Rethinking International Exchange with Digital

Bringing agility and innovation to international higher education

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What's inside

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- Digital exchange and digital transformation
- Why international exchange makes a difference
- Stakeholders and personas
- Common challenges and solutions

Recommendations & resources

- Best practices
- Example projects
- Resources

Insights

- Rocío Robinson – AIT, Leading House for the Latin American Region, University of St. Gallen
- Amanda Crameri – Movetia, the Swiss National Agency for Exchange and Mobility
- Robert Buttery – University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland (FHNW

Introduction

Leveraging digital to transform international education requires a mindset shift, upskilling, and considerable effort to build a network. And as a result, substantially more students gain access to valuable intercultural experiences that ready them for work in international and dispersed teams.

The additional challenges of the pandemic are an opportunity to prioritise rethinking international education while drawing on agile and innovation methodologies. In lieu of short term fixes, international digital exchange efforts should be integrated parts of larger, university-wide digital transformation processes. To make

digital exchange a reality, both students and faculty require storytelling and motivation to understand and champion the value of online international exchange.

This paper comes as a result of an online roundtable organised by swissnex India and Movetia in 2020 and of conversations with diverse Swiss and international education professionals. It provides best practices, case studies, resources, and inspiration to guide educators and administrators to advocate for, launch, measure, and maintain successful digital international exchange.

Sebastien Hug
CEO & Consul General Swissnex in India

Why digital

Accessible

Digital exchange is highly inclusive

Effective

Intercultural interactions are deeper and more sustained

Resilient

Ingraining innovation helps withstand future disruptions

Sustainable

Less travel reduces carbon footprint

Online international exchange is part of your digital transformation

As universities around the world accelerate their digitalisation plans, they should include their internationalisation initiatives as part of this transformation. The strategies are relevant to both international and domestic learning.

Digital exchange requires rethinking pedagogical techniques in order to increase access to and success of intercultural programmes while leveraging technology to unlock teaching potential. Stakeholders should learn strategies in agile, iteration, and innovation in order to be able to apply them adaptively to their initiatives.

Debunking misconceptions

International digital exchange is not simply finding new ways to keep people in front of screens. It is about using digital tools to build connections with people in dispersed locations, often in addition to in-person meetings. It can include communicating through familiar apps or social media, participating in offline activities, or experimenting with new digital tools for collaboration. Crucially, the tools serve the learning goals. This is an opportunity to reevaluate and improve upon traditional practices.

Where to begin

Common blockers to international exchange

- Motivating students and faculty
- Lack of time and resources
- Tool overload and tech fatigue
- Lack of experience leveraging technology innovatively
- Inadequate funding and network

Stakeholders

- Faculty
- Administrators
- International education offices
- Course developers
- Students
- University leaders
- Campus IT professionals
- International partners

Quick tips

- Just do it. Use the Lean Startup methodology and learn by doing: test, review, iterate
- Make a stakeholder map and bring them on early
- Explore ways to bring together research and classroom learning
- Utilise your network – alumni groups, research cohort, partner institutions, swissnex, Movetia, and involve students
- Redirect money that can't be used because of Covid-19, like travel budgets
- Help stakeholders realize the value for their own priorities – research, career, institutional goals
- Develop a culture of digital learning and iteration
- Take a "hackathon" approach by tackling issues collaboratively with an interdisciplinary group

University student

My plans to study abroad fell through because of Covid-19. Virtual exchange is just not the same. I'd rather postpone my trip until next year.

Key attributes
- Interest in international experiences
- Likes and expects digital elements in classroom learning
- Has resources for extended travel

Pain points
- Doesn't understand digital mobility
- Views digital mobility as a poor replacement to physical mobility
- Worried about networking and job hunting digitally
- Wants to travel for more than academic reasons – to experience living in another culture

Key messages
- Showcase the innovative opportunity with storytelling and clarify misconceptions
- Highlight the different transferable skills gained from digital exchange
- Digital mobility is not a 1-1 replacement for physical mobility
- Digital collaboration skills will be increasingly important for future employers

University professor

It might seem like this is the year for more digital programmes but actually, I'm just trying to keep my head above water moving my usual lectures online.

Key attributes
- Not a "digital person"
- Considers digital and international projects separate from teaching work
- Believes in the power of in-person relationships

Pain points
- Not enough time
- Other priorities take precedence
- Lack of support and clear strategic communication from university
- Lack of digital resources and guidance
- Can't keep track of all the tech tools and doesn't want to learn more

Key messages
- Instill a culture of continuous digital learning and upskilling as a strategic priority
- Provide workshops, training, and coaching to faculty on digital skills
- Spark inspiration with examples of programmes and projects at other institutions
- Engage in storytelling to make clear the value of international exchange

Applied sciences student

I don't think studying abroad is relevant to my degree, plus, it's expensive. My priority is starting work quickly so I can support my family.

Key attributes

- Has family obligations
- Focused on personal saving goals. Wants to buy a house
- Prefers easy, all-inclusive travel

Pain points

- No ideal home study space
- Doesn't like sitting in front of a screen all day
- Doesn't understand the benefit of international experiences for their profession in Switzerland

Key messages

- Communicate the professional and personal benefits of international exchange for all career paths, domestic and international
- Engage students in projects that they propose themselves
- Develop innovative programmes that include both online and offline elements

Programme administrator

Despite access to many digital resources, I fail to see big results from their use. I understand the potential but don't know how to move forward.

Key attributes

- Remembers own study abroad experience fondly
- Attended a workshop on COIL last year
- Parent to two small kids
- Likes following tech trends

Pain points

- Knowledge of many tech tools but unsure how to leverage innovatively
- Hectic shared home office space
- Motivated, but lacking network and internal resources

Key messages

- Assign a digital coach for the full length of a project
- Conduct training sessions on how to use technology to serve goals
- Senior faculty set examples
- Support top-down strategy with internal resources
- Help connect potential champions with international partners

How to convince stakeholders

International digital exchange...

- Prepares students for work in international and geographically dispersed teams
- Provides faculty with creative and interdisciplinary ways to pursue research interests
- Raises visibility of your institution as an innovative learning destination
- Introduces students and faculty to new perspectives and modes of analysis
- Increases opportunities for meaningful global collaboration
- Brings the value of international exchange to a significantly wider audience
- Surpasses traditional learning and mobility limitations by making it more inclusive
- Teaches valuable transferable skills in leadership, digital innovation, and critical thinking

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84%

of Swiss higher education students are not mobile*

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*See first notation p. 9

Insights

Methods for conducting virtual fieldwork – now is the time to reexamine and experiment

At the Leading House for the Latin American Region, one of our most important tasks is funding researchers so that they can travel and conduct fieldwork. With travel restrictions and closed archives, the pandemic brought a lot of traditional research to a halt. The reality, though, is that researchers should be prepared to conduct fieldwork in times of crisis of any form: be it pandemics, natural disasters, political upheavals, etc. We should also be reconsidering what type of travel is necessary. Our current priority at the Leading House is helping researchers move forward with their work.

Remote practices have existed for a long time. I find the possibilities of combining digital and analog tools to promote human-centred innovation and discovery very exciting. Cultural probes are an excellent example of this and British professors such as Helen Kara and William Gaver have interesting suggestions for creative remote research.

Surprisingly, sometimes people share and learn more when participating in remote-method, open-ended, hands-on assignments than they would in traditional ethnographic exchange. At present, we have academics conducting interviews over WhatsApp or asking participants to share through journal entries. Some researchers have sent a toolkit with "homework" activities for the respondents, such as writing a poem, taking a photo, making videos of their surroundings, or even building something together. Playfulness invites intimacy.

I learned of one researcher who, when unable to visit an indigenous basket archive, instead learned firsthand, over a series of video calls with the community, how to weave baskets himself, collecting valuable oral histories in the process.

There are also a plethora of digital non-traditional secondary sources to turn to, like chatrooms and forums. As scientists, we need to maintain our rigorous academic standards, but it is worthwhile to reconsider how we use primary and secondary data. Virtual is not a substitute for in-person meetings, but it can be a powerful enhancement for Social Science research. Hopefully, in the future, we will have the luxury to do both.

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Universität St.Gallen
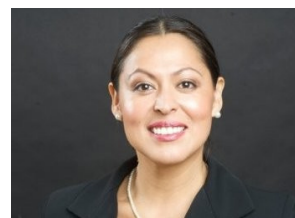
Movetia's vision

Internationalisation as a fundamental element of every student's path

The mobility of students and university staff is a key internationalisation measure for higher education institutions: stays abroad help graduates to acquire the necessary international, intercultural, specialist and personal skills and boost their employability and chances of access to a globalised working world. In a post COVID-19 future, additional competences such as resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility will play a major role, as well as curiosity, the ability to never stop asking questions and critical thinking. All these skills are also among those we see developed during a mobility period abroad.

Unfortunately, only a minority of students participate in study abroad programmes and not every institution promotes mobility in a strategic way. According to a study by the Federal Statistical Office, only 16% spend at least 3 months on exchange during their studies (1). A European study that includes all degrees at tertiary level, including colleges of higher education and degree mobility, i.e. when you spend an entire degree course abroad, comes to 12% for the 2017 graduates (2). Additional interesting facts and figures can be found in the Movetia statistics (3).

An educational exchange in another country is clearly a unique cultural experience and it cannot be replaced by digital exchange – even if universities and students came up with such creative solutions during the Corona pandemic, for example with virtual cookery meetings or yoga classes. On the other hand, digitalisation helps learning and collaborating without actually travelling and is extending the learning environment. Digital progress opens up new possibilities and it can be seen as a perfect pairing to internationalisation at home, but certain risks or barriers have to be mitigated. How can we widen the participant circle and what additional strategies can be pursued to help preparing resilient graduates and to create high-quality learning experience based on interaction and exchange?

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1. Reference: number of 2016 graduates. The statistics are based on the figures of the universities, the universities of applied sciences and the universities of teacher education. – Mobilität von Studierenden der Schweizer Hochschulen 2013-2016 /page 32.
2. Mobilitätsanzeiger – Hochschulbildung Hintergrundbericht 2018/2019
3. Swiss-European Mobility Programme

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Movetia's resources

Funding instruments

With financial means from the Swiss confederation, the Swiss national Agency Movetia supports efforts of higher education institutions to provide international learning opportunities. For the time after the pandemic, Movetia wants to combine the strengths from both experiences: physical mobility and digital exchange. Before and after a stay in a different country, students should be able to network digitally and exchange. We want to make this possible by introducing new financing instruments for institutions and students. On the one hand, from 2022 onwards, the classic **physical mobility** offer will be enriched with the so-called **blended mobility** (provided the budget is available): a combination of virtual and physical mobility. In concrete terms, this means that the duration of physical mobility for students will be reduced to between 5 days and 5 weeks for this format. To enhance the effects of a short physical mobility, students should remain digitally connected with the host university before and after the mobility.

In parallel and in addition to the support of blended mobility, institutions can apply for funding for **blended intensive programmes**. These are short, intensive programmes that use innovative ways of learning and teaching, including the use of online cooperation. Such programmes can build up the academic framework to implement blended mobility.

Within frameworks for international cooperation, such as Erasmus+ or the Movetia International Programme, institutions can internationalise their curriculum by embracing the opportunities of online technologies and pedagogies such as COIL or by fostering virtual experiences in addition to physical mobility.

With these new instruments, that target both the individual and the institutional, Movetia hopes to increase the number of students and staff benefiting from an international perspective.

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In practice
Collaborative Online International Learning COIL

Swiss and American MBA students consulted for US startups

60 students from the School of Management Fribourg HEG-FR and Suffolk University in Boston worked in mixed teams as junior consultants solving specific business challenges posed by two early-stage American startup companies. Part of a for-credit course at each institution and orchestrated by swissnex.

Startups provided background materials and groups collaborated digitally. Pre-covid, the programme included a one-week visit to Boston.

Navigating the complexity of working in a virtual trans-Atlantic team was an important intercultural component.

Outcomes and learnings
- Came out of a desire to move away from "innovation tourism" and toward longstanding learning outcomes
- Students formed deeper relationships with each others and earned first-hand business experience
- Very positive feedback from all stakeholders

Learn more
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Future English teachers collaborated in Switzerland and Israel

Students from Pädagogische Hochschule Thurgau PHTG and Gordon College of Education in Haifa, Israel collaborated over five weeks.

In a course on Multilingualism, students worked together on tasks, such as the benefits of virtual exchange in the English foreign language classroom. Participating in exchange while discussing exchange for school children, gave first-hand insights into the benefits and challenges.

This was a teacher-led initiative with the goal of planting the seed of future exchanges in soon-to-be-teachers. It was also a chance for institutional collaboration in a period without the possibility of physical exchange.

Outcomes and learnings
- The students clearly enjoyed learning about each other's language(s) and culture and several teams have stayed in touch
- The experiential and intercultural learning experience was considered an added value by the students
- Live exchanges were most effective and preferred by most participants

Learn more
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In practice
Summer school & Academy

Learners from every continent gathered online for summer courses

University of Zurich UZH offered interdisciplinary online summer courses to local and international students. UZH partnered with CIL at UC Berkeley to offer social workshops. Topics: effective communication and collaboration in diverse teams.

Outcomes and learnings
- Students reported a 73% positive rating as a valuable international experience (same as in-person years)
- Digital format allowed for a new university partnership that otherwise wouldn't have been possible due to travel costs
- Working across timezones was a challenge but provided good preparation for working globally
- Games helped bring students together and form friendships
- Online is more accessible financially. In future, may offer online and in-person courses
- Use multiple tools and formats: video, chat, podcasts, breakout rooms, whiteboards, quizzes, surveys, group work, workshops

Learn more
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UZH International Summer Schools

Swiss and South Asian students tackle global sustainable development goals in online Academy

In a three-week academy, students and young professionals build skills to address the UN Agenda 2030 – Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Special focus on climate change, waste management, and biodiversity. The Academy involves academics, grassroots, and civic leaders from South Asia as speakers and teachers.

Programme offered by the Clusters of Cooperation in the Global South (CLOC) and sponsored by Swiss universities Development and Cooperation Network (SUDAC).

Learn more
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Knowledge2Action online academy

In practice

Events

Indian technical students connected with ETH recruiters at TechFest expo

The digitised version of the TechFest Bombay event included talks, workshops, and networking for students and academics. The aim is to spark excitement for science and technology and promote international collaboration.

ETH showcased their facilities and innovations with video tours and introductions to current researchers and projects.

Learn more
ETH booth at TechFest Bombay

Cybathlon pushed innovation in assistive technology with online competition

51 teams from 20 countries competed to develop state-of-the-art assistance systems in different time zones and locations.

The atmosphere of an in-person event was missed, but some teams found they could focus better.

Event's thesis: technology should serve people. A relevant concept when reimagining the event for online.

Learn more
Cybathlon

Swiss and Middle Eastern university students will compete in the Circular Youth Challenge

Over several months, interdisciplinary teams of 5-10 students from multiple universities will compete to tackle two challenges: waste generation and youth unemployment.

Faculty members will participate as mentors and judges. The programme includes workshops and feedback rounds for the teams. Winners will have the chance to showcase their projects at the Swiss Pavilion in Dubai.

The goal is to build strong relationships between academic institutions and empower students to tackle pressing real-world issues.

Learn more
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In practice
Camp & Platform

Entrepreneurs from Brazil and Switzerland accelerate their startups

Academia-Industry Training AIT is a collaboration between The Leading House for the Latin American Region and swissnex Brazil. 20 participants spend two weeks transforming research into market applications and developing business skills.

Benefits of going virtual
- More decision-makers from big Brazilian companies could join with reduced time in transit
- Possible to have speakers and mentors join from all over the country. In-person iterations had people just from Rio and Sao Paulo

Outcomes and learnings
- Good feedback from students, especially for the 1x1 mentoring
- Somewhat difficult to build relationships over digital channels
- Important to build in breaks and include interactive talks
- Breakout rooms are essential for participants to exchange and get to know each other
- Future iterations will likely take the form of a hybrid model

Learn more
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Academia-Industry Training (AIT)

Students experience academic and intercultural exchange

The School of Business University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland (FHNW) successfully piloted a virtual exchange platform for Swiss and international business students. The courses encompass management studies and intercultural competences, as well as promote close collaboration between international partners.

Outcomes and learnings
The virtual exchange platform has received excellent reviews though 85% of students surveyed said they also want physical mobility as soon as it becomes possible.

FHNW is developing and extending hybrid exchange mobility modules as a part of its comprehensive portfolio.

Learn more
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FHNW Business Virtual Exchange

Insights

Weaving virtual exchange into an institutional strategy

Virtual exchange is providing an innovative path to forge stronger relationships with partner universities. For senior IROs with large existing networks, it's relatively easy to leverage our contacts across digital platforms, while reducing conference travel and helping sustainability goals. However, for junior colleagues and students, it can be daunting to build an academic and professional network from scratch online. Thus, it's important for senior IROs to take the initiative and actively connect students, faculty, and administrators.

Our International Office works closely with degree programme managers and faculty to support and promote digital mobility projects. This is done through direct engagement or it is nurtured in continuing education and research projects.

Digitalisation and internationalisation were already integral parts of the FHNW strategy. The pandemic added extra impetus to the university's priorities, as lectures and exams were converted into 100% online or adapted formats at breakneck speed.

Faculty faced an immediate increase in workload, plus the ensuing technology fatigue. The FHNW has had a digital learning support unit (Learning Lab) for several years, which proved to be a crucial hub in supporting rapid course transitions.

It takes a lot of groundwork but virtual exchange is a great enhancement to FHNW's internationalisation offering. We continue to be at the cutting edge of developing purposeful programmes that build knowledge, professional skills, and real-world connections.

Supporting faculty & students

- Support bottom-up initiatives with top-down strategy and resources
- Senior IROs actively lead international community building
- Identify and nurture champions
- Anticipate and address increased workloads
- Listen to students, involve them, and build courses they need
- Educate students on the transferable career skills gained from international experiences

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n|w University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland

Resources

Information

- swissnex Google Drive resources folder from online event
- EVOLVE - What is Virtual Exchange?
- EAIE - Your Virtual Exchange Reading List
- SwissCore - Rethinking student mobility after corona
- DAAD Brussels - Internationalising Teacher Education in Europe – Is virtual collaboration the "new way to go"?

Examples & methodology

- Research-publishing.net - Designing and implementing virtual exchange – a collection of case studies
- Corona in Education Study Overview
- State University of New York SUNY - COIL center
- Coventry University UK - COIL hub
- Online International Learning Projects Map
- Erasmus+ Project Platform
- Open Virtual Mobility - Educational Resources & best practices
- ACE - Comprehensive Internationalization resource center

Organisations

- Movetia
- swissnex Network
- EADTU
- European Association for International Education EAIE
- Erasmus+

Facts & figures

- Mobility of students at Swiss universities 2013-2016
- Swiss-European Mobility Programme 2018/19
- Hochschulbildung Hintergrundbericht 2018/2019

Remote fieldwork

- Doing fieldwork in a pandemic
- Researching in the Age of COVID-19
- Collecting Qualitative Data - A Practical Guide to Textual, Media and Virtual Techniques
- Doing Ethnography Remotely
- Cultural probes

About us

swissnex is the Swiss global network connecting the dots in education, research, and innovation. Our mission is to support the outreach and active engagement of our partners in the international exchange of knowledge, ideas and talent.

The five swissnex locations and their outposts are established in the world's most innovative hubs. The core value of the swissnex network consists of

- connecting its partners to thriving innovation ecosystems worldwide,
- advising on trends and opportunities in science, education and technology,
- promoting the visibility of Swiss higher education and research institutions, start-ups and other innovation-driven partner organizations,
- inspiring new ideas by promoting knowledge exchange.

Learn more
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Movetia is the Swiss National Agency for Exchange and Mobility. We want all young people to take part in an extended exchange and mobility scheme at least once during the course of their education. And we strive to ensure that exchange, mobility, and international cooperation are firmly anchored in education policy.

Movetia promotes exchange, mobility, and cooperation in all education sectors ® in Switzerland, Europe, and worldwide. Mandated by the Swiss Confederation and the Cantons, Movetia encourages and supports projects in school education, vocational education and training, higher education, adult education, and extracurricular youth work.