

# 13 The Sharing Perspectives Foundation: a case study in blended mobility

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## Abstract

This case study explores the Sharing Perspectives Foundation's (SPF) blended mobility course: *Europe on the Edge*, which included a 10-week Virtual Exchange (VE) followed by a 1-week physical mobility held in Brussels. Engaging 131 students from 30 different nationalities and partnering with 10 European universities, this 2015 intercultural exchange aimed to give students from diverse backgrounds the space to completely rethink what it meant to be a citizen in contemporary Europe. The 1-week event in Brussels at the end of the course for a selected group of 15 students created an opportunity for physical mobility and makes this an interesting case study for analysing the value of blended mobility.

**Keywords:** blended mobility, virtual exchange, facilitated dialogue, interactive online course, Erasmus+.

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## 1. Context

SPF has developed a model of VE based on three key elements: facilitated dialogue, expert material, and interactive assignments. Our model coheres with the framework of VE defined by the Virtual Exchange Coalition as technology-enabled, sustained, people-to-people education programmes. This means that our VEs take place on an internet-based platform; the exchanges are facilitated

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and continue over a number of weeks rather than being one-off encounters, and, fundamentally, they focus on meaningful encounters between young people.

These meaningful encounters between people are the motivation for our courses and it is for this reason that facilitated dialogue is used to create relationships. This element is fundamental to our model of VE and we share this with Soliya, a US based organisation who pioneered this educational practice. This focus on facilitated dialogue makes both SPF and Soliya's model distinctive.

Over the years, we have adapted and defined our model along the principle of inclusivity to take into account both the greatly increased numbers and to accommodate the growing diversity of participants in terms of countries, backgrounds, and needs. During the development of our courses, we have also explored the value of additional activities. However, at the foundation of all our courses there remains the same three key elements: facilitated dialogue, expert material, and interactive assignments.

This case study analyses our 2015 flagship VE, *Europe on the Edge*, which provided the foundation for our more recent *Cultural Encounters* series. One of the additional activities we explored for this earlier course was an event in Brussels that brought together a select group of participants to share a week of meetings with policy makers. This physical mobility following on from the VE created a *blended learning* experience.

## **2. Aims**

The overarching objective of this one-year European Commission funded project was to bring together youth from across Europe in order to foster their sense of European identity and encourage democratic participation of youth at a union level.

The intended learning outcomes of the VE *Europe on the Edge: Redefine Politics for the 21st Century* were to give young people from diverse backgrounds the

opportunity to completely rethink, from a youth perspective, what it means to be a citizen in contemporary Europe. In the context of growing youth disengagement from politics, students were encouraged to critically reflect on the norms surrounding European citizenship which are historically based on being white, able-bodied, heterosexual, and male. We invited academics and experts to also challenge these norms and created a course that discussed topics from race and unconscious white bias to immigration, environmental responsibility, the role of the media, and youth activation.

### **3. SPF model**

Funded by the Education, Audiovisual, and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) Europe for Citizens programme, *Europe on the Edge: Redefining Politics for the 21st Century* was our flagship 10-week course for MA level students which ran from October to December 2015. As in all the courses designed by SPF, it is based on the model of three core elements: facilitated dialogue, expert material, and interactive assignments.

Ten universities<sup>2</sup> partnered with SPF during this course and at this time we had not expanded to include youth organisations. Partnership with SPF meant engaging around 10 to 20 students in the course as well as contributing their academic expertise to the course by producing one video lecture in close collaboration with the SPF team. Whilst only European universities were partners for this exchange, we were still able to accept individuals applying independently from other universities in any region and of any age range. This, we believe, only enhanced the diversity and thus the learning experience. Students came from a range of subjects but mainly within political sciences, social sciences, and humanities such as international relations, languages, and business.

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2. Vesalius College, Belgium; Tartu University, Estonia; Helsinki University, Finland; Osnabrück University, Germany; Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece; Corvinus University, Hungary; Trinity College Dublin, Ireland; Padova University, Italy; Utrecht University, Netherlands; AGH University of Science and Technology, Poland.

Our partner universities tailored the integration of the course to their needs. For some, this meant accrediting the VE as a stand-alone course and offering up to 10 ECTS by requiring an additional paper marked within the university. Other universities offered this course as a 5 ECTS optional or elective alongside the students' compulsory modules. For a few universities, this was an extracurricular course without credits.

*Europe on the Edge* included a VE and a physical mobility phase. Below are outlined the activities that students engaged in for each phase.

### **3.1. Expert materials**

These took the form of video lectures by academics from our partner institutions as well as specialist practitioners on the theme of the course. In this case, students were critically exploring citizenship and each week they would watch three or four films of around 20 minutes each. The video lectures were produced as interview-style presentations by academics, activists, film-makers, and grassroots organisations who, after working with the SPF team to design the presentation, were then self-filmed by the presenters<sup>3</sup>.

### **3.2. Facilitated dialogue**

The students each attended a weekly, two-hour long, facilitated dialogue session. They met the same small group of students hosted by the same facilitator each week online for the duration of the ten-week course. The facilitator guided the students to explore their perspectives and understand the beliefs, values, and experiences that shape their understanding. In this way, the facilitated sessions were different to taught seminars as the facilitator was not there to impart knowledge but rather to ensure that every student engages equally, to create a safe space and to pose thought-provoking questions to keep the discussion flowing.

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3. Europe on the Edge Video lecture playlist (2015) [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL2bVdbBmPHDe6OQt\\_dIVdDRdkix6rQyO6](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL2bVdbBmPHDe6OQt_dIVdDRdkix6rQyO6)

This method of facilitated dialogue allows for a deepening of understanding and development of trust, honesty, and empathy as the course progresses. The length of the course follows the group-process theory which explains different phases that the group passes through in order for participants to feel comfortable enough to articulate their perspectives.

### **3.3. Interactive assignments**

These included video-lecture comments, a short presentation, and European-wide primary research.

### **3.4. Video-lecture comments**

Students were asked to write a short comment on each video lecture and prepare a question to put to their group. This short task served to ensure that they watched the videos as well as encouraging them to reflect on the content. This meant that students came to their group session feeling prepared and helped create a more fruitful dialogue.

### **3.5. Presentation**

Students were asked to prepare one short presentation of around 10 to 15 minutes based on one of the week's topics which they delivered to the rest of the group. Working in pairs, this task required cross-cultural collaboration and a chance to get to know another member of the group more closely outside the classroom setting.

### **3.6. Research**

All participants also jointly conducted a European-wide primary research project into the perceptions of European citizenship among youth across different national and socioeconomic boundaries. Through the research we created unique, real time results and there was a sense of being part of a big research project together that would have been unattainable as individuals. Students

also learnt valuable skills in primary and quantitative research, analysis, and interpretation of data.

### **3.7. Paper as a final assignment**

Students were asked to write a paper of 3,000 to 4,000 words expanding on one of the topics of the course. This was marked and second marked by the SPF team after the end of the course and the grades helped inform the selection process for the Brussels event.

### **3.8. Physical mobility**

Brussels: Physical mobility was a requirement as part of the EACEA *Europe for Citizens* funded programme with the aim being to increase students' democratic understanding and participation at European Union level. The *Europe on the Edge* course thus culminated in a week-long summit held in Brussels for some of the highest graded participants who had the opportunity to take the results of the research directly to the doors of EU officials. This physical event in Brussels also allowed a select group of the participants to meet in person, thus creating a 'blended mobility'.

SPF set up interactive meetings where students shared and discussed the findings of the research with policy makers and practitioners. In small groups, students took the lead to present and disseminate the findings of the data generated from the primary research project and took the opportunity to pose questions directly to politicians, media, and local non-government organisations. Reporting on the day, students also filmed and created a video diary reflecting on their experiences in small groups<sup>4</sup>. We were also conscious to provide spaces for students to get to know each other as people over the five days, so, as well as a full schedule of meetings, each evening included time to eat and socialise together.

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4. Brussels Summit Europe on the Edge videoblog (2016) <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL2bVdbBmPHDdqR8W4AmQLGS5sWMQw3v2s>

## **4. Lessons learnt**

### **4.1. Virtual exchange**

The aim of our VEs is to help youth from diverse social and cultural backgrounds to develop their transversal skills which the course creates opportunities for students to practise. Our skills-oriented and active learning approach (EUA, 2019) is reflected across all areas of the course from the active participation in the facilitated dialogue sessions to the interactive assignments.

The assignments included were therefore primarily assessed through students' engagement in a task rather than on the results of that task. This model of assessment based on regular active participation rather than a final verbal or written task is starting to emerge within the traditional model for educational assessment.

We evaluated and adapted a few assignments following this course. We decided that the paper neither enhanced the skills-based learning outcomes nor our inclusive values since some students were more accustomed to writing papers than others. Furthermore, rather than all activities being contained within the timeframe of the VE it left students with an outstanding assignment.

Although the viewing data showed us that students watched the videos, most did not view the video in its entirety. Therefore, in subsequent iterations of the VE, we employed a professional film company to produce academic quality films that captured the material in a much shorter time frame of around 5 minutes each and providing participants with a total of only 20 minutes of weekly viewing.

The large scale research was also adapted into a more dialogue based project. This laid less emphasis on individuals to access their networks, as not all students had such wide circles to draw on. It also required a great effort on the part of the research team to turn the data into an accessible format for the students in such a short space of time.

More generally, we learnt that where the course is strongly integrated, for example as a compulsory course with ECTS, then the completion rates and learning outcomes are high. The completion rates are higher due to the monitoring by their educator and the motivation of passing an accredited course. In terms of learning outcomes, where the course is optional and students are self-selecting, the course tends to attract students who already have some experience of intercultural settings. By contrast, a compulsory course engages all students including those with little or no intercultural experience. For the latter, the learning curve for skill development is greater than for those self-selecting students whose initial skills level is higher.

#### **4.2. Physical mobility**

In our later VEs, we decided not to include the Brussels event, dropping the blended mobility in order to focus exclusively on the VE. Students were selected based on their final grades so the physical mobility element served as a motivating factor to perform well during the course. However, the event was selective rather than inclusive, favouring students who performed well in the traditionally academic final paper. Furthermore, it was open only to 15 of the 131 students who participated in the entire programme. For these reasons, as we scaled up the course, we decided to dedicate all our resources to the VE element that was accessible to all the students.

Cost was a significant factor in this decision as the Brussels event represented a minimum of 15% of the overall budget for the programme whilst only benefitting around 10% of the participants. To take 15 students and 4 staff to Brussels we had to budget for flights, hotel, travel passes around Brussels, and cover all meals. The one-week event cost at least two times the budget per participant of the ten-week VE. It also required a dedicated member of staff to organise it over a number of months.

It is important to link the cost of a physical exchange to the learning objectives of the programme. In this case, the objective was to give young people from diverse backgrounds the opportunity to completely rethink, from a youth perspective,

what it meant to be a citizen in contemporary Europe. This was primarily done through a designed series of virtual interactions between a large group of diverse European youth. A limited number of participants were then selected to also travel to Brussels. Whilst the Brussels event definitely contributed to the learning objective and allowed the participants a peek into ‘Brussels’, this was only the case for a limited number of participants. So, whilst having a high impact on a small number of participants, it had no impact on the other 116 participants in the programme. Had we brought all participants to Brussels, the cost of that one week would have been double of all costs for the entire programme we developed.

Four years on, students from the Brussels Summit were invited to reflect on their experience. The feedback created a picture in which participants were left with a positive experience of intercultural exchange that has “definitely had an impact on my life” (Said, Hungary) creating “amazing memories” (Joanna, Greece), and “wonderful human experience for our futures”, the “physical meeting was an honour for me” (Gloria, Italy). “The physical exchange was a really positive added benefit which complemented the VE experience” (Gemma, UK).

In terms of the meetings supporting their studies of politics and European institutions, students explained: “I felt involved in a student-centred experience based on boosting independence and critical thinking” (Gloria, Italy). “I treasure the insights and inspiration I gained from the refugees in Molenbeek” (Joanna, Greece); and the EU institutions which had once been “perceived as distant and detached from one’s everyday life. To actually be there brings somehow everything back to the world of the real and the concrete” (Federico, Italy).

They spoke of their experience as informing the direction of their work life and studies: “Thanks to this programme I could understand how to mediate different perspectives, diversity and interests, which is important in workplace and job activities such as mine” (Gloria, Italy). In reference to undertaking an online MA, “I’ve been thinking about the sharing perspectives class as a basis for my decisions” (Gemma, UK).

Aboveall, they highlighted the relationship building. Although the VE was described as “a humbling and eye-opening experience” (Joanna, Greece), it was by necessity always defined by a framework of roles, topics, and time. By contrast, interactions in Brussels spilled out unhindered by the framework of the virtual classroom, enabling them to engage in “in-depth conversations spanning over several hours where we could discuss things that we were not necessarily able to bring up during our one-hour online learning sessions” (Said, Hungary). This time spent physically together helped participants “connect on a much deeper level” (Gemma, UK) and in those five days (and nights) forged “lasting friendships” (Joanna, Greece). The physical encounters “gave me many more nuances about the persons themselves as well as about their opinions, thoughts, and views” (Federico, Italy), which they largely put down to the spontaneous, informal, and natural encounters that a physical mobility offers. It would be interesting to understand whether the ease with which these relationships strengthen, happens so effectively because they have shared a prior intense and challenging virtual experience, nevertheless, in summary, “consolidating the VE experience in person, in my opinion, helped cement this commitment to and passion for cross-cultural dialogue” (Joanna, Greece).

## **5. Transversal skills**

SPF courses are VEs with young people from diverse backgrounds and as such students are learning about new cultures. This means that the most important learning is not the academic knowledge but rather the skills to be able to interact and communicate with confidence, honesty, and empathy in an intercultural setting, namely transversal and intercultural communication skills.

Our evaluation of the learning outcomes is therefore focused on the transversal skills that students develop and strengthen over the period of the course. As our courses are primarily cultural exchanges, we looked to the Erasmus+ mobility evaluation as a starting point. Students were evaluated on their transversal skills at the beginning and end of the course using an elaborative self-assessment survey of 50 questions. Besides evaluating the satisfaction of the participation,

participants' prior international and intercultural experience and their attitudes towards politics (the theme of the programme), the survey also evaluated cross-cultural competencies and six personality traits. The evaluated traits were: self-esteem, curiosity, decisiveness, tolerance of ambiguity, self-efficacy, and resilience. These traits were selected because similar traits were evaluated in the Erasmus Impact study of 2014. The evaluation methodology was developed by SPF but is based on extensive academic research on these different traits.

The findings from this course were modest but statistically significant. Given the course lasted a period of only ten weeks, this indicated a strong potential for skill development. The skills with significant increases included self-efficacy which increased by 3.11% and curiosity by 4.40% (Van der Velden, Millner, & Van der Heijden, 2016).

In terms of the physical mobility, it would be useful to have evaluated the students again after the Brussels event to see if any transversal skills had changed. However, with such a small sample this would need to have been replicated over a number of courses before results could be of value. There was no formal evaluation done but we might infer that given the intensity of the intercultural experience and the activities set up (including public speaking and team work), the participants may well have consolidated some of the skills they developed during the VE. Nevertheless, it would have been unlikely to have rendered any significant increase in transversal skills over only a week. Further research would need to be done on this.

## 6. Conclusion

This case study outlined and critically reviewed the blended mobility model we used for our 2015 *Europe on the Edge* course which was composed of a ten-week VE followed by a one-week physical mobility.

We recorded a significant increase in transversal skills during the VE and, although it was not formally measured, testimonies and observations indicated

that those students who joined the physical mobility consolidated the skills and understanding developed during the VE as well as strengthening friendships.

Given the disproportionate costs and its selective rather than inclusive criteria, we weighed up the value and impact of the physical mobility on students and, following evaluation, we retained and refined the three core elements of our SPF VE model: facilitated dialogue, expert material, and interactive assignments, but removed the physical mobility phase in order to focus our resources on an inclusive and accessible VE. This current model of VE has been implemented in various forms through the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange initiative and the impact on participant learning is significant<sup>5</sup>.

What is clear, is that the physical mobility was an opportunity that left a lasting, positive impact but was not afforded to all the students. It is our assessment, therefore, that when designing a blended mobility, adding a VE phase strengthens a physical mobility, whereas a *selective* physical mobility added to a VE detracts resources and is not inclusive.

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5. The SPF model is the iOOC model of virtual exchange (activity 4) and impact of this activity has been reported in the Impact Report (Helm & Van der Velden, 2019).



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