

Universities and youth organizations across Europe and Southern Mediterranean speak up in favour of Virtual Exchange and call on the EU to continue its support beyond 2020

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Virtual Exchange (VE) is a unique and flexible form of online learning. What makes it unique is its focus on online structured and facilitated collaborative learning sessions that bring people together and promote intercultural dialogue. This pedagogy enables participants to develop soft skills and transversal competencies that are essential in today's job markets and multicultural societies. The European Commission is piloting this methodology through the **Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange** initiative, an innovative action that has demonstrated its ability to engage large numbers of youth and educators in VE activities. Since 2018, more than 24,000 young people have taken part in this project and over 250 partnerships with universities and youth organisations have been created.

As **partners and stakeholders of the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange initiative**, we have experienced first-hand the benefits of taking part in Virtual Exchange activities, witnessing the impact that these experiences have on developing cross-cultural communication skills as well as critical thinking and empathy. Also, we have appreciated that in order to have a positive impact on participants, exchange activities need to have a strong pedagogic design, to take place in safe online spaces, and be supported by trained facilitators and educators.

The **COVID-19 pandemic** has resulted in a significant increase in the demand for online learning opportunities and in an abrupt stop of student and youth mobility, in Europe as well as globally. The long-term effects of this crisis on education and mobility are undeniable, as Europe explores new forms of virtual learning as well as sustainable and inclusive approaches to complement and reinforce traditional forms of mobility. The risk is that students and youth mobility, which has been a cornerstone both to strengthen the European identity and to foster understanding and collaboration with neighbouring countries, will be under strain over the next few years. 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 that can foster engagement and collaboration among learners, as well as for greater support to build educators' and youth workers' capacities in online pedagogy and facilitation. On the other hand, young people need more than ever to learn how to communicate and collaborate online and across cultures, and to engage critically with online environments and the media.

We **manifest our interest in continuing to engage** with Virtual Exchange activities and **we believe that this form of online learning should be further promoted by the European Union** through the next Erasmus+ Programme (2021-2027), offering both professional development for educators and youth workers, and a range of Virtual Exchange experiences that bring together young people both within and beyond Europe, in both formal and non-formal educational contexts.



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