



# Optimising International Student Mobility through Virtual Exchange

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You learn a lot when travelling to other countries...



# Or not...

## INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

“process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education” (Knight, 2004, p. 6).

- Are students **equipped to navigate** the challenges of studying abroad?
- Do universities **prepare** students before a mobility?
- How does the lack of preparation **impact** their experience?
- Are the expected learning **outcomes being met**?
- How can we **improve their performance**?



# LOW ACCESSIBILITY & PERFORMANCE

## THE PROBLEM ...

2.6% internationally mobile (UNESCO, 2022)

Elitist and a source of inequity (Richardson, 2016)

“Sink-or-swim environment” (Vande Berg et al., 2012b, p. 6)

“Bubble” & “tourist” experiences (Jackson, 2019, p. 6)

Reinforced stereotypes (Byram & Fleming, 1998)

No intercultural competence (Vande Berg et al., 2012a)

Immersion myth → Institutions do not intend to offer preparation (Borm et al., 2024).



## THE SOLUTION ...

Optimisation of learning outcomes (Jackson, 2018).

Pedagogical interventions throughout the entire SA cycle (Jackson, 2018).

Virtual  
Exchange

as a preparatory tool (Kinging, 2016; Lee & Song, 2019; Batardière et al., 2019; Capellini & Macré, 2020, Colpaert, 2020, O'Dowd, 2023a).

to increase accessibility to intercultural learning (O'Dowd, 2023b).

to increase participation in SA (Lee et al., 2022).

# PRE-MOBILITY: AN UNDERDEVELOPED CONCEPT

## VE

Linguistic competence (Belz, 2001; O'Dowd, 2012)

Intercultural learning (O'Dowd & Dooly, 2020)

Transversal skills (Lindner, 2016; Stevens Initiative, 2022).

A preparatory phase prior to mobility deliberately implemented to equip future sojourners with the necessary skills to maintain successful and appropriate intercultural interactions when studying abroad (Alonso, 2025).

Students desire to be trained and those who are, find it useful (Borm et al., 2024).

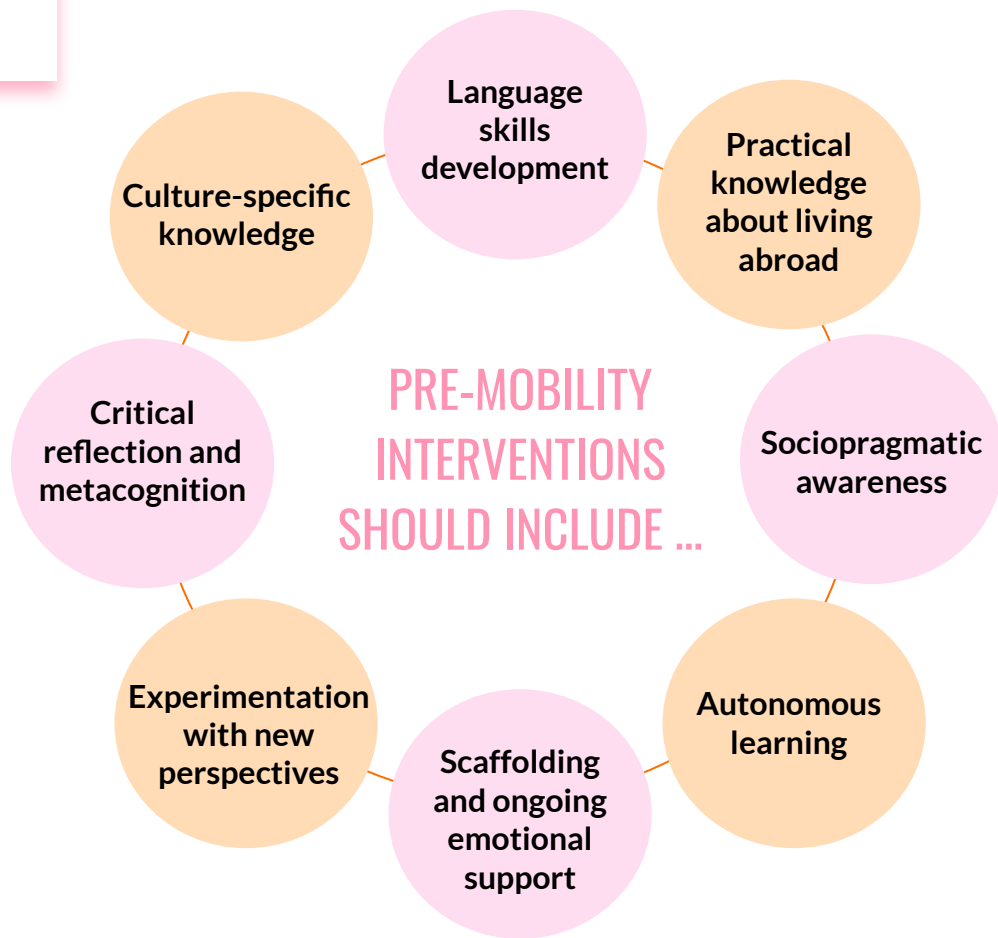
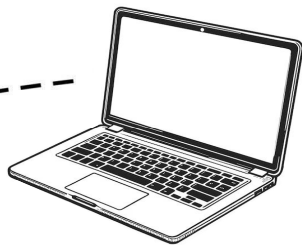


Ready, Mobility, Go! (Batardière et al., 2019)  
I-Tell Project (Giralt & Jeanneau, 2016),



# REFINING PRE-MOBILITY

What should pre-mobility interventions include in order to successfully prepare students to study abroad?



# BACKGROUND TO THE MODEL

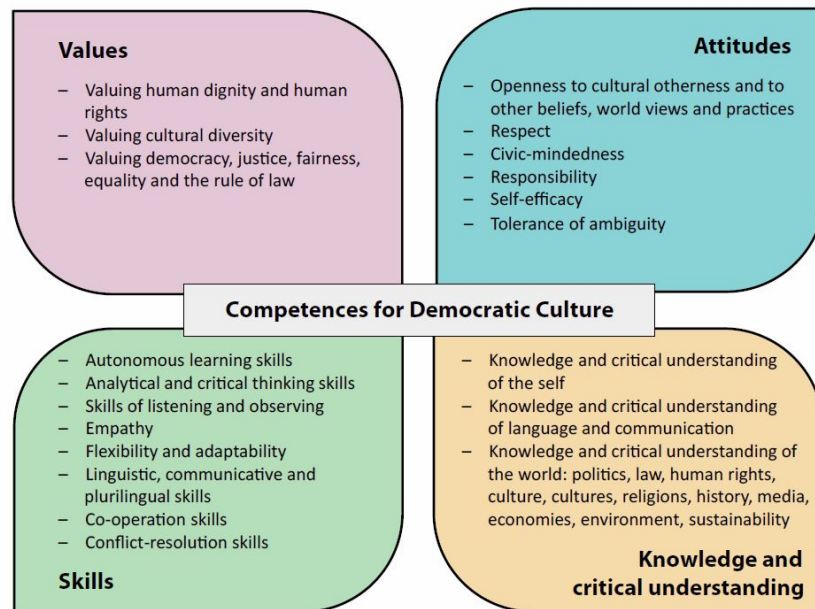
Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Task-Based Learning (TBL)

Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)  
(Council of Europe, 2001, 2018b, 2020).

Progressive Exchange Model (O'Dowd & Ware, 2009).

Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic  
Culture (RFCDC) (Council of Europe, 2016, 2018a).

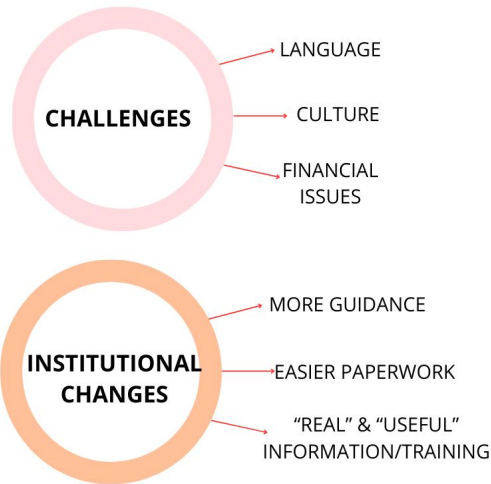


*Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture*

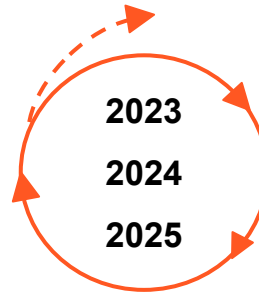
# METHODOLOGY & RESEARCH DESIGN

## NEEDS ANALYSIS

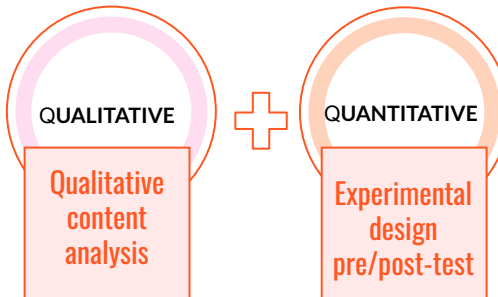
74 outgoing and incoming exchange students from ULE.



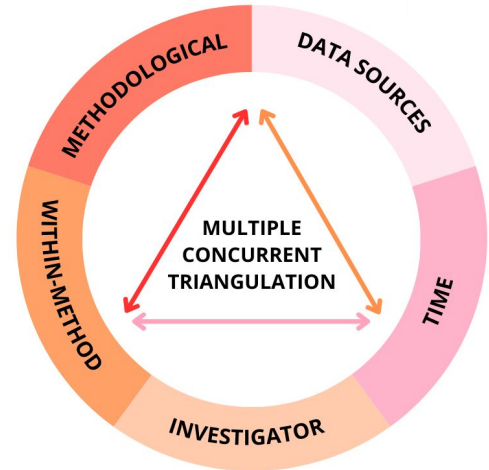
## ACTION RESEARCH



## MIXED METHODS

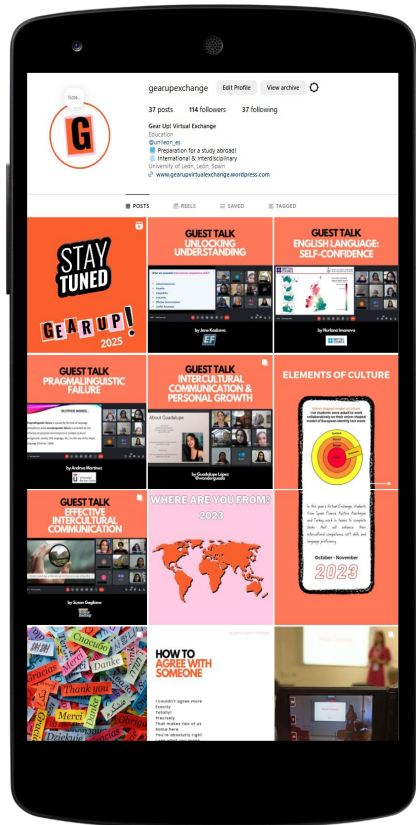
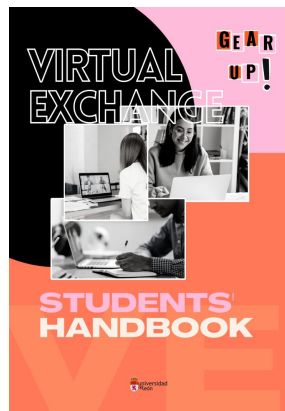


## TRIANGULATION





# THE MODEL



# GEAR UP!

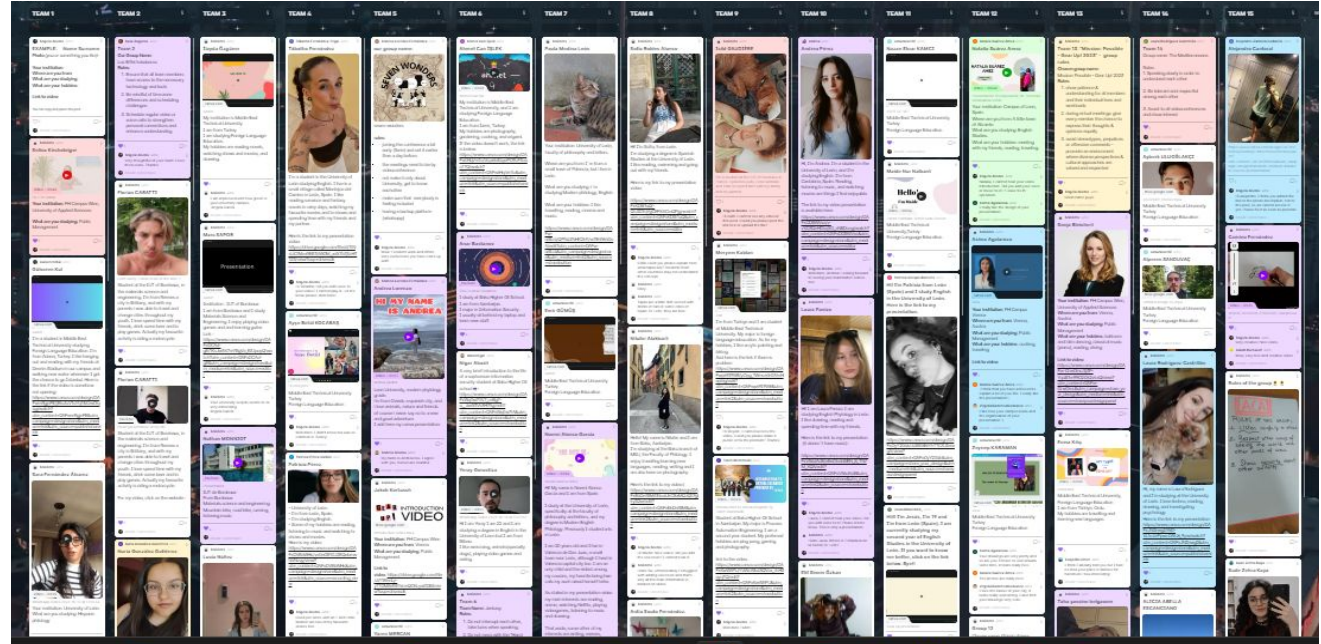
Week 0	Preparatory workshop
Week 2 - T1	Introduction: Who Am I?
Week 3 - T2	University life across countries
Week 4 - T3	Overcoming stereotypes
Week 5 - T4	Elements of culture
Week 6 - T5	Cultural misunderstandings
Week 7 - T6	Challenges of studying abroad
Week 8	Reflection: Portfolio

@gearupexchange



# INTERNATIONAL TEAMS

Authentic communication  
Using a lingua franca  
Supportive peer-to-peer learning context  
Resemblance to study abroad settings



# LESSONS LEARNT

## 2022

Structure	Voluntary for students and accessible via their international offices
Countries	18 countries Europe & South America
Discipline	Interdisciplinary
Year	1,2,3
Total	42
VLE	Moodle / Zoom
VE training	- Online workshop - Student's Handbook
Mentoring	- 4 online sessions - 3 in-person sessions
Recognition	% grade
Assessment	Summative: reflective portfolio

## 2023

Class-to-class VE	→ 5 partner teachers integrate the VE into their modules
Spain, Austria, France, Turkey & Azerbaijan	
=	
1,2,3	
95	
Padlet & Google Drive / Google Meet	
=	
- 8 online sessions - 5 in-person sessions - Keynote speakers	
2 ECTS + % grade	
=	

## 2025

Class-to-class VE	→ 7 partner teachers integrate the VE into their modules
=	
=	
1 & 2	
110	
=	
=	
=	
=	
=	

# SOME OF MOST SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

## LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

Increased FL  
confidence

(Lee and Markey, 2014; EVOLVE Project Team, 2020; O'Dowd, 2022).

## INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

Adaptability  
in intercultural  
settings

(Furstenberg et al., 2001; Belz, 2003; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006; O'Dowd, 2007; 2012; ).

## TRANSVERSAL SKILLS

Empathy

(O'Dowd, 2011; Lindner, 2016; The EVALUATE Group, 2019; EVOLVE Project Team, 2020; Stevens Initiative, 2022).

*At first I was afraid and embarrassed to do it because I had a hard time speaking English in public, but thanks to you and your project, and also to the people I have met in my group, I have realised that **I am more than capable and fear was what made me think I couldn't.** For this, and for making me see that English is also for me, I wanted to thank you (R2\_STUD3).*

*When talking to people of a different nationality than your own, you have to be careful, **you never know if something that's normal for you is normal for them too** (R1\_STUD18).*

*I also have **learnt to put myself on the other shoes**, to understand why people from different nationalities have different customs and behaviors (R2\_STUD4).*

# PRE-MOBILITY IS NOT ENOUGH FOR SOME

## PREPARATION

Increased  
feeling of  
preparedness

Reduced  
fears



## PARTICIPATION

New interest  
& willingness

Intensified  
willingness

Strong  
barriers &  
unresolved  
fears

[It] **helped me to get ready** for my upcoming exchange because most of the things we discussed are practical things we might experience while on exchange (R1\_STUD22).

I now know there is much more behind it, **not everything is fun and party** (R2\_STUD82).

I was scared of studying abroad. I recognize that **my expectations of studying abroad have changed** as I have become very good at communicating in English. (R1\_STUD36).

My expectations right now about studying abroad have not changed much since due to economic possibilities **I could not afford it** (R2\_STUD9).

This program gave me the courage to do it. [It] helped me make a decision about going on a student exchange. **Now I am also sure that I want to go on Erasmus** (R1\_STUD3).

# PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

**Authentic  
collaboration on the  
theme of studying  
abroad**

**Safety and support**

**Ongoing  
pedagogical  
mentoring**

**Guided critical  
reflection**

**Simplicity**

**Academic  
recognition**

**Strategic  
partnerships**

VE is not a magical  
formula but a tool to  
complement the study  
abroad cycle  
(O'Dowd, 2011;  
Trentamn, 2018).

There exist a series  
of strong barriers  
that VE alone  
cannot overcome.

## RECENT PUBLICATIONS

- Alonso, A. & O'Dowd, R. (2025). Virtual exchanges in CALL teacher education. In L. McCallum & D. Tafazoli (Eds.), *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Computer-Assisted Language Learning*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-51447-0>
- Alonso-Morais, A. (2025). Advancing Inclusion through Pre-mobility Virtual Exchange. In E. Britton, A. Kraemer, T. Austin, H. Liu & X. Zuo (Eds.), *Advancing Critical CALL Across Institutions and Borders* (pp. 55-74). University of Toronto Press.

# Thank you!

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