

## **Virtual Balkans**

# Virtual Collaborative Learning in Higher Education

Book of Abstracts of the VALEU-X

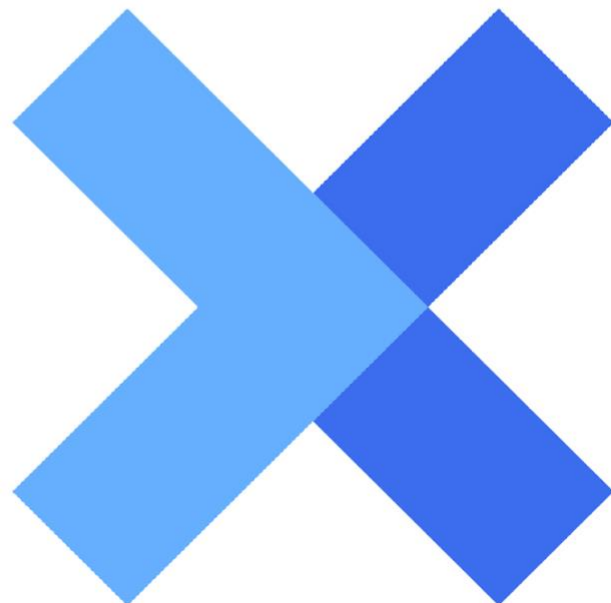
International Conference

Tirana, Albania & Online

30 November 2022



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## Virtual Balkans: Virtual Collaborative Learning in Higher Education

Book of Abstracts of the VALEU-X International Conference  
Tirana, Albania & Online, 30 November 2022

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More information on the VALEU-X project can be found at [www.valeu-x.eu](http://www.valeu-x.eu)



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**Dr. Fatri Morina**, European University of Tirana, Albania

**Dr. Eriola Qafzezi**, "Fan S. Noli" University, Albania



# Introduction

The International Conference “Virtual Balkans. Virtual Collaborative Learning in Higher Education” held on November 30, 2022, at EPOKA University, Albania, is also the final activity of the VALEU-X Project (<https://valeu-x.eu/>) and it is organised *on-site*, with both *hybrid* and fully *online* sessions. The conference is co-organised by EPOKA University and UNIMED, Mediterranean Universities Union, with the contribution of all the project consortium partners.

The VALEU-X project aimed to add a significant value to the teaching process in Albania by empowering academic staff with contemporary teaching competencies, by introducing innovative pedagogical approaches like Virtual Collaborative Learning, as a hybrid learning arrangement combining elements of blended learning, flipped classroom, which in turn addresses the development of soft skills central components of 21st Century Skills. The VALEU-X project, co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union, was implemented by a consortium composed of 9 institutions from Albania, Germany, Italy, and Slovenia.

This international conference gathers researchers with their original contributions of empirical, conceptual, or experimental research work in the broad area of virtual collaborative learning. Furthermore, managing authorities of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), teaching staff, students, trainees, international relations offices from Albania and the European Union and other important actors to discuss:

- innovative virtual teaching and learning settings for academic staff at Albanian HEIs,
- ICT-based internationalisation at home, virtual mobility/exchange,
- adaptation and recognising virtual/blended mobility as part of HEIs' internationalisation strategy.

Lessons learned and best practices emerged from the VALEU-X project are shared by the project's consortium aiming to raise awareness and attention to the importance of Virtual Collaborative Learning.

The conference is opened by the *Plenary Session*, dedicated to Welcome Notes from distinguished guests, and the Keynote Speech of the conference. Afterwards, participants are invited to the 4 *Parallel Thematic Sessions* of the conference where 27 research papers that passed the Scientific Committee peer review process are presented. The conference is organised in 2 on-site sessions and with both 1 hybrid and 1 fully online session, a novelty in terms of conference organisational technicalities and increased capacities stemming from the successful achievement of the project objectives. A *Synergy Session* is also planned where other EU-funded projects will present their objectives and activities, designed as a platform for the development of joint actions and exchange of good practices beyond the VALEU-X project.

The Conference is concluded by a Wrap-up and closing remarks by the Conference Chair and Thematic Session Chairs.

**Dr. Esmir Demaj**

*Conference Chair, EPOKA University*



# Foreword

This conference concludes almost three years of a very successful international cooperation between HEIs (higher education institutions) from Albania, Slovenia, Italy and Germany: VALEU-X – Virtual Albanian European Universities Exchange. My thanks go to all colleagues and students of the participating partner universities, and especially to my TU Dresden team for organisation, qualification and ongoing support of multiple activities.

The main objective of our Erasmus+ capacity building project has been to foster the integration of Albanian HEIs into today's European Union's HE system. As key instrument for the intended integration we had chosen virtual exchange between European HE students – long before the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 forced (and convinced) most of us to refer to the digital option for keeping educational processes running, and improving.

Virtual exchange extends the potential of virtual mobility as a mere substitute of physical mobility of students in the European HE area. Students communicate and collaborate on given tasks to jointly develop their competencies in orientation to suitable learning goals in formal learning settings. They learn from each other and achieve not only new professional skills and methods, but also new perspectives due to differing cultural backgrounds, study programs and specialisations. This specific implementation of general COIL (collaborative online international learning) approaches we call VCL = virtual collaborative learning.

Based on TU Dresden's established VCL Framework, proven over many years, educators, tutors and students from 6 Albanian universities learned how to design, implement and execute virtual exchange projects in orientation on 4 intertwined perspectives: (1) Complex, authentic real-world case-scenarios are the source for specific tasks which have to be solved in internationally mixed students teams. Their 8-10 weeks lasting learning processes are accompanied by (2) specially trained e-tutors and (3) take place on a powerful collaboration platform – MS Teams. (4) Social learning analytics generates objective data to support pedagogical decisions and interventions via information visualisation, provided by conversational agents.

## **What did we achieve?**

In 2020, being forced to online-only project activities, a needs assessment report on virtual collaborative teaching and learning in Albania was produced. Its findings formed the focus of the subsequent project activities. In 2021, students from the 6 Albanian partner HEIs were trained as e-tutors and had their first trial in local VCL projects. In 2022, a motivating case (Albanias next unicorn – design of a business model for eco-tourism in Albania) was designed, implemented and successfully executed as an international VCL project with more than 80 students from 8 HEIs participating, organised in mixed teams and collaborating for 6 weeks under the careful guidance of e-tutors. This central project event has been complemented by staff trainings at the 6 Albanian HEIs by the European partners and this final conference.

What is next? In 2023, a new Erasmus + capacity building project (COWEB, under leadership of EPOKA, AL) with 10 partners from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Slovenia, Italy and Germany will start and extend VALEU-X's results to a broader Western



Balkan region. From 2023-2025, on the basis of an ERASMUS + KA171 cooperation between TU Dresden and EPOKA Univ., long- and short-term physical and digital exchanges of students and educators will take place. Last, but not least, TU Dresden together with our VALEU-X partner from Slovenia and further partners from Lithuania and Austria expands the scope of VCL projects by an Erasmus + strategic partnership cooperation (OER-Codex) on providing OER (Open Educational Resources) which describe the didactical, organisational and technical issues of collaborative online learning. The OER shall be shared with HE educators interested in the application of virtual exchange projects.

Today we are very happy to present the results of our common project work in forms of project reports and presentations, embedded into a set of many valuable scientific papers. They provide a broad background for collaborative online international learning by multiple perspectives: pedagogics, psychology, organisation; management, and information technology. We look forward to fruitful discussions, valuable learnings and convincing recommendations for action for the upcoming political decisions in Albania.

**Prof. Dr. rer. pol. habil. Eric Schoop**, head of the Chair of Information Management,  
*Faculty of Business and Economics, TU Dresden, Germany*



# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Foreword</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Session 1: Innovative virtual teaching and learning settings for academic staff at Albanian HEIs</b>	<b>9</b>
Online Collaborative Learning in Higher Education in Albania - Some Necessary Innovations	10
Assessing Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL) as an Innovative Teaching and Learning Approach. A Case Application in Albania	11
Challenges of University - Industry cooperation in Albania	12
The implementation of the pilot local virtual collaborative learning in the module of botany in the framework of the VALEU-X project	13
<b>Session 2: ICT-based internalisation at home and the global network for “Virtual Mobility” for the HEIs</b>	<b>14</b>
Project "Entral" a new synergy towards the digital age	15
Alternative Flipped Learning Approach scaffolding student engagement and collaboration. A case study with ELT Master students in “Corpora in Applied Linguistics” Subject	16
The opportunities for applying the Virtual Collaborative Learning in Higher Education in North Macedonia	17
Designing and Facilitating Cross-Border Virtual Collaborative Learning Experiences: A Western Balkans Case Study	18
<b>Session 3: Adopting and recognising Virtual/Blended Mobility as part of the HEIs’ internalisation strategy for the administrative staff- hybrid</b>	<b>19</b>
Student-Centred Learning Practices: A Transition from Tradition to Innovation	20
The challenge of "Virtual Teaching" for sustainable learning even for students with special needs (case study for blind students)	21
Students’ English Language Development through the International VCL module of the VALEU-X project	22
Implementation of Virtual Mobility and Internationalization at Home in Albania’s Higher Education: A Catalogue of Recommendations for Action	23
Lessons Learned from an International and Interdisciplinary Virtual Collaborative Learning Module with 8 Institutions from the facilitator’s perspective	25
<b>Session 4: Online presentations &amp; discussion on Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)</b>	<b>27</b>
Collaboration between teachers in a Metaverse education	28
Internationalisation at Home through Virtual Collaborative Learning	29
Virtual learning, a new approach for the Albanian universities. A case of linguistics learning	30
Investigating reflection sheets to improve Virtual Collaborative Learning in higher education	31
Competence equipment of modern virtual community members	33
Collaborative learning and teaching in Miro - design of digital education using a collaboration platform	35
Can machine learning support eTutors in an online formal collaborative learning setting?	36
Impact of COVID-19 on College Students’ Psychological Condition	38
Socialization and distance learning challenges	39
How to foster 21st century skills in European Higher Education: Open Educational Resources for Collaborative Online & Distance Education and eXchange (OER-CODEX)	40



<b>Synergy Workshop</b>	<b>42</b>
MED2IaH - MEDiterranean countries: Towards Internationalisation at Home	43
FRAMES - Fostering resilience through Accredited Mobility for European Sustainable Higher Education innovation	46
Vtech - Accelerating Western Balkans University Modernization by Incorporating Virtual Technologies	48
COWEB - Promoting and Facilitating Collaborative Virtual International Learning in the Western Balkans' Higher Education Institutions	50
<b>List of Authors</b>	<b>52</b>





# Session 1: Innovative virtual teaching and learning settings for academic staff at Albanian HEIs



# Online Collaborative Learning in Higher Education in Albania - Some Necessary Innovations

Eriola Qafzezi, Department of Foreign Languages Faculty of Education and Philology, Fan

S. Noli University, Korça, Albania

eqafzezi[AT]unkorce.edu.al

**Abstract.** The current era of globalisation calls for necessary changes and adaptations in all aspects of life, education being one of the key areas in need of constant development and innovation. One of the priorities of higher education institutions is internationalisation and increase of mobilities so as to maximise opportunities for further development and sustainability. This article aims to illustrate current trends of internationalisation of higher education institutions through online collaborative learning by involving students in a case study. The first part of the article will outline the necessity to bring innovative trends in teaching and learning in higher institutions in order to fulfil a gap that has been observed in Albanian educational institutions, especially after the pandemic outbreak of COVID-19 and the necessity to teach and learn online. The second part of the article will be enriched with some concrete examples that show the benefits of online collaborative learning through the implementation of case studies at Bachelor level at Fan S. Noli University, Korca, Albania (UNIKO). The article will be completed with some conclusions referring to online collaborative learning through case study, as an innovative trend to be embraced in higher education institutions, together with all the necessary requirements that such an approach demands.

**Keywords:** *online, collaborative, learning, case study, internationalisation, innovative, higher, education.*



# Assessing Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL) as an Innovative Teaching and Learning Approach. A Case Application in Albania

**Griselda Alushllari**, EPOKA University, Albania, galushllari19[AT]epoka.edu.al

**Esmir Demaj**, PhD, EPOKA University, Albania, edemaj[AT]epoka.edu.al

**Abstract.** Until the 1990s face-to-face learning was the standard approach for education. In 1999, 29 EU nations signed the Bologna Charter where for the first time, a uniformed, standardised, and unified structure for the European university system was created. The strategic mission of HEIs in Europe has been impacted by the Bologna Process. The key components of this plan involved student and staff mobility, relevant exchange programs, joint cooperation projects, and scientific research. In the context of internationalisation and standardisation of HEIs, providing for the physical movement of all staff and students is extremely difficult.

Virtual exchange and virtual mobility, including Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL), are considered as very important breakthroughs in the educational system since the mid-2000s. The case study elaborated here, which aimed to develop a virtual module within existing traditional courses using the MS Teams platform in HEIs, was based on this context. Its implementation was a completely new experience for the university settings. Following the completion of the module's implementation using the VCL approach, student participants gave their feedback on their experiences, learning objectives gained and any challenges they encountered.

Data obtained from the survey shows that the implementation of the VCL model alongside its challenges, is generally well-acknowledged and considered a positive experience. Majority of respondents, 93% of the students who participated in the survey, highly recommend VCL as a new approach in learning. Communication issues are noticed particularly at first when students are trying to get accustomed to this model. Some of the respondents claimed the VCL model made it difficult for them to express themselves freely and that it isolated them from their social lives.

Beyond its obstacles and challenges, Virtual Collaborative Learning course activities and modules incorporated in higher education contribute significantly to the development of the curricula, modules, and programs to match EU standards, as well as in enhancing relationships between partner HEIs.

**Keywords:** *VCL, HEIs, Virtual Mobility, Virtual Exchange, Bologna Charter*



# Challenges of University - Industry cooperation in Albania

**Ketrina Mijo Çabiri**, European University of Tirana, Albania, ketrina.cabiri[AT]uet.edu.al

**Ermira Qosja**, European University of Tirana, Albania, eqosja[AT]yahoo.com

**Abstract.** Universities are not only the main generators of knowledge, but they also represent an important instrument of economic growth, especially when they effectively interact with business and industry. Scientific research is considered an important source of knowledge that can be used both locally and globally, but at the same time good research ideas can be considered as a source of income for universities. Albanian universities have a rigid experience especially when it comes to their effort to become competitive and respond to market demands. Today, it is a necessity for Albanian universities to become dynamic academic units, to go on an entrepreneurial path and to affect innovation in the region and beyond.

This paper aims to measure the perception of university management staff regarding the challenges and barriers that appear in university-industry cooperation. Using qualitative methods of data analysis of questionnaires and interviews distributed on behalf of Erasmus+ CBHE KALCEA project<sup>1</sup>, this study tries to identify the main factors that increase and hinder the cooperation of universities and industry. Also, it shed light to the identification of factors that motivate the academic staff toward such cooperation. The findings of the paper have interest in universities, industry, and politicians.

**Keywords:** *university-industry collaboration, challenges, scientific research, universities, Albania.*

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<sup>1</sup> Project number 618109-EPP-1-2020-1-EL-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP



# The implementation of the pilot local virtual collaborative learning in the module of botany in the framework of the VALEU-X project

**Arselida Mashaj**, University of Shkodra, Albania, arselida.mashaj[AT]unishk.edu.al

**Ariana Laçe**j, University of Shkodra, Albania, ariana.lacej[AT]unishk.edu.al

**Suzana Golemi**, University of Shkodra, Albania, suzana.golemi[AT]unishk.edu.al

**Abstract.** Virtual collaborative learning (VCL) is an educational research area of a particular interest. Lately During the years 2020-2022, a group-learning project in the virtual classrooms at the Chair of Business Informatics Technical University of Dresden, Germany has been implemented in 6 Albanian HEIs one of which is the University of Shkodra. Valeu-X started in 2020 in the University of Shkodra with a pilot local VCL. Virtual collaborative learning (VCL) was implemented in a 4-week module of the Botany subject. 16 students took part in this module of Botany and the language applied was Albanian. All course study materials were deposited in the virtual platform we used for the VCL, MS Team. 3 Meetings were conducted, during which we used Power Point Presentation, Miro Board, Slido and Tricider Apps for discussions. Most of the students finished the tasks in the application used. They enjoyed the use of these applications during meetings. It increased the interactivity. The attendance during the online meetings was high. The learning objectives have been achieved. All the students passed the MS Form exam, and 7 students earned the maximum number of points. The assignments were delivered in time. In conclusion the pilot local VCL in the module of Botany subject was successfully implemented.

**Keywords:** *Virtual collaborative learning, synchronous online activity, asynchronous online activity, VALEU-X project*



## Session 2: ICT-based internalisation at home and the global network for “Virtual Mobility” for the HEIs



## Project "Entral" a new synergy towards the digital age

**Donalda Lacej**, Department of Biochemistry, University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi", Albania  
donalda.lacej[AT]unishk.edu.al

**Hajrije Dibra**, Central of the waters, University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi", Albania  
hajrije.dibra[AT]unishk.edu.al

**Zamira Shkreli**, Central of Albanian studies, University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi", Albania  
zamira.shkreli[AT]unishk.edu.al

**Abstract.** Our work aims to address the possibilities that appear today as a need for time; interaction between projects and online learning as an efficient way. They are located opposite the two projects: Entral where we are part, as academic staff and VALEU-X which we have followed through our training and participation in online meetings.

This presentation aims to create a mirror of possibilities and will answer some of the questions we ask through our abstraction.

"Entral" project represents the relationships students can have with teaching, but these knowledge enables the latter to translate the concepts they receive into service and in adaptation to the labour market. So we obtain at once entrepreneurs and scholars or economists of a certain enterprise. They are also trained in certain modules to treat your colleagues and students at the same time. Entral Models include: Modules for pre-university teachers. Two modules presented: (1) Entrepreneurship in Primary Education, and (2) Entrepreneurship in Secondary Education. Module for university students: Entrepreneurship for students. Module for university teachers.

VALEU-X addresses the limited exposure of Albanian university students and academics to international experience. It proposes blending on- campus teaching activities with International Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL) components as a Virtual Mobility element to introduce international perspectives in formal study programmes with a holistic approach of Internationalisation at Home.

**Keywords:** *Entral, VALEU-X; students; entrepreneurs*



# Alternative Flipped Learning Approach scaffolding student engagement and collaboration. A case study with ELT Master students in “Corpora in Applied Linguistics” Subject

Juliana Çyfeku, “Fan S. Noli” University, Albania juliana.cyfeku[AT]gmail.com

**Abstract.** The focus of the present study is to highlight the importance of learning in a faster and easier approach, without time and space limits in Higher education.

Provided the nature of my teaching academic subject “Corpora in Applied Linguistics”, that means bringing natural language into the classroom in a way that involves learners through web-applicative tools to generate hands-on activities interacting with ‘real’ language, I have implemented in my teaching practise an alternative flipped learning approach to disseminate knowledge, technology and its tools in a more flexible learning environment.

The research statement this study addresses is that flipped classroom and flipped classroom technology models increase the students’ level of engagement and cultivate the collaborative values among the latter in the long run of the educational process. Even though this model of learning is not well recognized in our country, yet the innovative intentions of the researcher reported to facilitate and turn into as interactive the learning process. Moreover, the acronym’s significance ‘FLIP’ with its four pillars came up as successive chunks of practice in this model of teaching: Flexible learning environment, Learning throughout ‘real’ language about culture across time and space in which Intentional knowledge content assisted the Professional educator to foster engagement vs. collaboration so that students work independently and exert a greater control on the learning process.

**Keywords:** *flipped classroom, alternative flipped learning approach, corpus, web-applicative tools, engagement, collaboration*





# The opportunities for applying the Virtual Collaborative Learning in Higher Education in North Macedonia

**Venera Gudachi**, University American College Skopje, venera.gudaci[AT]gmail.com

**Marija Vasilevska**, University American College Skopje, marija.vasilevska[AT]gmail.com

**Abstract.** The Republic of North Macedonia as part of the European Higher Education Area is trying hard to follow the Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), specifically focusing on the student-centered learning, teaching, and assessment; Teaching staff and Learning resources and student support.

The Institutional Evaluation Programme in 2018 conducted a system report in North Macedonia evaluating most of the HEIs. The report is among the few ones that presents the situation in higher education in North Macedonia. It concludes that the universities are facing a challenging environment including a comprehensive approach to digitalisation in few universities, small number of eLearning Centres and limited evidence of using information technology. The last EU progress reports for North Macedonia are highlighting the lack of development in the Macedonian HEIs, especially in terms of following and implementation of the European Standards and digitalization. The COVID-19 accelerated some progress mainly connected with teaching, but with limited quality and strategy for their sustainability. The HEIs are lacking strategies for taking advantage of the digitalization process and application of innovative approaches. The authors notified limited usage of the opportunities offered by the digitalization for further development of the teaching and learning process in Macedonian HEIs.

The main research question in this paper is assessment of whether the Macedonian higher education system is prepared to apply the instrument Virtual Collaborative Learning in Higher Education, especially in checking the qualification of the academic staff at the national public and private HEIs and the recognition system. The paper will include qualitative analysis of interviews and observations of the biggest HEIs in the country conducted by the authors, including the perspectives of all stakeholders in the higher education system. Specific focus will be given to the benefits that the HEIs will have in case they apply the instrument and how they can cooperate with Albanian HEIs in that regard.

**Keywords:** *Higher Education in North Macedonia, HEIs, VCL in North Macedonia, North Macedonia*



# Designing and Facilitating Cross-Border Virtual Collaborative Learning Experiences: A Western Balkans Case Study

Esmir Demaj, PhD, EPOKA University, Albania edemaj[AT]epoka.edu.al

**Abstract.** In the 21st century we are witnessing rapid technological developments and digital transformations, which are re-shaping the way we live, work, and interact with others. The global dynamic markets of today demand highly educated citizens who possess skills affected by several trends and challenges, such as the development of information and communication technologies (ICT), automation, globalisation changes, workplace change and the increased expectations of companies for agility and adaptability. Being able to work in decentralised, international groups based on collaborative information and communication technology (ICT) is quickly gaining importance as a globally required key competence, additionally to that, virtual communication, problem solving, the purposeful use of networked online tools, development of social skills, and the creation of digital content are considered among key competencies for the 21st century. It is increasingly critical for university students to enhance their digital culture and learn these 21st century skills so that they can quickly adapt to the new work-life dynamic environment and ensure quick adaptability and success in the current highly competitive workplaces.

The main research question in this paper is how to facilitate and build capacities for international cross-border virtual collaboration, with the aim to boost 21st century skills and competencies; and concurrently address the low cross-border collaboration among youth in the Western Balkans region. Carefully designing and co-creating virtual/blended learning spaces and course content that involves academics and students from different countries and social/cultural backgrounds is seen as a prospective setting to address this research question.

It is proposed that the main mediator and most instrumental source for digitally skilled graduates and professionals is the education sector, and especially high education institutions' auditoria through innovative pedagogies in teaching and learning. The COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis it brought along produced an important occasion to reflect on, design and implement new teaching and learning processes that leverage the potential offered by digital technologies. In this context, it is claimed that universities face a challenge that if properly tackled could be turned into an opportunity and competitive advantage at the same time; that is the paradigm shift in the digitalization and innovation in teaching and learning pedagogical processes.

As a response to the global developments and very dynamic industry market, it is recommended that universities and academia see the necessity of innovating their teaching and learning practices. Thus, a successful university and/or professor is the one able to orchestrate the diverse and multidisciplinary teaching materials, contemporary learning and teaching tools and practices, and align them to the real needs of industry and the society in general.

**Keywords:** *Virtual Collaborative Learning, Cross-border collaboration, Western Balkans, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills*



## Session 3: Adopting and recognising Virtual/Blended Mobility as part of the HEIs` internalisation strategy for the administrative staff- hybrid



# Student-Centred Learning Practices: A Transition from Tradition to Innovation

Mariola Muçi, EPOKA University, Albania, mmuci[AT]epoka.edu.al

**Abstract.** Significant changes are occurring in the twenty-first century related to massive scientific discoveries, artificial intelligence and globalisation. Hence, this century is being considered as the age of digital discoveries and technological advancements. Starting from smartphones and social media platforms to self-driving cars or autonomous flying machines.

Nevertheless, it looks like everything has already changed and evolved except education and teaching practices. Has the learning theory changed from the twenty century? Are high education institutions evolving and adapting to these drastic changes? Consequently, a lot of criticism has been raised nowadays regarding the very slow evolution and adoption of innovative teaching methods by scholars and educational institutions on a global level.

A significant emphasis in this study is over the Student-Centred Learning (SCL) concept which refers to a kind of innovative practice that encompasses methods of teaching with a shifting focus from the instructor to the student. Furthermore, this practice offers the students a wide range of opportunities to decide over the two important aspects: what to learn and how to learn it. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to critically analyse the current Albanian educational system's obstacles in adopting the "westernisation of education" through student-centred learning practices that are developed mainly by western countries and the US.

In order to generate reliable results regarding the comparison and evaluation of the educational system at a national level a questionnaire was conducted among academicians of two HEI's in Albania, EPOKA University and Vlora State University. Two main important extents were taken into consideration when compiling the questionnaire: the technological and infrastructure advancement impact over the teaching practices and the importance of training of the scholars over these new innovative teaching practices.

Universities, besides their core and historical mission to teach, instruct and educate the students have another important task to accomplish, the stimulation and encouragement of scholars in adapting to this new and changing reality while applying the most recent and innovative teaching practices of Student-Centred-learning and digitalization.

**Keywords:** *learning, SCL, teaching practices, innovation, digitalization.*



# The challenge of "Virtual Teaching" for sustainable learning even for students with special needs (case study for blind students)

**Ambera Duka**, Faculty of Education, "Aleksander Moisiu" University, Albania,  
ambaduka[AT]yahoo.com

**Klodiana Leka**, Faculty of Education, "Aleksander Moisiu" University, Albania,  
klodianaleka[AT]uamd.edu.al

**Abstract.** Albanian universities are facing numerous challenges in terms of the adaptation required by virtual teaching and learning. And when we have in front of us students with special needs and more specifically students who cannot see, this is a necessity. But this must be seen in some components. Digital teaching infrastructure should be a support in this challenge. The inclusion of digital teaching increases the chances of a sustainable teaching even for students with special needs, especially those with vision difficulties. Digital technology in education is a renewable method in the teaching and learning process, but which is accompanied by challenges in Albanian classrooms.

The main purpose of the study is the necessity of digital teaching supported by a modern infrastructure. Which supports and reduces the difficulties of students with special needs who have difficulty seeing or total inability to see. The study was conducted using quantitative research methods. The secondary data was used as the basis of the analysis on the challenges, difficulties and support of students with special needs in countries with medium or high development that these students have. As a comparative example, the support of these students at Limerick University in Ireland will also be given.

The primary data was collected through an empirical study from a sample of 200 students who attended the Professional Master's Program in "Special and Social Pedagogy" at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Tirana. A semi-structured questionnaire was used for data collection. Data analysis was carried out through the statistical program SPSS version 20. The study revealed that the effectiveness of virtual learning for students with visual impairments lies and should be supported by a teaching based on a digital infrastructure.

Investing in these components in Albanian universities is and should be a priority of higher education policies. Taking as a reference the best practices of universities that students see as a priority.

**Keywords:** *virtual teaching and learning, sustainable learning, special needs student with visual impairment, learning efficiency*



# Students' English Language Development through the International VCL module of the VALEU-X project

Dorela Kaçauri, "Fan S. Noli" University, [dkonomi@unkorce.edu.al](mailto:dkonomi@unkorce.edu.al)

**Abstract.** The aim of this research is to investigate the development of students' English language in terms of speaking, vocabulary and pronunciation aspects. 43 students who became part of this research participated in the International Virtual Collaborative Learning Module within the framework of the ValeuX project founded by Erasmus +. The students came from 6 universities from Albania (European University of Tirana, Epoka University in Tirana, Shkodra University "Luigj Gurakuqi", "Fan S. Noli" University in Korca, University of Elbasan "Aleksander Xhuvani", "Aleksander Moisiu" University in Durrës) and one university from Germany "The Technische Universität" in Dresden.

VALEU-X project addresses an important national priority "Internationalisation of higher education institutions", through virtual and blended mobility, internationalisation at home and internationalisation strategy. As a result, all the students collaborated virtually via MS Teams to develop a business idea into a successful start up. Their ideas would be presented in a contest to win the Albania's next Unicorn. The duration of their collaborative work was 6 weeks. They were organised in 7 seven groups. In each of them there were students from 7 partners of the project. Students were provided with a wide range of assignments to develop their business idea in order to "win" the funding for their Startup. Every team was assigned to one or two e-Tutors.

An interview was conducted via Google Form to gather the data concerning the impacts that students had after joining the International VCL. Then the researcher focused on the development of students' oral proficiency, pronunciation and vocabulary as they are related together as the main language skills in English.

As a result, all of the students' development was noticeable and they perceived natural communication in English and expanded their vocabulary as well. Research implication and suggestions are also noticed in this study.

**Keywords:** *international virtual collaborative learning, English language development, oral proficiency, pronunciation, vocabulary*



# Implementation of Virtual Mobility and Internationalization at Home in Albania's Higher Education: A Catalogue of Recommendations for Action

**Gotje Frieda Rubarth**, Technische Universität Dresden, Germany  
gotje.rubarth[AT]mailbox.tu-dresden.de

**Lisa Aschenbrenner**, Technische Universität Dresden, Germany

**Maroua Salhi**, Technische Universität Dresden, Germany

**Mattis Altmann**, Technische Universität Dresden, Germany mattis.altmann[AT]tu-dresden.de

**Abstract.** The concepts of Virtual Mobility and Internationalisation at Home are key factors to prepare students for the future labor market. However, due to financial restrictions and responsibilities in their personal environment, students often cannot physically attend to international experiences. Virtual Mobility offers a valuable alternative, allowing students to partake in classes at other universities without leaving their home country. This approach allows for decreasing educational discrepancies and fosters students' intercultural competencies as well as the ability to work in a geographically separated, and international team. Despite progressing research in the field of Virtual Mobility and developments in the area of information and communication technologies, recent theories and technologies are challenging to implement. The present paper focuses particularly on Albania, where the current education system has not been able to sufficiently incorporate Virtual Mobility and Internationalisation in higher education programs. This is due to a lack of development concepts, infrastructures, and legal foundations. The aforementioned challenges ultimately become apparent in a lower quality of academic education and capacity gaps in the education system. This paper analyses the prevalent situation within Albania's higher education system regarding Virtual Mobility and Internationalisation at Home activities. The underlying data has been collected in qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with teaching staff and students from Albanian universities. The data was evaluated through a mixed approach of qualitative content analysis by Mayring using inductive and deductive category formation. Further, recommendations for actions were formulated to improve the learning situation regarding Virtual Mobility and Internationalisation, directed towards the higher education institutions as well as the Ministry of Education.

The results show the benefits that an increasing integration of Virtual Mobility and Collaborative International Online Learning in the Albanian education system could bring for students and teachers in Albania's higher education institutions. Answering the question of "how Virtual Mobility could best be integrated into the education system", recommendations for action were derived and described. These recommendations have been further elaborated



into a list of demands to the Ministry of Education concerning the implementation of Virtual Mobility approaches in Albania's higher education system.

**Keywords:** *Virtual Mobility, Virtual Learning, Internationalisation, Higher Education Institutions, Albania*





# Lessons Learned from an International and Interdisciplinary Virtual Collaborative Learning Module with 8 Institutions from the facilitator's perspective

**Mattis Altmann**, Technische Universität Dresden, mattis.altmann[AT]tu-dresden.de

**Laura Hilse**, Technische Universität Dresden, laura.hilse[AT]tu-dresden.de

**Nelli Ukhova**, Technische Universität Dresden, nelli.ukhova[AT]tu-dresden.de

**Abstract.** Current trends show that there is a need in education to improve its quality by replacing traditional teaching methods with more open and personalised educational frameworks, that make the student an active subject of his own knowledge production. Furthermore, this should encompass innovative paradigms that are strongly focused on interconnection, collaboration, and interrelationships. In this context the use of Virtual Mobility and Internationalisation at home activities has attracted burgeoning interest during the last years and has been further catalysed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the design and implementation still represent a challenging task for academic staff and needs to be customised to the individual modules and teaching regulations of the participating institutions.

One way to facilitate Virtual Mobility and Internationalisation@home can be initiated through Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL), designed to have students work together to achieve a specific goal in the virtual settings. Furthermore, the VCL applies the COIL (collaborative online international learning) approach that promotes experiential cross-cultural student learning in co-created international online environments by utilizing the three main components required for an effective COIL experience: pedagogy, technology, and cross-cultural learning.

This paper reports on the lessons learned of the COIL module, developed within the VALEU-X Erasmus+ project aiming for capacity building to implement the VCL Framework as an Instrument to foster Virtual Mobility and Internationalisation@home in Albania. On the other hand, it interrelates with the further Erasmus+ project OER-CODEX, that intends to address organisational, technical, and pedagogical needs by developing Open Educational Resources (OER) in forms of online course modules with special focus on online collaborative learning and teaching as an important digitalization approach.

To enable easy transferability of experience and encapsulate best teaching practices, pedagogical patterns were applied. These capture well proven experience in a certain domain into a concise format that may be easily communicated to collaborating institutions that require information on how to solve a recurring problem. The patterns discussed in this paper are derived from an international VCL Module which took place in summer semester 2022. Within this module over 100 students from 6 Albanian, one Slovenian and one German Higher Education Institutes developed collaboratively ideas for platform business models to foster eco-tourism in Albania.



The extensive analysis of this module has identified certain areas for improvement. For example, international, multicultural, and digital collaboration in the context of this module presented several challenges e.g., blurring boundaries in the e-tutor tandem, social loafing effect, or misunderstandings based on cultural differences. As a result, pedagogical patterns emerged in the areas of development of intercultural competencies, dropout management and e-tutor tandem organisation. Also, it is evident that expectation management of e-tutors and students plays a significant role for future VCL modules.

**Keywords:** *Virtual Mobility, Virtual Collaborative Learning, Internationalisation at home, Albania*



## Session 4: Online presentations & discussion on Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)



# Collaboration between teachers in a Metaverse education

**Menada Petro**, “Aleksander Moisiu” University Durrës, Albania,  
menada\_petro[AT]yahoo.com

**Abstract.** The task of the school has always been to prepare students as people and citizens, and each era presents new challenges for all educational institutions. To overcome today's challenges, new technologies must be seen as bridges to tomorrow's school. In all reforms in education or in all the recommendations given from the Ministry of Education in Albania, emphasis is placed on the structural side of the system and the way the process works, but without considering the human and social elements, such as culture, school climate and human relations. In our schools, today we talk about teacher-pupil, teacher-parent and vice versa relationships in both cases, as well as the school-community relationship. Of course, these relationships are very important and significant for the school, but it seems clear that an equally important element has been forgotten, the teacher-teacher relationship, the creation of a good climate of cooperation and the exchange of experiences between them.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, technology began to spread at a very fast pace in all areas of life in Albania, but even with the easing of the pandemic, its use did not fade, on the contrary, it expanded even more and became necessary, bringing changes in daily life, at work and in the entire educational system. While the world is moving towards the metaverse and education is moving from teacher education to network teaching action using Metaverse Technology. Metaverse is an important way to seek the path of high-quality education development, reshape the relationship between education subjects, and solve social issues such as educational equity.

This article is based on the review of the literature, as well as its evaluation, bringing contemporary studies as well as different viewpoints regarding these relationships and how they can be in the meta-universe, as well as the influence it has in encouraging and strengthening the cooperation between them. The article interweaves the researcher's point of view regarding teacher relations, as well as it concludes with a critical reflection on the challenges posed by the education Metaverse giving some recommendations to explore the laws of education under the new Internet education models and to be out of sight and prepared for the future towards which the world is moving.

**Keywords:** *Education; Metaverse; Virtual society; Collaboration; Cooperation*



# Internationalisation at Home through Virtual Collaborative Learning

**Dorsaf Ben Malek**, Virtual University of Tunis, Tunisia dorsaf.benmalek[AT]uvt.tn

**Rut Muniz Calderon**, Catholic University of Valencia, Spain rutmuniz[AT]gmail.com

**Abstract.** Research has long preached for physical mobility as an effective tool for students' internationalisation. However, this type of mobility is not always affordable to the average student because of the funding and visa requirements. What made physical mobility even more unreachable is the health crisis that paralyzed travel movements between countries. Therefore, in the light of COVID-19 pandemic, universities have recognised virtual mobility as a path for their local students' internationalisation at home (IaH). This concept is one of the major objectives of the MED2IaH project (The MEDiterranean Countries: Towards Internationalisation at Home).

In this vein, we use two virtual exchange courses as concrete examples for local students' internationalisation at home. Both involved two partner universities; The Virtual University of Tunis (a partner in the MED2IaH project) and The Catholic University of Valencia. Despite their different orientations, these courses have three common learning objectives; enhancing students' intercultural communicative competence, collaborating in virtual teams, and practising the English language. The research study was in three phases: course design, virtual exchange and evaluation through students' questionnaires. Results were in line with the quasi consensus over the efficiency of virtual mobility in improving students' intercultural communicative competence and hence supporting them in their internationalisation at home process.

Thus, the intent of this paper is to give an overview of the MED2IaH project with a special attention to the challenges and achievements of internationalisation at home through reporting the unfolding of two virtual exchanges across the Mediterranean.

**Keywords:** *Internationalisation at home (IaH) – virtual collaborative learning – virtual exchange – virtual teams - intercultural communicative competence*



## Virtual learning, a new approach for the Albanian universities. A case of linguistics learning

**Rrezarta Draçini**, University of Shkodra “Luigj Gurakuqi”, rrezarta.dracini[AT]unishk.edu.al

**Mimoza Priku**, University of Shkodra “Luigj Gurakuqi”, mimoza.priku[AT]unishk.edu.al

**Abstract.** Higher education in Albania has undergone a qualitative development after the 90s. This progress was identified in the reconstruction of the curricula, the adaptation of the Law on higher education, but also the teaching methodology. The involvement in the VALEU-X project and the situation of COVID-19 put us in front of some new challenges - the integration of teaching with virtual methods. During the situation of COVID-19 the adaptation to virtual methods was a little more strained because the lecturers did not have all the knowledge for such teaching, the VALEU-X project made it possible to establish a sound scientific basis in terms of virtual learning. One of the positive experiences from this project was the learning of language, which will also be the object of our study. In this paper we will ask questions about the duality of linguistics and virtual learning and reflect on the impact that this methodology has had on both teachers and students.

Part of our paper will be about the continuity in Albanian higher education not only of concepts, but also the use of virtual methods in the future. How are these concepts represented in the Albanian higher education law? Is there room for reflection and improvement in this direction? These will be the questions that will be discussed during our work.

**Keywords:** *virtual learning, linguistics, Albanian High Education.*



# Investigating reflection sheets to improve Virtual Collaborative Learning in higher education

**Fabian Jetter**, Technische Universität Dresden, Germany fabian.jetter[AT]mailbox.tu-dresden.de

**Moritz Maurer**, Technische Universität Dresden, Germany moritz.maurer[AT]mailbox.tu-dresden.de

**Sebastian Schmidt**, Technische Universität Dresden, Germany sebastian.schmidt14[AT]tu-dresden.de

**Abstract.** The conceptualization of courses at universities is strongly discussed in the scientific context. In recent years, the conception of courses in the virtual space has become a frequent topic of academic and interpersonal discourse. For the successful conceptual design of courses, frameworks can be used as a guideline. One of these possible guidelines is the design dimension published in 2019. These dimensions describe guidelines that should be implemented in the context of Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL). This framework consists of four dimensions: "Professionalised Pedagogical Support Concepts", "Realistic Cases and Working Tasks", "Technical Platform" and "Learning Analytics and Information Visualisation". These design dimensions are reviewed in this paper to identify resulting problems. Based on the identified problems, solution strategies will be developed to improve future courses. Therefore, this paper is an iterative improvement of the design dimensions from 2019, and the iteration will be based on student feedback on courses.

Reflection sheets from 47 students form the data basis of this paper. These reflection sheets were created in the context of two different VCL modules, which were conducted in the winter semester 2021/2022. Both modules took place in cooperation between the TU Dresden and the HTW Dresden. In both modules, students had to work together virtually in the form of a group work. Participation in the module was limited to students with a background in economics. Participants from Bachelor, Master and Diploma of any age were allowed to participate.

The creation of the reflection sheet was obligatory for each course participant and was based on a predefined outline.

The existing design dimensions "Professionalised Pedagogical Support Concepts", "Realistic Cases and Working Tasks", "Technical Platform" and "Learning Analytics and Information Visualisation" are to be improved with the help of a Qualitative Content Analysis. The existing design dimensions were used as superordinate groups to structure the codes. This provided a better overview of the existing codes as well as an assignment to the dimensions. The coding of the reflection sheets was done on a completely inductive basis. This coding can then be used to identify topics that are viewed negatively by the students.

In this process, all reflection sheets were coded by two people to counteract subjective consumption. Directly from the results of this paper, instructors can benefit as they are informed about problems that exist in their courses and receive suggestions for solutions. In



the future, students could benefit if the existing problems are corrected. This would create a better learning environment for students. Since all reflection forms were created by students with a background in economics, it is possible that identified problems are only applicable to this group and students from other disciplines would have identified other problems.

**Keywords:** *VCL, Virtual Collaborative Learning, Design Dimension, Quantitative Analysis, Reflection Sheets.*





# Competence equipment of modern virtual community members

**Tom Helleken**, Technische Universität Dresden, Germany tom.helleken[AT]mailbox.tu-dresden.de

**Nils Hobe**, Technische Universität Dresden, Germany, nils.hobe[AT]mailbox.tu-dresden.de

**Lisa-Marie Langesee**, Technische Universität Dresden, Germany lisa-marie.langesee[AT]tu-dresden.de

**Abstract.** A sudden change in the work and learning environment occurred at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. As of new regulations and governmental restrictions, companies and universities were obliged to change their previously analog work and learning processes to a virtual environment. Until then, it was used to detain meetings of work or learning groups with face-to-face communication. This situation changed during the pandemic, as most meetings had to become virtual, which led to the building of new virtual online communities. The covid pandemic is thus seen as a driver of digitization.

Even though virtual collaboration offers new advantages, it also poses unique challenges. Virtual community members, for example, need different competencies than in an analog learning environment. But not every community member has the same set of competencies, which in turn can limit collaboration.

The following scientific paper examines necessary competencies and uncovers the associated gaps in virtual collaboration. In addition, methods for closing these gaps are identified. Hence, the research objects are virtual communities in a higher education learning context. This paper, therefore, explores which competencies are needed to participate in a virtual community and how these competencies can be acquired and measured.

A systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted to answer these questions. Three databases relevant to the topic were examined: Scopus, EBSCO and Web of Science. In addition, based on the findings of the SLR, a self-evaluation tool (SET) for virtual community members will be designed with a "soft" prototyping approach.

The results show that a mixture of digital methodological competencies, soft skills and intercultural competencies is particularly important in virtual communities. Especially adaptivity to new software and the ability to search, find and use information seems highly relevant. In addition, virtual collaboration offers the opportunity to connect people from different countries. This, in turn, leads to the necessity of overcoming cultural differences, especially language barriers. Besides digital and intercultural competencies, communication abilities also play a decisive role. Here, the ability to exchange new ideas and the presentation of one's own "point of view" can be considered exemplary. Regarding the collaboration aspect, collective decision-making seems to have a significant influence. One of the critical competencies for this is showing empathy for others.

However, due to the focus on three subject databases, it should be noted that the present work is based on a limited amount of existing research on virtual collaboration. In addition, as



the COVID-19 pandemic continues, it is important to note that many findings and research results have not yet been published. On the one hand, this is related to the publication times of qualitative scientific work; on the other hand, the long-term effects and consequences of the pandemic have yet to be worked out.

**Keywords:** *competencies, virtual community, higher education, online collaboration, internationalisation of higher education, virtual teams*



# Collaborative learning and teaching in Miro - design of digital education using a collaboration platform

**Jasmin Schöne**, Fachhochschule Dresden (FHD) – University of Applied Sciences,  
j.schoene[AT]fh-dresden.eu

**Peter Schmiedgen**, Fachhochschule Dresden (FHD) – University of Applied Sciences,  
p.schmiedgen[AT]fh-dresden.eu

**Abstract.** Digital technologies can be used to improve the quality of teaching and studying. Within just a few weeks, almost every (German) university had to transfer all face-to-face events to digital teaching through contact restrictions and security precautions. With the support of numerous tools for communication and content transfer, a wide variety of formats could be implemented and tested in the virtual world<sup>2</sup>. This paper describes the design and implementation of digital teaching formats with students using the collaboration platform "Miro". First, the use of virtual learning environments and collaborative learning is introduced and supported by relevant literature. Subsequently, the case study is introduced, and its structure is explained. The goal of creating and implementing the case study is to support and successfully convey the teaching content in digital teaching. Additionally, an overview of possible application scenarios is given. These scenarios were developed and implemented and evaluated in teaching from 2021 -2022. Particularly highlighted is the implementation of a course with the topic "Market and Product", which was carried out with an interdisciplinary group of students from the bachelor programs "Business Administration", "Media Informatics/Media Design" and "Graphic Design". This module aims in particular at teaching entrepreneurial methods as well as the development and further development of a product or service. The results were evaluated based on literature analyses as well as observations during the implementation of the case study. The core findings include the feasibility of digital teaching and collaborative learning in the platform Miro through the numerous features in the tool, which allow the integration of method sets, images, videos and other media, the ease of use, low barriers to registration and use of the tool, the applicability in interdisciplinary learning groups. Limitations arise from the literature explained as "Digital Divide". These include various forms of digital divide and other factors such as student heterogeneity. The evaluation of these limitations is addressed in the core results through the observations. In the final part, there is a placement of the case study as well as an outlook on the use in the research environment and the work with scientists.

**Keywords:** *Virtual Classroom Environment, Digitalization in Higher Education, Collaborative learning and teaching in Online Environment*

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<sup>2</sup> Hofmann, Y., Salmen, N., Stürz, R.A., Schlude, A., Putfarken, H., Reimer, M., Classe, F., 2021. Die Pandemie als Treiber der digitalen Transformation der Hochschulen? bidt - Bayerisches Forschungsinstitut für Digitale Transformation. P.96 <https://doi.org/10.35067/XYPQ-KN65>



# Can machine learning support eTutors in an online formal collaborative learning setting?

**Arne Böhmer**, Technische Universität Dresden, Germany arne.boehmer[AT]mailbox.tu-dresden.de

**Maximilian Musch**, Technische Universität Dresden, Germany maximilian.musch[AT]mailbox.tu-dresden.de

**Hannes Schubert**, Technische Universität Dresden, Germany hannes.schubert1[AT]mailbox.tu-dresden.de

**Sebastian Schmidt**, Technische Universität Dresden, Germany sebastian.schmidt14[AT]tu-dresden.de

**Abstract.** Supervising roles within virtual collaborative learning (VCL) environments face many different challenges and are often having difficulties keeping an eye on everything. To help supervisors with problems like that certain environments like Microsoft Teams already offer different analysis tools that summarise selected parameters regarding the collaboration within the groups (e.g. amount of sent messages within a certain time etc.). The research regarding this paper underlined that such quantitative summaries are not sufficient to fix the mentioned problems. Therefore, more support is needed especially when it comes to giving a more in-depth and qualitative overview of the communication processes within the groups specifically. The first objective of this study is to find out whether it is feasible to develop a machine learning model which classifies incoming messages into categories with an accuracy that meets the supervisors' requirements. The model training is based on a dataset consisting of around 2500 messages from students addressing supervisors labelled within six categories. The next research objective was to determine how the supervisors can benefit from that classification and how their needs regarding the comprehension of collaboration within the groups can be fulfilled.

This study used a design science research approach to investigate how learning analytics might be able to support teaching staff in VCL settings. Initially, a qualitative interview series with four experienced tutors was carried out to get an in-depth understanding of the challenges and tasks teaching staff typically faces in VCL environments. The interview material was systematically analysed to derive the software requirements. These were then combined with existing knowledge about support software of similar use cases to create a first prototype, primarily based on a supervised machine learning model that classifies online messages sent from students to supervisors. The prototype was iteratively improved by collecting and implementing feedback from tutors. Finally the resulting prototype was extensively evaluated by the teaching staff in a qualitative and quantitative fashion.

The software tool we have developed has shown that machine-learning processes can indeed be used to support supervisors in VCL environments. The tool achieves satisfactory accuracy in categorising chat messages. It could therefore be demonstrated that it is possible to classify chat messages using a software tool. The interviews conducted revealed a particular interest in the statistical evaluations of group activities in Microsoft Teams. This was said to save a lot



of time in the subsequent evaluation of the groups. The interviewed supervisors also expressed an interest in receiving private information on the development of possible conflicts within groups. The interest of the interviewed supervisors was very high and further interviews could lead to further possible feature ideas.

The biggest challenge was to achieve a correspondingly high accuracy in the categorization. Although our final prototype indicated that modern machine learning methods could yield a feasible solution to our problem, a more extensive dataset for training would be necessary to create a practically applicable artefact. Additionally, we identified a research gap in the thematic area of sentiment analysis which poses a great potential for further research.

**Keywords:** *learning analytics, virtual collaborative learning, machine learning*



# Impact of COVID-19 on College Students' Psychological Condition

**Nurul Retno Nurwulan**, Department of Business Administration, EPOKA University, Albania  
nnurwulan[AT]epoka.edu.al

**Maya Primeradama Yanti**, TaniHub, Cikarang, Indonesia, maya.yanti[AT]email.arizona.edu

**Abstract.** The COVID-19 pandemic has changed many things including teaching and learning activities. Various restrictions and the abrupt transformation of school activities from face-to-face to online learning may have an impact on students' performance and mental health. The aim of this study was to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on college students' psychological condition.

**Methods:** A total of 220 college students ( $20.08 \pm 0.67$  years) participated in this study, of which 150 students were only attending online courses, 47 students were also conducting internships, and 23 students were also completing their thesis. We evaluated 3 different groups of students to see the impact of the pandemic on each of their situations. Difficulties with enjoying free time, feeling scared for no reason, and difficulties in online learning were selected as factors of interest. In addition, we also chose internet connectivity, financial conditions, learning facilities, communication with lecturers, and discussion with peers to further explain the difficulties in online learning. The Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS) was used to evaluate students' psychological condition. Data analyses were done with the aid of SPSS software.

**Results:** Most of the students felt stressed and anxious during the pandemic with 35.5% choosing "agree" and 21.4% choosing "strongly agree". The stress and anxiety in students were strongly correlated to difficulties in enjoying free time ( $p < 0.001$ ) and feeling scared for no reason ( $p < 0.001$ ). Interestingly, no correlation between difficulties in online courses and students' stress and anxiety ( $p = 0.112$ ). However, we found students who had to attend internships during the pandemic felt stress and anxiety. This is because most companies were closed and not accepting student interns. Similarly, stress and anxiety were found in students who were completing their thesis due to the difficulties in finding topics of interest and difficulties in communicating with the thesis advisor.

**Conclusion:** Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that COVID-19 impacted students' psychological conditions in general. However, online learning itself did not negatively impact students psychologically.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Online Learning, College Students, Psychological Condition



## Socialization and distance learning challenges

**Merlina Koseni**, “Aleksandër Moisiu” University, Durrës, Albania, mpograzha[AT]gmail.com

**Enkelejda Cenaj**, “Aleksandër Moisiu” University, Durrës, Albania, enicenaj[AT]gmail.com

**Abstract.** Distance learning in Albania was little known and used before the Covid-19 pandemic. The circumstances created by the pandemic made distance learning a necessity and the only alternative solution. In this article we will discuss the difficulties and challenges of distance education, as well as the facilities and benefits. Also, we will analyse how effective distance learning practices are for students from an academic point of view, as well as the difficulties and challenges encountered when using distance learning. Despite the academic successes of distance learning, there are many educators who still have doubts about its use because of the difficulties it presents, and on the other hand, students are not very open to accepting a new alternative form of learning. In this article, we will focus on students' perceptions of distance learning, conducting a structured interview with 100 students of the Faculty of Education, bachelor's and master's level. From the analysed data, it appears that one of the difficulties presented by students is related to isolation and the lack of direct contact with each other and with the lecturer. In conclusion, although it is indisputable about the benefits and amenities that distance learning offers, it is very important that young people engage in face-to-face interaction with each other. As Dewey states, schools have a social purpose which is to create a cohesive society.

**Keywords:** *distance learning; students; challenges; social purpose*



# How to foster 21st century skills in European Higher Education: Open Educational Resources for Collaborative Online & Distance Education and eXchange (OER-CODEX)

Florian Lenk-Klioner, TU Dresden, [florian.lenk-klioner@tu-dresden.de](mailto:florian.lenk-klioner@tu-dresden.de)

Eric Schoop, TU Dresden, [eric.schoop@tu-dresden.de](mailto:eric.schoop@tu-dresden.de)

Nelli Ukhova, TU Dresden, [nelli.ukhova@tu-dresden.de](mailto:nelli.ukhova@tu-dresden.de)

**Abstract.** Continuously evolving digitalisation in Higher Education combined with inevitable and necessary distance education due to the pandemic has brought challenges as well as opportunities for educators to light. While early adopters easily shifted into the new mode and could also use the digitalisation initiatives for quality improvement, most educational institutions and educators were confronted with unexpected obstacles and challenges in the digitalisation of Higher Education. Several needs were identified on the organisational, technical and pedagogical level. Organisational needs include provision of legal framing conditions, availability of digitalisation tools, access to the internet, and adequate media equipment in the lecture halls. Technical needs are advanced skills in computer and media literacy both on teachers' and on students' side and pedagogical needs manifest in the competence to design advanced blended learning arrangements, production and provision of suitable learning content, and appropriate combination of individual and collaborative learning processes to achieve the intended learning goals, following Bloom's taxonomy.

To address these needs, OER-CODEX as an Erasmus+ Action Type KA220 HED project, aims to develop Open Educational Resources (OER) in form of online course modules with special focus on online collaborative learning and teaching as an important digitalisation approach. OER are not only accessible to all without copyright issues but can also be changed and adapted to the specific application requirements. This makes it a perfect fit for educators to reuse, tailor and continuously improve educational content and ideally by republishing as OER sustaining a pool of latest educational resources. The project acknowledges the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, as formulated by the OECD and its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the course modules are structured along the DigCompEdu framework of the EU. The courses shall qualify educators to engage in blended learning activities at their institutions, based on best practices conveyed in the offered OER and shall motivate educators to generate and add own OER content. The final project result is an openly accessible and extensible, self-sustaining OER pool for online collaborative learning and teaching methods.

The basis to successfully implement this project is a methodology on how to create OER courses for online collaborative learning and teaching, which will be presented in the project contribution work in progress. This instructional methodology conveys all necessary information to prepare an OER course for online collaborative learning, starting with defining learning outcomes and identifying relevant material and guiding this process up until final





implementation in a chosen online platform. The methodology serves in two ways: it is the basis the project team will use to create OER courses throughout the project and it is instructional for other educators, who want to create their own OER course. The to be developed online courses in OER-CODEX are the introductory course selection for educators wanting to use and create OER in online collaborative learning courses.

**Keywords:** *digitalisation of Higher Education; Open Educational Resources (OER); educators; OER courses*



# Synergy Workshop



# MED2IaH - MEDiterranean countries: Towards Internationalisation at Home



**Website:** <https://med2iah.eu/>

**Runtime:** 01/2020 – 07/2023

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**Partners:**

- Euro-Mediterranean University – EMUNI, Piran, SLOVENIA (coordinator)
- European Policy Development and Research Institute, SLOVENIA (co-coordinator)
- University of Montpellier, FRANCE
- Catholic University of Murcia, SPAIN
- UniPegaso University, ITALY
- Al Akhawayn University, MOROCCO
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- Universite Ezzitouna, TUNISIA
- Helipolis University for Sustainable Development, EGYPT
- South Valley University, EGYPT
- Philadelphia University, JORDAN
- Luminus Technical University College, JORDAN
- Lebanese International University, LEBANON
- Antonine University, LEBANON

**Project representative to be contacted for further info:** Nada Trunk, trunk.nada[AT]gmail.com and Dorsaf Ben Malek, dorsaf.benmalek[AT]uvt.tn

**Short description of the initiative**

The MEDiterranean countries: Towards Internationalisation at Home (MED2IaH) project is primarily designed to have an impact at system level and trigger reform processes at national level in Mediterranean Partner Countries (PC).

The inclusion of all stakeholders (management, academic and administrative staff at universities, students) in project activities and consortia ensures that the whole HE sector in PCs and will take a step forward towards national reforms, which is a success factor.



The objectives of the MED2IaH project are threefold:

- 1) To outline the internationalisation landscapes of PC HEIs and to identify levels of integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curricula of PC HEIs
- 2) To improve the capabilities of partner universities' internationalisation through staff training and by translating general awareness of institutional strategies and action plans.
- 3) To build students' intercultural knowledge and sensitivity to cultural diversity.

**Main target groups of the project:** University students – Academic and administrative staff-  
University management

**Significant public results:**

- Four webinars on internationalisation at home
- 2 roundtables organised by every south-Mediterranean partner university
- Country profiles of internationalisation (document)
- Internationalisation at home strategy and action plan of every south Mediterranean partner university (document)
- Intercultural digital storytelling manual
- Intercultural digital storytelling training and contest
- Intercultural digital stories produced by students within DST contest
- Student boot camp in Piran, Slovenia
- Equipment
- Friends teahouses
- MED2IaH handbook of intercultural activities
- Organisation of intercultural activities in South Mediterranean universities
- National conferences on internationalisation at home
- Multicultural Festival at South Mediterranean universities.

**Abstract.** Internationalisation at home (IaH) is the integration of international components in the curricula, in the campus, and in the faculty. It also means promoting intercultural dialogue and developing a global mind-set. In this sense, adopting internationalisation at home provides higher education institutions (HEIs) with complementary tools and methods of internationalisation to ensure a modern fair international inclusive society. Thus, local students and university staff do not need to leave their home universities to gain international experiences. Therefore, IaH offers all students without exception global perspectives within their programme of study regardless of their physical mobility. It also involves all staff, not only academics and international officers. It can also include virtual mobility through collaborative online learning with students of partner universities. It is additionally supported by informal (co-) curriculum activities across the institution. It makes meaningful use of cultural diversity in the classroom for inclusive learning, teaching and assessment practice. Moreover, it creates opportunities for student engagement with 'cultural others' in local society by fostering purposeful engagement with international students.

Therefore, IaH should not be developed as 'another' activity but has to be integrated in the university strategic plan in order to get the best of it. It should be based on the intention of policy makers, management, and staff to integrate the international dimension into the overall policy of the institution. In other words, it should be a deliberate not a passive process hence



translated into actions in different levels (management, academic and administrative staff, students) and areas (education, research, society). It should not be a purpose in itself but a tool to improve the quality of teaching and learning within institutions.

IaH therefore should meet the needs of every society. Consequently, every university should have the strategy of internationalisation at home, and because this latter is based on intercultural sensitivity and communication, cultures should be valorised for what they add to the global citizenry. It is also an overall process that involves every stakeholder in the institution; students, academic and administrative staff, and management. In this sense, inclusiveness is the basis for every successful strategy of IaH. It should be an ongoing process to guarantee the sustainability of its outcomes.

In this vein, MED2IaH project preaches for adopting internationalisation at home as a strategic avenue to provide local students with international education, experience, and opportunities in order to be able to meet the hard requirements of the 21st Century job market. MED2IaH as a capacity building project empowers the south Mediterranean universities on six levels namely internationalisation of formal and informal curriculum, global skills development in a local context, virtual mobility and collaborative online learning as internationalisation at home, campus diversity and intercultural engagement, university leadership supporting internationalisation, and forming international active staff as change agents at universities

**Keywords:** Internationalisation at home (IaH) - Capacity building – Inclusiveness – sustainability – Virtual mobility – International formal and informal curricula



# FRAMES - Fostering resilience through Accredited Mobility for European Sustainable Higher Education innovation



**Website:** <https://frames-project.eu/>

**Runtime:** 03/2021 – 01/2023

**Supported / co-funded by:** Erasmus+

**Partners:**

- UNIMED - Mediterranean Universities Union (coordinator), Italy
- UNICollaboration, Belgium
- Sharing Perspectives Foundation, Netherlands
- Universitat de Girona, Spain
- University of Limerick, Ireland
- University of Siena, Italy

**Project representative to be contacted for further info:** Cristina Stefanelli, UNIMED, c.stefanelli[AT]uni-med.net

**Short description of the initiative**

FRAMES aims to foster an harmonised implementation and accreditation of Virtual Exchange, as an integral part of (blended) mobility approaches, among European Higher Education Institutions, making the European Higher Education Area more innovative, intercultural and resilient.

Virtual Exchange (VE) is a practice that consists of sustained, technology-enabled, people-to-people online exchange sessions in which constructive communication and interaction takes place with the support of educators or facilitators. The VE methodology has proven to work as a synergistic and complementary component of physical exchange programmes, showing that it can prepare, deepen, and extend physical exchanges, allowing more students to benefit from meaningful international and intercultural experiences as part of their Higher Education. Now it is high time to work to facilitate the integration of this approach in the daily mobility activities of as many EU universities as possible.



The project aims to:

- valorise successful scenarios of accredited VE, considered as an innovative, inclusive and intercultural complement to physical mobility
- build capacity of European HEIs to integrate and accredit VE as a key component of their mobility activities
- support HEIs, European Universities and HEI Networks in creating the conditions for long term harmonised integration and accreditation of physical, blended and virtual mobility.

**Main target groups of the project:** International Relations staff and related offices (mobility officers, educational offer, career offices), IT staff, academic staff with responsibilities for internationalisation, management and educational leaders of Higher Education Institutions in Europe and beyond.

**Significant public results:**

- **Scenarios for the integration of Virtual Exchange in Higher Education.** A comprehensive report presenting the different scenarios of integration of blended mobility (focusing mainly but not only on Virtual Exchange approaches) by Higher Education Institutions, with the aim to foster understanding of how to integrate and accredit blended mobility.  
<https://frames-project.eu/outputs/scenarios/>
- **Online training on Virtual Exchange.** An online training on integration and accreditation of Virtual Exchange and blended mobility targeting university staff from international relations offices and related offices.  
<https://frames-project.eu/outputs/online-training-on-virtual-exchange/>
- **Toolkit for integrating Virtual Exchange in Higher Education.** A set of key information, inspiration, tools and case examples of the approaches that HEIs can take to integrate and accredit VE.  
<https://frames-project.eu/outputs/toolkit/>
- **Strategic framework for blended mobility integration.** A strategic framework to support university leaders and managers on how to include Virtual Exchange in a long-term perspective within the mobility and internationalisation strategies of their universities.  
<https://frames-project.eu/outputs/strategic-framework/>

**Abstract.** FRAMES aims to foster an harmonised implementation and accreditation of Virtual Exchange, as an integral part of (blended) mobility approaches, among European Higher Education Institutions, making the European Higher Education Area more innovative, intercultural and resilient. The project is funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union and spans over 2 years (March 2021 - February 2023).

**Keywords:** Virtual Exchange, Higher Education, Internationalisation at Home



# Vtech - Accelerating Western Balkans University Modernization by Incorporating Virtual Technologies



**Website:** <https://vtech-project.eu>

**Runtime:** 01/2020 – 01/2023

**Supported / co-funded by:** Erasmus+ CBHE

**Partners:**

- University of Durrës, Albania
- European University of Tirana, Albania
- Polis University, Albania
- Epoka University, Albania
- University of Prishtina, Kosovo
- University for Business and Technology, Kosovo
- Mother Teresa University Skopje, North Macedonia
- South East European University, North Macedonia
- University of Tartu, Estonia
- Lodz University of Technology, Poland
- University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

**Project representative to be contacted for further info:** Albana Ndreu, UAMD University, Durrës, Albania, [albanahalili@uamd.edu.al](mailto:albanahalili@uamd.edu.al)

**Short description of the initiative**

VTECH is an Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education project led by the Aleksander Moisiu University of Durrës, Albania. The consortium has 11 partners out of which 6 are HEIs from Albania and Kosovo, and 5 partners HEIs from program countries namely Estonia, Poland, Slovenia and the Republic of North Macedonia. The project is envisaged to last for 3 years.

The project specific objectives are:

- Capacity building of academic staff to incorporate Virtual Technologies in teaching;
- Develop teaching methodologies availing of technology and/or ICT tools;
- Equip students with competencies to use/access tools, software and platforms;





- Increase interaction between teachers and students;
- Increase the level of understanding and reduce the grasping time and the effort that students need to learn information by using 3D concepts instead of 2D ones;
- Offer a better delivery of basic knowledge even for complex issues, higher learning efficiency and better learning experience by AR/VR techniques;
- Establish Virtual Technology HUB for developing teaching materials for basic learning courses and serve as a HUB for other HEIs;
- Foster cooperation between academy and industry by organising open days, joint product developments, thesis supervision etc.;
- Develop capacities for future joint research and innovative ideas with the support of Virtual Technologies.

**Main target groups of the project:** HEIS, academic staff and students, administrative staff, University management

**Significant public results:**

In the mid to long term, the project will bring novelty in the learning and teaching tools, methodologies and pedagogical approaches challenging the traditional teaching and learning process, toward a new one having the student interaction at the center.

The project will enable teachers and students to access new ways of teaching and learning (virtual and augmented realities, 3D animation etc..) to contribute toward a modern qualitative education system.

In the long run, it is expected to increase the higher education institutional performance to meet the international criteria and standards.

**Abstract.** VTECH is an Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education project led by the Aleksander Moisiu University of Durrës, Albania. The consortium has 11 partners out of which 6 are HEIs from Albania and Kosovo, and 5 partners HEIs from program countries namely Estonia, Poland, Slovenia and the Republic of North Macedonia. The project is envisaged to last for 3 years.

VTECH project's general aim is to introduce for the first time at Western Balkan universities the concept of Virtual Technologies as a tool for accelerating university modernization, while contributing to developing knowledge-driven society.

By incorporating Virtual Technology in the academic culture of universities, this project aims at increasing the quality and level of efficiency in teaching and knowledge retention through interactive learning methods, thus contributing to skills enhancement and further building of digital society at Western Balkans countries.

**Keywords:** Virtual technology, university to business, VR/AR, internationalisation, capacity building.



# COWEB - Promoting and Facilitating Collaborative Virtual International Learning in the Western Balkans' Higher Education Institutions

**Runtime:** 01/2023 - 01/2026

**Supported / co-funded by:** Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union

## **Partners:**

- EPOKA University, Albania
- Technical University of Dresden, Germany
- International School for Social and Business Studies, Slovenia
- University of Salento, Italy
- European University of Tirana, Albania
- University of Business and Technology, Kosovo
- Business College, Kosovo
- International Burch University, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- University of East Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- University of Montenegro, Montenegro

**Project representative to be contacted for further info:** Esmir Demaj, edemaj[AT]epoka.edu.al

## **Short description of the initiative**

The idea of this project proposal stemmed from the experience and the impetus created during the last years under extraordinary emergent conditions under COVID-19, where all the consortium partners of this project have been put in a fait accompli position to use alternative tools and channels to keep the teaching and learning process going, regardless of the fact whether staff and/or students possessed proper competencies and capacities to comply with such shift.

**Main target groups of the project:** WB HEI Students, WB HEI Academic Staff, WB HEIs

**Significant public results:** Report on EU Best Practices on VCL (Benchmarking), Report on Western Balkans Needs Assessment on Virtual Collaborative Learning, Didactical Staff training materials and Teaching & Learning Materials, Local, Regional and International VCL Course Delivered, Research Output on VCL Course experience, Project Website, and Promotional Materials

## **Abstract**

COWEB project is fully aligned with the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) action call, since it brings together Western Balkan HEIs and EU HEIs, the latter committed to transfer their good practices and experiences to the Western Balkan HEIs part



of the consortium aiming to modernise the teaching and learning processes of their institutions in line with the Digital Transformation overarching priority of the European Commission.

COWEB Project Consortium is composed of ten partner universities. Three HEIs are from the European Union, respectively Germany, Slovenia and Italy. Seven other partner HEIs are from the Western Balkans region, respectively 2 from Albania, 2 from Kosovo, 2 from Bosnia-Herzegovina and 1 from Montenegro. The Consortium was designed so that partners are complementary to each other and to enhance the experience and expertise of each partner.

The general objective of COWEB (Promoting and Facilitating Collaborative Virtual International Learning in the Western Balkans Higher Education Institutions) is to build capacities in the Western Balkans Higher Education Institutions for international virtual collaboration as an innovative pedagogy in teaching and learning, with a focus on co-creating virtual/blended learning spaces and course content that will boost 21st century skills and competencies and address the low cross-border collaboration among young students in the Western Balkans region.

**Keywords:** Virtual International Learning, Western Balkans, cross-border collaboration, learning spaces



# List of Authors

Altmann, Mattis, 23, 25  
Alushllari, Griselda, 11  
Aschenbrenner, Lisa, 23  
Ben Malek, Dorsaf, 29  
Böhmer, Arne, 36  
Çabiri, Ketrina Mijo, 12  
Cenaj, Enkelejda, 39  
Çyfeku, Juliana, 16  
Demaj, Esmir, 11, 18  
Dibra, Hajrije, 15  
Draçini, Rrezarta, 30  
Duka, Ambera, 21  
Golemi, Suzana, 13  
Gudachi, Venera, 17  
Helleken, Tom, 33  
Hilse, Laura, 25  
Hobe, Nils, 33  
Jetter, Fabian, 31  
Kaçauni, Dorela, 22  
Koseni, Merlina, 39  
Lacej, Donalda, 15  
Langesee, Lisa-Marie, 33  
Laçej, Ariana, 13  
Leka, Klodiana, 21  
Lenk-Klioner, Florian, 40  
Mashaj, Arselida, 13  
Maurer, Moritz, 31  
Muçi, Mariola, 20  
Muniz Calderon, Rut, 29  
Musch, Maximilian, 36  
Nurwulan, Nurul Retno, 38  
Petro, Menada, 28  
Priku, Mimoza, 30  
Qafzezi, Eriola, 10  
Qosja, Ermira, 12  
Rubarth, Gotje Frieda, 23  
Salhi, Maroua, 23  
Schmidt, Sebastian, 31, 36  
Schmiedgen, Peter, 35  
Schöne, Jasmin, 35  
Schoop, Eric, 40  
Schubert, Hannes, 36  
Shkreli, Zamira, 15  
Ukhova, Nelli, 25, 40  
Vasilevska, Marija, 17  
Yanti, Maya Primeradama, 38



## Members of the Consortium

Technische Universitaet Dresden (TUD), Germany (coordinator)  
International School for Social and Business Studies (ISSBS), Slovenia  
Mediterranean Universities Union (UNIMED), Italy  
European University of Tirana (UET), Albania  
Epoka University (EPOKA), Albania  
University of Shkodra (USHK), Albania  
“FAN S. NOLI” University of Korka (UNIKO), Albania  
University of Elbasan (UNIEL), Albania  
Aleksander Moisiu University of Durres (AMU), Albania

