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مركز التكامل المتوسطي

ROUND 2

COVID-19 MED POLICY BRIEFS

COVID-19 IMPLICATIONS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Promoting Virtual Exchange as a resilient way
to strengthen academic internationalisation
in the South Mediterranean region

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Summary: Against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic, this policy brief focuses on Virtual Exchange (VE), a methodology that can contribute to solve the current education and mobility challenges faced by South Mediterranean countries by enhancing the quality and inclusiveness of Higher Education, despite the severe limitations to international youth mobility. Virtual Exchanges are technology-enabled, facilitated people-to-people dialogues sustained over time, and characterised by the unique features of scalability and inclusivity, experiential learning, community of trust, and learner-led approach.

The recommendations introduced in the brief derive from the impact analysis of the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (EVE) initiative of the European Union, which clearly demonstrates how VE can effectively support the internationalisation process of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), boosting “Internationalisation at Home” (IaH) opportunities, which are of the utmost importance for HEIs in South Mediterranean countries, and how it favours a regional balance in terms of North-South participation, far more than other forms of international exchange programmes. Notably, evidence shows the high value of VE as a way to innovate the educational offer by integrating a new pedagogical approach which also allows for wide engagement and participation of young women.

The current pandemic started when EVE had already been piloting VE in the EU and in the Southern Mediterranean for almost two years. Owing to the needed and sudden shift to online teaching, it offered the opportunity for many more HEIs to experiment the extraordinary value of VE as a sustainable, reciprocal, balanced, inclusive and ecological tool whereby the main focus is on its innovative pedagogy. Based upon the EVE experience, the brief illustrates the most relevant findings and insights for the South Mediterranean, after a brief outline of the COVID-related challenges for HE and internationalisation in the region, and conclusions will be drawn to support the argument that VE can be a great opportunity for Southern Mediterranean HEIs to face current challenges. The recommendations provided are hence meant to enable policy makers to take the measures needed to finetune and streamline VE, as well as to allow HEIs on the two shores of the Mediterranean Sea to benefit most from VE as an innovative pedagogy enhancing cross-border collaboration among staff, a student’s proactive approach to learning, as well as a greener and eco-friendlier mobility option.

COVID-19 IMPLICATIONS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN**1. Introduction: Impact of COVID-19 in the Mediterranean region on Higher Education**

The Mediterranean region has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, further aggravating pre-existing economic and societal challenges, notably youth unemployment, especially of tertiary graduates. The pandemic is deemed to be the fourth crisis to hit the region in the past decade (Yahya 2020) and frustration over youth unemployment and the exacerbation of inequalities that the pandemic has caused, could now create the potential for further social unrest. The International Monetary Fund has recently outlined how lockdowns and the resulting sharp decrease in oil demand and prices have hit oil-exporting countries hard (IMF 2020). All these factors highly require that workers and businesses are adequately supported and that a shift is triggered towards a digital – and greener – economy (IMF 2020).

Owing to the COVID-19 outbreak, the Higher Education (HE) sector has adopted closure policies affecting an estimate of 103,276,469 tertiary education students and 830,272 teaching staff for the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region which includes South Mediterranean countries (World Bank 2020). All universities in the region have been working online since early March 2020 and most government agencies, including Ministries of Higher Education, work from home, with the sole exception of a few staff working in the office (for example, in Morocco and Tunisia). This further hinders the response coordination and clear and consistent communication among agencies and with universities, students, and university staff. The overall development and expansion of the HE sector in the South Mediterranean region thus risks being jeopardised by the virus outbreak. The shift towards “an inclusive and equitable quality education”, in line with the 4th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), is nevertheless much needed in the region, as a key driver for growth in an area where the demand for highly skilled and internationally qualified workers is constantly increasing.

Notably, as clearly outlined by the Union for the Mediterranean, 32% of enterprises in some of the South Mediterranean countries currently consider the labour skill levels of graduates inadequate, and from 15% to 32% of young people (15-24 years old) in South Med countries are NEETs – i.e. neither in employment, education or training. Also, the high unemployment rate in the region (25% of which are among HE graduates) is hitting especially traditional universities, due to the mismatch between what the labour market requires and what recent graduates may offer (Union for the Mediterranean 2020).

2. Innovation and internationalisation for HE: key challenges for South Mediterranean countries

South Mediterranean countries feature a very young population (ca. 100 million people), who will be the future work force facing an increasingly competitive international market. As the Arab spring revolutions well evidenced since 2011, young people are the key players of political, economic and social transformations in the region. Cross-border tertiary education in its various forms, in particular international mobility, as well as the overall internationalisation process undertaken by the HE sector, have played an important role in enhancing the quality of tertiary education in South Mediterranean countries. A current trend towards enhancing internationalisation in the HE sector has been witnessed in the whole region, also thanks to the support of the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union which has introduced, since 2015, the International Credit Mobility scheme (KA107-ICM). Whilst this has been an important initiative, it is worth pointing out that the mobility flows were mainly from the South Med to Europe, in some cases the demand was higher than the number of places available, and the cost and difficulties in obtaining visas have sometimes jeopardised the initiative. **COVID-19 has further limited international travelling and could severely affect the internationalisation path undertaken by South Med HEIs, unless adequate support and appropriate tools are provided to face these challenging times.**

Despite the presence in the South Med region of distance learning universities and of a few universities that are well equipped for online teaching and learning through earlier investments in electronic platforms and content, and although some individual educators have invested in professional development and are hence well equipped to teach online, **the majority of universities in the region, as in many parts of the world, are struggling with the sudden necessity of providing large-scale online teaching.** Governments and universities in the region are facing crucial challenges concerning how to move courses online, such as (World Bank 2020):

- lack of internet access and insufficient bandwidth in many student households: on average, only 50% of the South Mediterranean population has access, in contrast to 75% in developing and emerging countries in Europe and Central Asia (Augier and Francois 2019), even if some countries such as Lebanon reach a 80% level of access;
- lack of devices such as tablets and laptops for student use at home, as for example in Algeria (Al-fanar Media 2021);
- online course content not available/limited opportunity to move courses online, especially for lab-intensive subject such as medicine or chemistry;
- lack of online platforms for teaching and learning that can be used in the region, because of language issues (most of the MOOCs platforms for example do not provide courses in Arabic) or because of governments decisions to block certain platforms (as in the case of the Coursera platform in Syria);

- limited skills of instructors for online teaching, in terms of e-learning design, digital content production, digital pedagogic capacity, e-assessment readiness, as emerging from the collection of practices run by UNIMED during the year 2020¹;
- limited digital skills of citizens to access and learn online, as demonstrated by a recent report by the European Training Foundation (ETF 2020)
- limited face-to-face and social interaction with instructors and classmates, which can lead to decreased student motivation and learning, affecting especially disadvantaged students in a region where the digital divide is representing an obstacle to the economic and social development (Pérez Castro et al. 2021).

Despite these substantial challenges, South Med universities have largely succeeded in providing as many students as possible with course content through various channels. But, as Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) pointed out, emergency remote teaching is different from online distance education, which “involves more than simply uploading educational content, rather, it is a learning process that provides learners with agency, responsibility, flexibility and choice. It is a complex process that requires careful planning, designing and determination of aims to create an effective learning ecology.” The commitment by stakeholders to work together to face the challenges has been notable, and may enhance future coordination in HE if sustained beyond the crisis. Also, as a positive effect of the crisis, some of the South Mediterranean countries and universities which were previously reluctant to formally recognise and move towards online education are now setting up online courses, as in the case of Jordan where the limitation existing prior to the pandemic stating that online learning could not represent more than 20% of university courses has been eliminated². This can further help to build student and instructor digital literacies, and help develop students’ soft skills (such as teamwork, peer mentoring, communications), but only if suitable pedagogical approaches are used; otherwise, distance education might actually inhibit development of soft skills (World Bank 2020).

The crisis represents an opportunity to build capacity and strengthen system management for universities, and it has contributed to a general boost of the digital readiness of the South Mediterranean region, either by speeding up the developments already happening in some countries, such as the Morocco Growth Strategy to 2025, or by extending digital services, as in the case of Egypt, where access to the Egyptian Knowledge Bank has been opened to students, providing content by grade level and subject. Yet, this rapid shift to online teaching has also witnessed major hindrances and risks which need to be taken into account, including: the inequalities in access to online classes and lack of attention to the wellbeing of both students and staff has not been a priority (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Bozkurt et al. 2020); the privacy of young people menaced by proctoring systems (Young, 2020); the risk that universities pay large amounts of money to ed-tech companies selling their services and products (Fazackerley, 2021; Williamson, 2021), focusing on hardware and software rather than spending to build the capacity of staff and students; contents which are not relevant to the needs of South Mediterranean students, neo-colonialism through

¹ See <https://onlineresilience.uni-med.net/>

² <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/76399.pdf>

educational technology such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) (Altbach, 2014; Bali & Sharma, 2017); and limitations on freedom of teaching and research (Al-fanar Media 2021).

3. Virtual Exchange as an opportunity for South Mediterranean HEIs

Virtual Exchange (VE) is an innovative pedagogy which connects and engages educators and students in collaborative and participatory forms of online learning. Several models of VE exist and are being used across the globe, providing a financially viable and ecologically sustainable form of academic internationalisation based on relations of equity, mutual learning and reciprocity. One of the main features of VE is its focus on online structured and facilitated collaborative learning sessions, bringing people together and promoting intercultural dialogue. Thanks to their participation in VE projects, students and young people outside the formal education system can develop soft skills and transversal competencies which are essential in today's job markets and multicultural societies. Educators can also collaborate across the world and develop joint projects or curricula for their courses, involving their students in transnational interactions and collaborations. Because of these unique features, VE is a valid approach to support both internationalisation and teaching innovation of HEIs in the South Med region in these challenging times.

The European Commission piloted this innovative methodology through the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (EVE) pilot project which ran from 2018 to 2020, connecting young people in European and South Mediterranean countries. This initiative demonstrated the power of VE to engage large numbers of youth and educators, as in the three years of the project 28,426 young people engaged in the different VE activities and 5,115 individuals took part in the training programmes. **49% of participants were from Southern Mediterranean countries and this regional balance is what distinguishes VE from other international exchange programmes. Furthermore, over 60% of participants were female, thus providing ample opportunities for young women to develop their soft skills and engage in international exchange.**



The EVE Impact Studies have shown that the benefits of taking part in Virtual Exchange activities were experienced first-hand by participants of the initiative, who reported growth in foreign language and cross-cultural communication skills, digital literacies as well as critical thinking and active listening. In pre- and post-

tests, there was significant growth in self-esteem, curiosity and attitudes towards people with different ethnic or religious backgrounds, and this was generally higher for South Mediterranean participants.

Knowledge and interest in global issues as well as the relationships between societies was found to have grown, while participants built meaningful relationships. 80% of respondents were interested in further opportunities for intercultural exchange, both online and face to face. The strong pedagogic design of VE was a valuable aspect, as exchange activities take place in safe online spaces, and are supported by trained facilitators and educators. The impact of VE was also found to last at least 18 months on several of the measures. Training courses for educators and youth workers were also successful and the experiential approach adopted was appreciated as it provided an opportunity to learn about VE through direct experience. Training courses developed participants' intercultural awareness, active listening skills and communication skills as well as their understanding of VE and ability to develop and implement VE.

4. Lessons learnt from the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange initiative

The COVID-19 pandemic had a dramatic impact on student mobility³ and resulted in a significant increase in the demand for online learning. According to the IAU report, COVID-19 had a negative impact on international student mobility at 89% of HEIs that responded to the survey, though the type of impact is diverse and varies from institution to institution. In terms of the transition to online teaching, as university campuses closed in most of the world this was necessary, but it was more challenging in different regions. According to the IAU report, in Africa only 29% of courses were replaced with online courses⁴. The long-term effects of this crisis on education and mobility are undeniable, as HE worldwide explores new forms of virtual learning as well as approaches to complement and reinforce traditional forms of mobility.

Students' mobility, which has been key to fostering understanding and collaboration with neighbouring countries, was already limited to a minority, and will be further limited over the next few years due to the pandemic. Experience has shown that the relevance of Virtual Exchange at this specific juncture is increasing, both for institutions and for young people. On the one hand, universities and youth organisations are searching for online learning methodologies which can foster engagement, collaboration and empathy among learners, as well as greater support in building educators' capacities in online pedagogy and facilitation. On the other hand, young people need more than ever to make people-to-people connections, at a time when physical proximity and travel are limited, learn how to communicate and collaborate online and across cultures, and to engage critically with online environments and the media⁵.

³ https://nesetweb.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NESET-AR4-2020_Full-Report.pdf,

<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200312143728370>

⁴ https://www.iau-aiu.net/IMG/pdf/iau_covid19_and_he_survey_report_final_may_2020.pdf

⁵ Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Impact Report 2020, forthcoming <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a6996e63-a9d2-11e9-9d01-01aa75ed71a1>

The main lessons learnt during the three years of work of the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange initiative, which are particularly relevant in a post-covid context, can be summarised as follows:

- VE can provide balanced transnational exchange programmes based on mutual learning and reciprocity, but it requires appropriate and professional planning, investment and support;
- Both VE activities and training programmes for educators and facilitators are highly valued and perceived as useful both by participants and by intermediaries such as educators and universities;
- There are several tried and tested models of VE which can address this wide range of needs and target audiences, which vary in terms of objectives, pedagogical design, skills developed, scalability, but share the same principles and core elements;
- VE can also enhance South-South cooperation and connections, as shown by some collaborative VE-based projects developed among institutions from the MENA region;
- VE has been found to “activate” young people, some of whom seek new international experiences and also bring their learning from VE to their local and international communities⁶;
- Perceived gain and growth were higher across most competence areas for participants in the South Med countries with respect to European counterparts, perhaps due to the links to employability skills developed and to the limited opportunities available for international engagement;
- VE is an inclusive approach, especially for women, due to the collaborative approach and creation of networks of mutual learning, and the very nature of platforms themselves;
- VE provides a better and more realistic understanding of different regions. VE participants from South Mediterranean countries learnt, for example, that many young people in Europe were facing challenges such as unemployment, discrimination, inequality;
- VE provides participants with a valuable intercultural learning experience and access to an international network. These networks can also potentially open up opportunities also for online employment and engagement without them having to leave their countries and contributing to the ‘brain drain’.

Future educational policies and programmes, as well as institutional strategies, should encompass the opportunity to offer both professional development on Virtual Exchange for educators, and a range of Virtual Exchange experiences which can bring together young people both within and beyond the South Mediterranean region.

⁶ See for example African Voice, an initiative developed by an EVE participant and facilitator <https://www.facebook.com/African.voice.foundation/>.

5. Implications and policy recommendations

In the light of the current pandemic and of the urgent need for South Med HEIs to continue the reforms undertaken towards internationalisation and cross-border cooperation, Virtual Exchange represents a cost-effective tool to be further promoted and exploited as an innovative form of online learning which can equip future graduates with the competences and skills they need in an international labour market, as well as with a higher capacity to understand different cultures. Virtual Exchange can complement physical mobility, it has a lower carbon-footprint and lower costs than physical mobility, and provides a scalable and highly inclusive opportunity to access international and intercultural learning and soft skills development.

Virtual exchange could thus modernise and internationalise Higher Education and youth work in the South Mediterranean region, providing young people in the region with an engaging experience and equipping educators and youth workers with the skills to develop their own exchanges. For this to happen, several measures need to be put in place.

The following ten recommendations are intended for the integration of VE as an educational practice supporting internationalisation at home and thus promoting a more inclusive international experience, and are targeted to policy makers in charge of innovation, internationalisation and inclusion in Higher Education and youth work.

1. A **common definition** of Virtual Exchange across the Mediterranean countries should be adopted with an explanation of its core values and principles before any initiative is put into place, and should be used in all communications.
2. A **multistakeholder South Mediterranean community** with a clear understanding of VE (policy makers, HEI staff, youth workers) should be created and nurtured through experiential training opportunities and networking to grow VE in the region. This community should allow broad participation and should be coordinated by a body guaranteeing knowledge exchange and support to newcomers in the VE field.
3. VE initiatives should aim for **quality and meaningful experiences** rather than high numbers of participants. Promoters should ensure that evaluation is built into any VE initiative and evaluate participants' experiences and learning, not just numbers. This should include ongoing monitoring during the initiative to gather feedback from participants, and interviews and focus groups with participants as well as pre- and post-exchange surveys looking at both attitudes and competences. Existing tools and frameworks that have been developed specifically for VE could be adapted, for example those used for Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange⁷.
4. **VE cannot be unilateral**, but rather based on constructive partnerships with Institutions and organisations from different regions and countries who have an interest in developing VE initiatives. The Stevens' Initiative in the US, for example, has funded several initiatives, including the SUNY COIL project, which is mentioned

⁷ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/0ee233d5-cbc6-11ea-adf7-01aa75ed71a1/language-en> see p. 66 for evaluation tools

in the World Bank Report (2020) on the Internationalization of Tertiary Education in the Middle East and North Africa⁸.

5. **System approaches work better:** VE cannot be ‘top down’ only, nor grassroots only if it is to be scaled. There should be support both at policy and institutional level to engage and sustain VE initiatives, and there should be desire and interest on the grassroots level to engage in VE. Virtual Exchange should be written into policy documents, with funding and professional development programmes set up at a national or international level to incentivise HEIs and educators to engage with virtual exchange. Within institutions, both teaching and support staff should be involved. HEIs should give staff time (teaching load reduction, or a dedicated number of hours to dedicate to VE) and recognition (certificates, teaching awards, specific roles in relation to VE) for participating in training programmes and for developing, implementing and supporting VEs.
6. There is no need to reinvent the wheel: promoters should **explore what is available**, learn from, engage with and create partnerships with existing VE organisations and institutions. Through collaborations with them, VE training courses, activities and partnerships that are suitable for specific contexts and demographics can be developed more efficiently.
7. To connect significant numbers of youth from many different countries, **use tried and tested VE approaches** which have already proven their capacity to involve young people in high quality, multilateral exchanges, such as the facilitated dialogue exchanges led by Soliya (www.soliya.net) and Sharing Perspectives Foundation (<https://sharingperspectivesfoundation.com>).
8. A **portfolio of VE opportunities** should be developed, including training for educators (see for example UNICollaboration’s training and facilitators), as well as VE activities on a range of themes and addressing different target groups and in different languages. Information about these opportunities would be made available in a coherent way, with the support of student and faculty alumni and ‘ambassadors’.
9. Whilst VE comes at a lower cost than transnational mobility, **quality VE experiences have costs** - required for the development of curricula, facilitation, training, monitoring and evaluation, quality control, technology. Scaling of VE initiatives can reduce the costs but not eliminate them.
10. HEIs will engage with VE if there are **incentives** for them to become involved. Governments should encourage tertiary education institutions to strengthen international collaborations and build their international profiles through funds specifically for internationalisation. Opportunities for participation in multilateral professional development initiatives should be developed and promoted as well as opportunities for networking

⁸ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324113574_SUNY_COIL_Stevens_Initiative_Assessment_FINAL_REPORT

Finally, it must be noted that while VE is more accessible than mobility, it is not universally accessible. There remains a **digital divide** in terms of access to good Internet connection, regular electricity in some areas, access to devices and also a quiet place to connect from. The Virtual Exchange model would work well for someone who lives in an urban area, has wi-fi at home, and can log in and participate in classes easily. But for those living in rural areas who can access only through a mobile phone's 4G signal, a common source of internet across rural areas in developing countries, it could be frustrating. This can be addressed by providing funding for developing the infrastructure, scholarships for students to acquire devices and data for virtual exchange to connect from home; providing access to quality internet in university spaces where students can connect from for virtual exchange. As mentioned before, VE can be a powerful new approach that should be included in the digitally-attentive HE reforms that the COVID-19 emergency has triggered in many South Mediterranean countries, and should be fostered together with more structural interventions aiming at making sure that the inclusion potential of VE is reaching as many citizens as possible.

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