Fostering Global Perspectives in Tourism Education: Implementing Virtual Exchange Projects

MARIA LURDES MARTINS[1] & PAULA FONSECA[1]

[1]Instituto Politécnico de Viseu

Contacting author: lurdesmartins@estgv.ipv.pt

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Objectives | This study outlines a comprehensive strategy for integrating virtual exchange (VE) projects into a tourism undergraduate degree program. The approach spans three years, progressively engaging students in immersive cross-cultural experiences. This study describes the strategy underlying the integration of three distinct and structured semester-long VE projects into three different language courses of a tourism undergraduate degree program. The primary goals are to incrementally involve students in cross-cultural experiences, starting with sensory exploration in their local context, advancing to critical dialogues on decolonization, and culminating in a multidisciplinary exploration of sustainability issues. Through this phased approach, we aim to cultivate students' intercultural competence, deepen their global perspectives, and equip them with the skills necessary to approach sustainability challenges from a diverse and multidisciplinary standpoint.

Methodology | The research employed a case study approach, focusing on a Design Thinking workshop that brought together 24 higher education students from the aforementioned countries. This workshop, conducted in Germany in May 2023, served as a follow-up to a semester-long virtual exchange project centered around sustainability. Data was collected through a combination of observations, participant reflections, and artifacts generated during the five distinct phases of the workshop. These phases—Orientation, Cultural Awareness, Sustainability & Environmental Issues, Design Thinking Charrette, and Charrette Presentation—provided a rich context for understanding the participants' learning journey.

The three projects outlined below were meticulously implemented to enrich the educational experience within English language courses of the tourism undergraduate degree program. These projects are strategically implemented to align with the progression of students' linguistic proficiency and cultural understanding, ensuring a seamless integration into the curriculum.

Year 1: Sensory Exploration of Local Contexts

In the initial year, students embark on a VE centered on exploring sensory experiences within their local environment. This is achieved through a combination of field visits, guided activities, and online

collaboration with international peers. Through digital platforms, students share their observations and reflections, creating a rich tapestry of cultural insights. This phase emphasizes observation, reflection, and effective communication skills.

Year 2: Building Bridges Across Continents (BBAC)

The second-year project, BBAC, delves into the nuanced conversations surrounding decolonization. Students engage in structured dialogues, critically examining tourism narratives, and identifying opportunities to dismantle colonial legacies. The VE format facilitates candid exchanges with peers from diverse backgrounds, promoting empathy and deeper cultural understanding. This phase emphasizes critical thinking, cross-cultural communication, and perspective-taking skills.

Year 3: ProGlobe - Sustainability in Multidisciplinary Lens

The third year introduces the ProGlobe project, a multidisciplinary endeavor focused on sustainability. Students investigate sustainability issues through the lens of their respective disciplines (e.g., tourism, international business, interior design). Through VE, they collaborate with peers worldwide, sharing insights, methodologies, and solutions. This phase promotes cross-disciplinary collaboration, analytical thinking, and a holistic approach to sustainable tourism.

Main Results and Contributions | The three VE projects have yielded substantial benefits. These initiatives have significantly enhanced students' language proficiency, crucial for effective global communication in the tourism industry. Additionally, students have developed heightened cultural sensitivity and intercultural competence, essential skills for navigating diverse cultural contexts. The projects, particularly BBAC, have sharpened critical thinking abilities, enabling students to critically assess prevailing narratives and consider alternative perspectives. Furthermore, the ProGlobe project's multidisciplinary approach to sustainability has equipped students with a comprehensive understanding of this critical facet of the tourism industry. This combination of language proficiency, intercultural competence, critical thinking, and sustainability awareness positions graduates as valuable assets to employers in the tourism sector, uniquely preparing them for the demands of the evolving global industry.

Limitations | While the VE projects have been highly successful, certain limitations exist. These include logistical challenges related to time zones, technological constraints, and project management skills. Additionally, the depth of cultural immersion may vary depending on individual student engagement levels.

Conclusions | The integration of VE projects into the tourism undergraduate degree program has proven to be a transformative educational endeavor. By progressively immersing students in cross-cultural experiences, we have observed a significant enhancement in their global perspectives, critical thinking abilities, and collaborative skills. Despite minor limitations, the benefits far outweigh the

challenges. This model serves as a valuable blueprint for other institutions seeking to implement similar initiatives, ultimately enriching the educational experiences of future tourism professionals.

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