This position paper defines virtual exchange and offers a vision of the role of virtual exchange in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and beyond[i]. This paper has been developed by the INTENT project group and is intended for distribution and undersigning by educational institutions, organizations and networks.

What is Virtual Exchange?

Virtual exchanges are technology-enabled, sustained, people to people education programs[ii]. These entail the engagement of groups of students in online intercultural exchange, interaction and collaboration with peers from partner classes in geographically distant locations, under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators. This practice is also known as Collaborative online International Learning (COIL) and Globally Networked Learning (GNL). In Foreign Language education it is more commonly known as Telecollaboration and Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) [iii], and is employed to foster intercultural dialogue, the development of digital and critical literacies as well as foreign language skills.

Context: Current issues in Europe and the EHEA

Europe is currently facing many challenges and higher education is one place where these challenges need to be addressed. The European Commission argues: "In a changing world, Europe's graduates need the kind of education that enables them to engage articulately as committed, active, thinking, global citizens as well as economic actors in the ethical, sustainable development of our societies"[iv].

We believe that:

- The world is increasingly interdependent and there is an urgent need to develop a deeper understanding of this interdependency and to address major global challenges through multilateral and intercultural collaboration.
- Whilst study abroad programs offer an effective way to prepare students for intercultural collaboration, it is estimated that currently only about 4.5% of the total student population in the European Higher Education Area experience a period of study abroad at some time during their studies[v]. Even if the European objective of 20% by the year 2020 is achieved, this will still leave 80% of students without an international, intercultural experience as part of their university studies.
- Racism, xenophobia and intolerance are on the rise in Europe, both in our communities and in the online space[vi]. There is a strong need for structured intercultural dialogue[vii] to combat these tendencies, not only in theory but in practice. Combatting racism and xenophobia is a transversal concern.
- Intercultural, international and global competencies are required for employability in the global 'knowledge society'. There is also a need for greater attention to notions such as critical global citizenship and civic engagement.
- Developing digital literacy is becoming an imperative, yet the European Commission has identified a new digital divide between those who have access to innovative, technology-based education and those who do not, as a result of a fragmentation of approaches. Higher quality and more innovative education practice through the use of ICT has become a key priority for the EU[viii].
- Foreign language competences need to be significantly improved in Europe and the European Commission has called for language policies to address the creation of language-friendly learning environments and motivate young people to learn languages[ix]

We hold that

- Virtual exchange can meet the needs of higher education institutions in fostering the development of 21st century skills, foreign language competence as well as intercultural awareness and critical thinking.
- Independent evaluation of some virtual exchange models has proved that they can substantially improve cross-cultural empathy and understanding; increase critical thinking, intercultural communication and collaboration skills; and increase participants' capacity to collaborate as part of diverse teams.
- Virtual exchange can offer greater equity in access to intercultural exchange than physical mobility, and reach a far greater number and diversity of the student population. The European Higher Education Area has the potential to contribute to a generation of young people who are not merely tolerant of diversity but who actively seek and embrace a diversity of views, languages, beliefs and practices.
- Virtual exchange is not intended to replace physical exchange or mobility, but it can be a stimulus for students' intercultural curiosity and spark an interest in engaging in physical mobility; it can be an alternative or a combined and preparatory activity for Erasmus or other mobility programmes, hence a component of blended mobility approaches.
- Virtual exchange can be introduced into any university course as a way of innovating teaching practice and internationalising the curriculum 'at home'.
- Virtual exchange can be implemented by individual teachers partnering with other teachers in designing their own projects according to their specific needs. However, sustainability can only be guaranteed with institutional support to integrate virtual exchange into the curriculum across disciplines. There needs to be a commitment to provide professional development to both educators and staff to successfully implement virtual exchange.
- Virtual exchange can also be implemented with the support of 'virtual exchange providers' who have the capacity to offer large-scale virtual exchanges involving multiple partners, following an established curriculum. Virtual exchange partnerships can also include other stakeholders, such as enterprises, NGOs, associations.
- There is a need for more research, development and evaluation of new models of virtual exchange addressing current European and global issues.

We call for:

- A coherent strategy for virtual exchange in higher education on European, national and institutional levels in order to mitigate fragmentation and enhance consolidation of approaches and resources that will enable this practice to be mainstreamed in higher education.
- A system of grants for virtual exchanges to cover the costs for the development and implementation of innovative online exchange projects.
- The integration of virtual exchanges as an important component of quality higher education curricula, and their recognition with credits and inclusion in the European Diploma Supplement.
- Support for more research into measuring the impact of virtual intercultural exchange programs

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[To add your institution's or organization's signature to this position paper, please contact the INTENT project group: intentproject@gmail.com]

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[ii] http://exchange2point0.org/

[iii] The activity of OIE is also referred to in different educational contexts as Virtual Exchange, Telecollaboration, Collaborative Online Integrated Learning (COIL) and Globally Networked Learning and also as a form of virtual mobility. However, the term *virtual mobility* is often used to encompass what we would define more generally as online education or distance learning and more recently MOOCs, which do not always focus on people to people interaction. A need has been recognized to change the terminology, see for instance the Movinter White Paper www.movinter.eu

[iv] http://ec.europa.eu/education/library/reports/modernisation_en.pdf

[v] http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-13-647_en.htm

[vi] http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/Library/PressReleases/146-2013_10_25_AnnualReport2012_en.asp

[vii] http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white%20paper_final_revised_en.pdf

[viii] http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/education-technology.htm

[ix] http://ec.europa.eu/education/library/reports/modernisation_en.pdf