	61
Reflective essay & post processing	61
Total	150

4. Designing learning activities in the virtual exchange format

Designing virtual exchange formats requires careful sequencing of different types of tasks to support the complex social processes in international, digital learning groups (Tan, 2024a). Based on established didactic principles for virtual exchange, the course concept presented here follows a three-stage sequence of learning activities: *get-to-know tasks for mutual acquaintance, comparison and analysis tasks for critical examination of different perspectives, and collaborative tasks for joint knowledge production* (O'Dowd & Waire, 2009). This progression enables gradual increases in the complexity of intercultural interactions and the ability to address learning objectives at all levels of the taxonomy. The specific learning activities of the virtual exchange format are described below along these three categories. Figure 1 presents an example of the Summer School 2025 schedule.

Get-to-know tasks: Getting to know each other and building trust

Kick-off event

The four-hour digital kick-off event, held four to six weeks before the main event, primarily helps participants get to know each other (Dixon et al., 2006). In this event, participants are encouraged to introduce themselves, share their expectations of the program, and make initial contacts. The session promotes the exchange of information about personal backgrounds and lays the foundation for trust in the subsequent learning phases. Then, peer groups are formed to work together throughout the event. In addition, participants work together to develop a code of conduct to create a welcoming and non-judgmental atmosphere. In addition, the subsequent six-week preparatory practice is explained and introduced to help participants understand the background of these activities and make the preparatory phase more relevant. Finally, a technical check-up ensures that everyone is familiar with the virtual teaching and learning environment.

See section 9 for additional resources: a) Participant Profile: Instructions, b) Participant Profile: Template; c) Code of Conduct: Co-creation Instructions and Template.





Wednesday, 2 nd April 2025 Introduction to research culture	Thursday, 3 rd April 2025 Futures (thinking) in practice	Friday, 4 th April 2025 Connecting futures (thinking) to academic careers
9 to 9.25 am WELCOME RECEPTION Vicepresident Prof Dr Simone Abels, Leuphana University Lüneburg Prof Dr Anne-Mieke Vandamme, KU Leuven	9 to 9.25 am WARM-UP SESSION	9 to 9.25 am WARM-UP SESSION
9.30 to 10.15 am KEYNOTE I How to build a new research culture Prof Dr Anne-Mieke Vandamme, KU Leuven	9.30 to 10.15 am KEYNOTE II Pragmatism and collaborative inquiry: Research impact through dynamic design Asst. Prof Dr Frithjof Wegener, Northumbria University	9.30 to 10.15 am KEYNOTE III Narrative futures: The role of narratives in sustainability transformations Jun. Prof Dr Karoline Augenstein, Wuppertal University
10.30 am to 12 pm REFLECTION SPACE I	10.30 am to 12 pm REFLECTION SPACE II	10.30 am to 12 pm REFLECTION SPACE III
12 to 2 pm LUNCH BREAK	12 to 2 pm LUNCH BREAK	12 to 2 pm LUNCH BREAK
2 to 6 pm WORKSHOP I Exploring the future of research culture in 2050 – Applied foresight capability training I Monika Volgyi, Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies	2 to 5 pm WORKSHOP II Growing into a culture of transdisciplinary research Dr Simona Pesaresi, KU Leuven	2 to 5.45 pm Workshop IV Exploring the future of research culture in 2050 – Applied foresight capability training II Monika Volgyi, Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies
	2 to 5 pm WORKSHOP III Research culture of tomorrow with design thinking Lena Bittrich, Baumgartner & Co Business Consultants	
	6 to 7.30 pm CAREER TALK Thriving in different working cultures: Exchange with senior academics	5.45 to 6 pm Closing Session

Figure 1. Example schedule from Summer School 2025 | Feature your future.



Welcoming session

At the beginning of the main event, participants are officially welcomed by representatives of the partner institutions. This short activity serves as the official opening, conveys institutional perspectives on the collaboration, and underscores the importance of international exchange.

Warm-up sessions

On days two and three of the main event, warm-up activities provide a low-threshold introduction to the day and encourage informal interactions between participants (Siebel, 2019). These activities lighten the atmosphere and support ongoing relationship-building of the participants.

Career talks

In informal discussion formats, participants meet senior academics from various subject areas and career paths within and outside the academic world. In small groups, they discuss international career prospects and professional issues. This activity requires negotiating discussion topics, actively contributing one's own perspectives, and developing a common understanding of international career development. The sequencing of this exchange activity allows for a gradual increase in the complexity of intercultural interactions. It supports both networking and the acquisition of informal subject-specific and interdisciplinary knowledge about academic research culture (Elliot et al., 2020).

See section 9 for additional material: e) Career Talk: Instructions.

Comparison and analysis tasks: Exploring diversity of perspectives

Keynotes

International guest lectures introduce key topics and offer diverse theoretical and practical perspectives from various academic cultures and geographical contexts, inspiring participants (Köster et al., 2022). Participants are encouraged to compare and critically analyze the perspectives presented and relate them to their own experiences and disciplinary backgrounds. This activity stimulates discussion of professional and cultural similarities and differences.

Preparation phase

In the six-week asynchronous preparation phase, participants engage with two complementary types of reflective activities (Köllner, 2025b). *Reflection Nuggets* are short, weekly micro-tasks (approximately 15-20 minutes) designed for quick, focused engagement with specific aspects of futures thinking and research culture. *Deep Dives* are more substantial weekly reflection exercises (45-60 minutes) that require critical analysis of academic texts, case



studies, or multimedia resources exploring topics such as foresight methodologies, scenario planning, and transformative research practices.

These scaffolded activities systematically prepare participants the productive intercultural and interdisciplinary collaboration central to the course.

A detailed facilitator guide for the Reflect and Envision preparation activity can be found in (Köllner, 2025a).

Reflection Spaces

Reflection Spaces are self-organized spaces for networking and exchange, as well as structured environments for discussing learning outcomes. These daily 90-minute sessions serve three interrelated goals: promoting networking and informal exchange, utilizing diverse research perspectives from different institutional contexts, and deepening learning through structured reflection (Chang, 2019; Fedeli & Tomczyk, 2022; Kittelmann et al., 2023; McAllister et al., 2006; Nardon, 2019). During the kick-off event, participants were divided into peer groups based on both academic status and institutional affiliation.

The pedagogical basis of the Reflection Spaces follows the approach of comparison and analysis tasks, which encourages participants to go beyond mere information gathering and to explain meanings and to discuss disciplinary and cultural similarities and differences (Tan, 2024a). An example for the design and use of reflection spaces in the *Spring School 2015 | Feature your Future: Envisioning Research Culture in 2050* can be found in the supplemental material.

The Reflection Spaces build a bridge between the theoretical content of the morning sessions and the practical workshops in the afternoon. After a brief introduction by the coordinators, the reflection spaces are primarily self-organized, thereby strengthening participants' personal responsibility for their learning process.

See section 9 for additional material: f) Reflection Spaces: Instructions.

Collaborative tasks: Joint knowledge production

Workshops

Interactive workshops led by external experts enable experience-based learning of methods in small international groups. In collaboration phases lasting several hours, participants apply the methods they have learned in practice, discuss their applicability in different contexts, and negotiate common approaches. The workshops require intensive communication, coordination, and negotiation of meanings between participants from various institutional and subject backgrounds.



5. Community engagement and digital environment

The successful implementation of virtual exchange courses requires a well-designed digital infrastructure that enables synchronous and asynchronous interactions, covers various communication needs, and supports a sustainable learning community. A recent review of virtual communication tools suggests that versatile, rich communication channels improve virtual communication relative to face-to-face communication (Walther, 2025).

Technical infrastructure

The course concept uses Zoom for synchronous events and Microsoft Teams (MSTeams) as the central asynchronous collaboration and communication platform (see Table 2). Zoom serves as the virtual venue for the kick-off session, the three-day main event with keynotes, workshops, and plenary sessions, as well as for smaller synchronous sessions such as career talks. During the synchronous sessions, presentations are shared via slide sharing, interactive survey tools such as Zoom polls and Particify are used for real-time feedback and opinion polls, and online whiteboards such as Collaboard are used in the workshops to jointly develop ideas, work visually, and collaboratively produce knowledge. Thus, the platform serves as a continuous digital exchange platform before, during, and after the event, enabling the establishment of a sustainable learning community beyond the synchronous phases and beyond the coordinators' and facilitators' facilitation.

In addition, LimeSurvey is used for evaluation purposes and structured data collection. The variety of tools used helps to accommodate different learning styles and forms of participation and to maintain interactivity even in larger groups. The data protection officer of the respective institution should approve all digital tools used in the course. The tools and the types of personal data used and processed should be described in the data protection guidelines and data protection information for participants, and speakers and participants should actively confirm their use.

Structuring the learning and exchange environment

A dedicated communication platform for all participants, coordinators, and facilitators of the virtual exchange course was set up within the digital learning environment of MSTeams, structured into five thematically differentiated channels. This channel structure follows the principle of separating different communication needs while maintaining clarity.

Information Hub

The Information Hub serves as a central distribution center for key information, with access for all participants, and communication is structured as *admin-to-many*. This channel contains all essential organizational information: a file repository for program documents, the schedule, an information board for announcements, profiles of participants and lecturers, and the jointly developed code of conduct. The unidirectional communication structure ensures that general discussions do not overshadow important information.



Community Hub

The Community Hub is designed as an open space for networking where all participants can communicate with each other (*many-to-many communication mode*), independent of the coordinators and facilitators. This channel promotes informal exchange, social interaction, and the development of a learning community. Research on virtual exchanges suggests that such intentionally designed spaces for informal exchange are essential in virtual environments because, unlike in physical learning environments, spontaneous interactions do not arise naturally and must therefore be consciously facilitated (Cullinane et al., 2022). Prepared posts with low-threshold engagement for interaction were intended to encourage participants to get involved, share personal perspectives, and engage in exchange with others in the community hub (see Figure 2). However, during the six-week preparation phase, participants did not take advantage of opportunities for informal exchange. Only tasks linked to credits were completed, and natural communication did not emerge. Based on this experience, we recommend placing greater emphasis on collaborative tasks during the preparation phase to foster informal exchange from the outset.

The Calm Before the (April) Storm

Hey everyone!

We're in this interesting in-between moment – our **Spring School Kick-Off** is behind us, and the full program is still ahead in April. While we have this short intermission, let's take a moment to connect beyond the sessions!

During the kick-off, some of you might have got a glimpse of each other's interests, but let's add a creative spin to it:

 *If your research field were a movie genre, what would it be and why?*

Is it a **thriller** because of unexpected research twists? A **romantic drama** because of your love-hate relationship with experiments? Or maybe **sci-fi** because you're exploring the unknown?

And if you'd like to stay in touch beyond Spring School, feel free to drop your **socials, LinkedIn, or any other way people can connect with you!**

This space is open for anything you'd like to share – interesting articles, ideas, or just casual thoughts. Let's turn this into our **Spring School Lounge** while we gear up for April!

Looking forward to your takes! 

Figure 2. Example of an engagement post of the Spring School 2025 | Feature your future.

Reflect and Envision

This channel supports the preparation and reflection phases of the course (Köllner, 2025a, 2025b). It contains temporary tabs, such as visions of the future for results of the preparation phase, or a reflection board for information on the preparation assignments. The communication mode is *many-to-many*, enabling participants to exchange assignments and provide feedback to one another (see Figure 1).



Feature your future: A digital and international summer school. Guidelines for organizing and designing a three-day virtual exchange course © 2025 by Anna Sundermann is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

Key insight & a song

Thank you very much for organising the Virtual Spring School. Overall, it was very exciting to see how different people/scholars approach problems in different (transdisciplinary) ways and break completely new ground (!) for me. Starting with questioning fundamental scientific/entomologic theories (pragmatism; Keynote Thursday) and problem definition (CLA; Keynote Wednesday) through to possible methods (theory of change, Workshop Thursday) and approaches in real-world challenges (narratives; Keynote Friday). A very diverse set of insights to me. For me, however, the most important insight or impetus was Prof Wegener's keynote speech - we should (or could) rethink science as a more collaborative, iterative and even more open-ended approach. I will keep that in mind for my future studies and research.

The first song that came to my mind refers to various discussions and reflections on the question of how we look to the future (optimistic vs. passive?). I seek to continue analysing the past, but aim to also be open and question this assumption from time to time. Past 'knowledge' does not necessarily have to apply to tomorrow. Positively speaking - what didn't work yesterday (or frustrated me) may very well work and be appropriate tomorrow: **Don't Look Back in Anger**.

Figure 3. Example post in Reflect and Envision from Spring School 2025 | Feature your future.

Urgent technical issues only

A dedicated support channel with many-to-many communication provides quick help with technical problems (see Figure 4). The clear name signals that this channel is intended exclusively for urgent technical issues, thereby increasing problem-solving efficiency. It is suggested that a dedicated member of the coordination team provide constant support for technical problems.

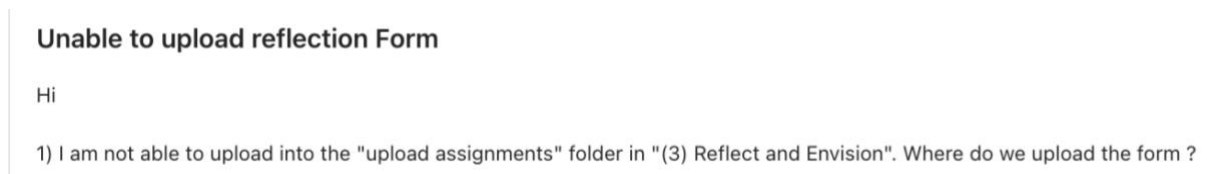


Figure 4. Example post in the urgent technical issues channel from Spring School 2025 | Feature your future.

Team intern The team intern channel is only accessible to the organization team and is used for coordination, planning, and the exchange of organizational documents. It contains files for managerial and operational planning documents.













	Information Hub	Community Hub	Reflect and Envision	Urgent Technical Issues only	Team Intern
Channels	Information Hub	Community Hub	Reflect and Envision	Urgent Technical Issues only	Team Intern
Purpose	Information	Networking	Preparation	Support	Team coordination
Settings	Access: all Communication: Admin only to many	Access: all Communication: many to many	Access: all Communication: many to many	Access: all Communication: many to many	Access: Team only Communication: many to many
Tabs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Files - Schedule - Information board 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Profiles - Code of conduct 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visions of the future (temporarily) - Reflection board - Reflection spaces- - Instructions-Whiteboard - Blog Post-Whiteboard 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Files (Organizational documents) - Operational planning schedules 	

Table 2. Communication channel structure of Spring School 2025 | Feature your future: Envisioning research culture in 2050.



Communication guidelines and best practices

A system of communication labels has been established to structure communication across different channels and guide participants. These labels indicate the purpose and expected response to posts:

-  **ANNOUNCEMENT / IMPORTANT UPDATE:** Information that everyone needs to know but does not require action (optional response: ). Example: “ Schedule for Week 3 published” in the Information Hub.
-  **URGENT:** Critical information that requires immediate action or response (within hours). Example: “ Login issue: Reset your password by 2 pm today” in the Urgent Technical Issues channel.
-  **QUESTION:** Requests for clarification or to start a discussion that anyone can respond to. Example: “ Where can I find the reflection template?” in the relevant channel.
-  **ASSIGNMENT /**  **ASSIGNMENT:** Tasks that must be submitted by a specific deadline. Example: “ ASSIGNMENT: Reflection Nugget ‘My Research Culture’ - Due Feb 15” in the Information Hub.

In addition to the labels, quick tips for good communication were provided to help participants use the digital learning environment effectively:

- **Use threads:** Post replies as threads to existing posts instead of creating new posts to keep discussions clear.
- **Check the Information Hub daily:** Regularly check the Information Channel for essential updates.
- **Clear and focused posts:** Keep posts concise and relevant to the topic.
- **Use the search function:** Before asking a question, check whether the information is already available.
- **Meaningful subject lines:** Give posts clear subject lines to make them easier to find

These standardized labels and communication guidelines reduce uncertainty about the urgency and expected handling of messages and contribute to more efficient asynchronous communication, which is particularly important in international contexts with different time zones and work cultures.

Table 3. Channel descriptions and communication guidelines.

Channel	Description	Communication guidelines
Information & Course material	Dear participants, this channel is dedicated to all important updates related to Spring School 2025. Here, we'll share key announcements, deadlines and resources. Make sure to check regularly to stay informed, as this channel will be actively moderated by the Spring School team.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read-only channel for announcements • Check daily for updates • React with 👍 to confirm you've seen important posts
Community Hub	Welcome to the community hub! This is a space for informal communication, networking, and reflection. Feel free to share thoughts, ask questions, or start discussions with fellow participants.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Network with others • Share experiences • Join and start discussions • Use threads for
Reflect and envision	Welcome to the Reflect and Envision space! This is your dedicated channel for preparation activities. Here you'll find your reflection assignments, engage with weekly nuggets and deep dives, and develop your vision for the future of research culture.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit your assignments • Share your reflections • Ask questions about assignments • Engage with others' reflections • Use provided templates
Urgent technical issues	Welcome to the Urgent Technical Issues channel! This is your go-to space when you need quick technical support during Spring School 2025.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get help with technical problems • Start with "URGENT" for immediate help • Include screenshots if possible • Check if someone else had the same issue first
Team intern	This is our dedicated space for organizers. Here we plan, prepare materials, and ensure smooth program delivery.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal coordination and planning discussions • Mark time-sensitive items with "ACTION REQUIRED" • Use standardized prefixes for different types of posts • Keep draft announcements clearly marked as "DRAFT"

Didactic role of the digital environment

The structured use of digital media tools fulfills several didactic functions: It creates transparency by providing information centrally, enables asynchronous collaboration across time zones and individual schedules, documents learning processes and outcomes in a traceable manner, promotes various forms of interaction (formal/informal, synchronous/asynchronous), supports active participation through interactive tools in synchronous sessions, and enables the establishment of a sustainable international learning community that can continue beyond the event.

The combination of clearly structured information channels, unambiguous communication guidelines, practical best practices, targeted engagement strategies, interactive elements in synchronous formats, and open exchange spaces helps to manage the organizational complexity of an international format and create authentic intercultural meeting spaces where participants can build relationships and learn from each other in a self-organized manner.

6. Recommendations for teaching virtual exchange courses

The successful design of virtual exchange formats in heterogeneous, intercultural groups requires a specific teaching approach, which, based on interviews with three experienced virtual exchange lecturers as part of the DigiTaL project and our own experience, we describe as a reflexive virtual exchange teaching approach.

This approach is characterized by several key features: In the planning phase, learning objectives should be designed to create a conscious connection between content learning and learning opportunities for various facets of intercultural competence (Tan, 2024b). It has been shown beneficial to have not only professional didactic skills but also intercultural knowledge and sensitivity to design this interconnection in a targeted manner.

During implementation, a high degree of adaptability and intercultural savvy is essential. Facilitators should be agile in handling unforeseen situations and technical problems, keep an eye on multiple processes simultaneously, and not lose sight of individual participants. In the digital space, it is necessary to convey significantly more energy than in face-to-face events to achieve the same activating effect. The schedule should maintain a balance between variety and rest periods to remain focused and engaged. It is essential to consider Zoom fatigue, which describes the exhaustion caused by intensive synchronous online interaction. Sufficient breaks, alternating between synchronous and asynchronous formats, and varying work forms help to reduce cognitive load.

A central element of the reflexive approach is the conscious consideration and productive use of course heterogeneity. Differences among participants in terms of their subject backgrounds, academic status, cultural influences, or institutional contexts must be actively highlighted (salient) rather than ignored or leveled. This begins at the kick-off event, where all participants jointly develop a code of conduct that establishes basic rules for collaboration. Communication



challenges, differing expectations, and difficulties in cooperation that arise from this heterogeneity must be explicitly addressed and worked through. Misunderstandings should be resolved promptly and used as learning opportunities for intercultural awareness.

One sensitive issue, for example, is the use of cameras: while visual presence increases connectedness in virtual spaces, various factors, such as technical limitations, cultural preferences, and personal circumstances, may prevent participants from turning on their cameras. Facilitators must find a respectful middle ground that emphasizes the advantages of visual interaction while respecting individual boundaries and enabling alternative forms of presence and participation.

The ability of the lecturers themselves to reflect is crucial here: they must be able to question their own cultural influences and assumptions, observe and interpret group dynamic processes, and respond flexibly to the needs of a diverse group.

The Ruhr University Bochum's guide offers specific tips on mentoring students in virtual exchange formats (Tan, 2024b).

7. Recommendations for organizing virtual exchange courses

Organization and planning

The successful implementation of a short virtual exchange course requires careful scheduling and coordination between the participating partner institutions. Experience shows that planning and preparation take at least twelve months, with various organizational milestones to be considered in a structured timeline (see Figure 5).

Schedule and organizational phases

Planning ideally begins one year before the planned event, with the **conceptualization phase** (12-10 months in advance). In this phase, the content orientation is determined, partner institutions are contacted, and binding cooperation agreements are made. At the same time, data protection clarifications should be initiated at an early stage, as the use of digital tools and international cooperation entail specific data protection requirements. All digital media and tools used must be reviewed and approved by the responsible data protection officers. The data protection officers and legal team of the host institution jointly develop the draft of the cooperation agreement, the participation conditions, and the data protection regulations for participants and facilitators. The partner institutions sign data protection declarations and other relevant contracts.

See section 9 for additional resources: g) Participation conditions: Template.

In the **preparation phase** (10-6 months in advance), the detailed program is developed in close cooperation with the partner institutions, external experts, and keynote speakers are invited and committed, and the digital infrastructure is set up (Tan, 2024c). It has proven advantageous for the partner universities to divide the organization of keynotes, career talk



speakers, and workshops among themselves, as this significantly reduces the coordination effort with additional external facilitators and distributes responsibilities evenly. The complete program, including confirmed speakers and workshop content, must already be finalized at this point, as the development of the reflective preparation tasks (reflection nuggets and deep dives) should draw on the specific content of the workshops and keynotes. Materials such as readings, videos, or other resources used in the workshops and keynotes should already be available to enable participants to prepare coherently. The application documents are created during this phase, and the application period is set. Before the application phase starts, participants sign data protection forms that regulate the processing of their data and the use of the digital learning environment.

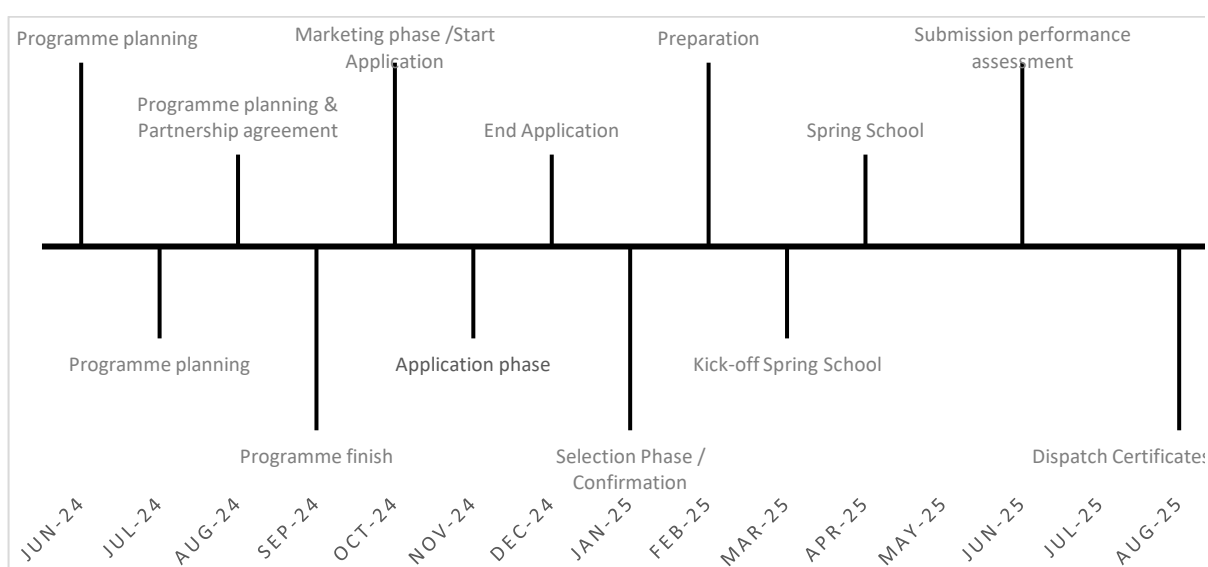


Figure 5. Organization timeline of the Spring School 2025 | Feature your future.

The **application and selection phase** (6-4 months in advance) includes the call for applications, application management, and participant selection. The selection is made according to previously published criteria, which should be set out in the cooperation agreement. It has proven to be a practical and efficient process for each partner university to first select its preferred candidates independently after a preliminary review of the application documents. The selection is then discussed in a joint meeting of all partners to ensure a balanced composition of the participant group and to address any borderline cases. After the final selection decision is made, acceptances and rejections are communicated. During this phase, the reflective preparation tasks (reflection nuggets, deep dives) are finalized in parallel, building on the already established program content and the preparation material for the workshops and keynotes. Already at this stage, it is essential to provide the selected participants with continuous, active information and to involve them to promote their engagement and establish an early connection to the program.



In the **implementation phase** (4-6 weeks in advance), the digital learning environment (Microsoft Teams) is set up, participants are given access to all platforms, and the kick-off event takes place four to six weeks before the main event. The asynchronous preparation phase, including reflection tasks and blog post creation, runs over the following weeks. Regular communication with participants through updates, reminders, and motivational prompts is essential during this phase to increase commitment and prevent potential dropouts.

The **implementation phase** includes the three-day main event with synchronous sessions, workshops, and self-organized reflection spaces. The **follow-up phase** consists of participants' reflective essays, course evaluations, and documentation of lessons learned for future iterations.

Across all phases, organizing a virtual exchange format requires continuous communication and coordination with participants, partner universities, external speakers, workshop facilitators, and your own team. Using a Kanban board to track all parallel processes, responsibilities, and deadlines has proven to be a helpful project management tool. It visualizes the status of various tasks, facilitates coordination within the team, and makes it transparent which milestones have been reached and which steps are still pending.

Marketing and communication strategy

A well-thought-out marketing and communication strategy is essential for attracting suitable participants. It is advisable to develop a communication plan at an early stage that specifies when and which target groups will be contacted via which channels, and to distribute responsibilities. This plan should include specific dates and be shared as a joint calendar with all participants and partner institutions to ensure a coordinated approach.

The host university has found that creating a media kit helps promote the event. This kit contains ready-made promotional materials for various channels: sample social media posts, newsletter text, and a poster for physical displays. The division of marketing tasks between the partner institutions should be clearly agreed upon and set out in the cooperation agreement to ensure equal recruitment from all participating institutions.

Human resources and collaboration

For organization and implementation, a team comprising at least one coordinator, one e-tutor for technical support, and ideally one additional moderator is recommended. This division of labor reduces complexity for individual participants and enables professional support for participants throughout all phases.

International coordination between partner institutions requires regular coordination meetings and clear communication structures. A key success factor is the active involvement of coordinators from all partner universities in defining learning objectives and designing learning activities. This collaborative approach ensures that the different institutional requirements, assessment systems, and ECTS award practices are considered and that the program is relevant and compatible across all involved contexts. Joint development also promotes ownership among all partners and fosters an equal partnership, which positively affects motivation and commitment throughout implementation.



Operational implementation

In both pilot projects, detailed operational planning proved essential for smooth implementation. The day before the main event, the entire technical infrastructure was tested, all digital tools were checked for functionality, and materials were prepared. A comprehensive briefing document containing contact information for all participants, Zoom access data, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and a detailed schedule was provided to all team members and proved to be a valuable orientation tool.

The following proven structure was established for moderating the synchronous sessions: Moderators were present 10-15 minutes before each session to welcome speakers, check technical settings, and assign co-host rights. During the sessions, they took over technical moderation, managed the chat, provided technical support, announced times, and transitioned between program items. The definition of substitutes for each role proved particularly helpful, as it allowed for a flexible response to unforeseen situations.

Continuous documentation during the event included recording sessions (with participants' consent), saving chat histories, noting key discussion points, and photographing visual results from workshops. These materials were used both for follow-up with participants and for evaluating and further developing the format. A dedicated support channel in MSTEams also proved its worth, allowing technical problems to be quickly identified and resolved.

8. Performance assessment

To earn 5 ECTS credits, participants must complete two written assignments, which are described in detail in the accompanying OER *Reflect and Envision* (Köllner, 2025b).

The two parts are structured as follows:

A) Blog post (approx. 300 words)

The blog post is created during the preparation phase and serves as a reflective examination of a self-chosen topic within the course topic. Preparation for this task takes place during the asynchronous preparation phase, which includes a deep dive that provides a detailed introduction to creating blog posts, criteria, and examples. The blog post is first shared for peer review within the group and can then be revised based on the feedback. The blog post will be assessed based on content appropriateness (clear description of the topic, reflection on relevance, well-founded positioning), scientific rigor (structure, coherent argumentation, target-group addressing), and formal quality (length, citations, blog criteria such as headings, visual elements, and personal touch).

B) Reflection report (approx. 850 words)

The reflection report is written after the event and asks participants to select a topic from the program, describe it, justify its personal relevance, reflect on changes in their perspective, and apply it to their own field of study or research. The critical examination of the topic and the reflection on the diversity of perspectives that arose through international exchange in the peer



groups and the materials on differences in higher education systems will be evaluated. The central focus is on the extent to which participants reflect on how different perspectives became visible through intercultural cooperation and how these have broadened their own views. The individual transfers to their subject degrees and research areas form the conclusion.

Both assignments require transparency regarding the use of AI tools (pass/fail assessment).

9. Additional resources

- a) Participant Profile: Instructions
- b) Participant Profile: Template
- c) Code of Conduct: Co-Creation Instructions
- d) Code of Conduct: Template
- e) Career Talk: Instructions
- f) Reflection Spaces: Instructions
- g) Participation Conditions: Template

References

- Altınay, F., Bahçelerli, N. M., Sharma, R. C., Atamtürk, N., Altınay, Z., Dağlı, G., & Altınay, M. (2024). Learning Life Skills through Multi-cultural Exchange. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 25(3), 294–309. <https://doi.org/10.17718/TOJDE.1356342>
- Bedenlier, S., & Bruhn-Zaß, E. (2021). *The Digital Turn in Internationalization* (S. Bedenlier & E. Bruhn-Zaß, Eds.; 1 ed., Vol. 2). BoD - Books on Demand. <https://zfhe.at/index.php/zfhe/issue/download/70/7>
- Beelen, J., & Jones, E. (2015). Redefining Internationalization at Home. In A. Curaj, L. Matei, R. Pricopie, J. Salmi, & P. Scott (Eds.), *The European Higher Education Area. Between Critical Reflections and Future Policies* (pp. 59–72). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-20877-0_5
- Bruhn-Zaß, E. (2022). Virtual Internationalization to Support Comprehensive Internationalization in Higher Education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 26(2), 240–258. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10283153211052776>
- Chang, B. (2019). Reflection in Learning. *Online Learning*, 23(1), 95–110.
- Commander, N. E., Schloer, W. F., & Cushing, S. T. (2022). Virtual Exchange: A promising High-Impact Practice for Developing Intercultural Effectiveness across Disciplines. *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, 5, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.21827/jve.5.37329>
- Cullinane, A., McGregor, D., Frodsham, S., Hillier, J., & Guilfoyle, L. (2022). Transforming a Doctoral Summer School to an Online Experience: A Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 53(3), 558–576. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.13195>
- Deardorff, D. K., & Jones, E. (2012). Intercultural Competence: An Emerging Focus in International Higher Education. In D. K. Deardorff, H. Wit, J. D. Heyl, & T. Adams (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of international higher education* (pp. 2–26). SAGE.



- Deardorff, D. K., & Jones, E. (2022). Intercultural Competence as a Core Focus in International Higher Education. In D. K. Deardorff, H. De Wit, B. Leask, & H. Charles (Eds.), *The Handbook of International Higher Education* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003447863>
- Dixon, J., Crooks, H., & Henry, K. (2006). Breaking the Ice: Supporting Collaboration and the Development of Community Online. *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology/La Revue Canadienne de l'apprentissage et de La Technologie*, 32(2).
- Ehlers, U.-D., & Kellermann, S. A. (2019). Future Skills: The Future of Learning and Higher Education. *Karlsruhe*, 2.
- Elliot, D. L., Bengtson, S. S. E., Guccione, K., & Kobayashi, S. (2020). Exposing the Hidden Curriculum in the Context of Doctoral Education. In D. L. Elliot, S. S. E. Bengtson, K. Guccione, & S. Kobayashi (Eds.), *The Hidden Curriculum in Doctoral Education* (pp. 17–28). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-41497-9_2
- EVOLVE Project Team. (2020). *The Impact of Virtual Exchange on Student Learning in Higher Education: EVOLVE Project Report*. 121.
- Fedeli, L., & Tomczyk, Ł. (2022). *Reflection Strategies and Course Achievement in Online Academic Learning Environments*. ESP. <https://u-pad.unimc.it/handle/11393/296487>
- Hochschulforum Digitalisierung. (2015). *Diskussionspapier- 20 Thesen zur Digitalisierung der Hochschulbildung* (No. 14; Arbeitspapier, p. 22). Hochschulforum Digitalisierung. <https://hochschulforumdigitalisierung.de/20-thesen-zur-digitalisierung-der-hochschulbildung/>
- Jingzhu, Z. (2015). *Effects of Virtual Conversations on International Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence* [College of William and Mary]. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/cb7c1230af98c0bb9f467583d7feb251/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750>
- Kittelmann, F., Kraft, P., & Schmid, E. (2023). Experiential Learning During Lockdown: A Teaching Case Describing Intercultural Competency Development through the Mechanism of Reflection using Different Digital Teaching Methods. *Journal of International Education in Business*, 16(3), 229–246. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIEB-06-2022-0044>
- Köllner, G. (2025a). *Handreichung Begleitreflexion*. <https://doi.org/10.48548/pubdata-2387>
- Köllner, G. (2025b). *Reflect & Envision*. <https://doi.org/10.48548/pubdata-2385>
- Köster, M., Passi, S. R., Bitterer, F., Vuorinen, U., & Karaoglu, N. (2022). Virtual Summer Schools: Experiences from Finland and Germany. *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, 5, 144–154. <https://doi.org/10.21827/jve.5.38373>
- McAllister, L., Whiteford, G., Hill, B., Thomas, N., & Fitzgerald, M. (2006). Reflection in Intercultural Learning: Examining the International Experience through a Critical Incident Approach. *Reflective Practice*, 7(3), 367–381. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623940600837624>
- Meyer-Guckel, V., Klier, J., Kirchherr, J. W., & Winde, M. (2019). *Future Skills: Strategische Potenziale für Hochschulen*. Stifterverband/McKinsey. <https://www.narcis.nl/publication/RecordID/oai:dspace.library.uu.nl:1874%2F380523>
- Nardon, L. (2019). Reflection and Intercultural Competence Development. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Business and Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190224851.013.64>
- O'Dowd, R. (2018). From Telecollaboration to Virtual Exchange: State-of-the-Art and the Role of UNICollaboration in Moving Forward. *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, 1, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2018.jve.1>





- O'Dowd, R. (2021). Virtual exchange: Moving Forward into the Next Decade. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 34(3), 209–224.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2021.1902201>
- O'Dowd, R., & Waire, P. (2009). Critical Issues in Telecollaborative Task Design. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 22(2), 173–188.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09588220902778369>
- Siebel, C. (2019, March 14). Top 5 erprobte Kennenlernspiele für Erwachsene. *Wilde Workshop Spiele*. <https://www.workshop-spiele.de/top-5-kennenlernspiele-fuer-alle-workshops-und-seminare-fuer-erwachsene/>
- Stevens Initiative. (2019). *Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report* (p. 17). The Aspen Institute. <https://www.stevensinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Virtual-Exchange-Impact-and-Learning-Report.pdf>
- Tan, A. E. (2024a, February 14). *Lerngelegenheiten in Virtual Exchange-Settings*. LEHRE LADEN – Downloadcenter für inspirierte Lehre des Zentrums für Wissenschaftsdidaktik. <https://lehreladen.rub.de/lehrformate-methoden/virtual-exchange/lerngelegenheiten-in-virtual-exchange-settings/>
- Tan, A. E. (2024b, February 14). *Mentoring/ Begleitung der Studierenden*. LEHRE LADEN – Downloadcenter für inspirierte Lehre des Zentrums für Wissenschaftsdidaktik. <https://lehreladen.rub.de/lehrformate-methoden/virtual-exchange/mentoring-begleitung-der-studierenden/>
- Tan, A. E. (2024c, February 14). *Zehn Schritte zum Virtual Exchange*. LEHRE LADEN – Downloadcenter für inspirierte Lehre des Zentrums für Wissenschaftsdidaktik. <https://lehreladen.rub.de/lehrformate-methoden/virtual-exchange/zehn-schritte-zum-virtual-exchange/>
- Walther, S. (2025, July). *The Effect of Virtual Communication Channels on Human Behavior: A Literature Review*. <https://mpira.ub.uni-muenchen.de/125223/>
- Wit, H., & Altbach, P. G. (2020). Internationalization in Higher Education: Global Trends and Recommendations for its Future. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, 5(1), 28–46.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2020.1820898>

