FORMS AND KNOW-HOW OF VIRTUAL INTERNATIONALISATION IN SECONDARY EDUCATION IN FINLAND IN 2021

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1 BACKGROUND

The pandemic that broke out in spring 2020 has already continued into a second year and the forms of international activities in educational institutions may have changed, perhaps even permanently. For a long time, internationalisation at home was the only form of maintaining contact with partners abroad. In autumn 2020, the Finnish National Agency for Education implemented a survey on the forms of virtual internationalisation and the know-how related to it. The report included interviews as well as the survey. The aim was to repeat this report in autumn 2021 when more experiences of virtual internationalisation activities had already been achieved. This time, only the survey was implemented, and in a compact form. The aim was to find out/investigate how virtual activities may have developed between 2020 and 2021. This report also describes what educational institutions anticipate international activities to be like in the future.

Before the pandemic, there was not much experience of virtual mobility and no specific instructions had been prepared for it. In autumn 2020, the Erasmus+ programme issued rules for so-called blended mobility, which means a combination of virtual mobility and a later physical mobility period. Students can start off with a virtual mobility period and have an actual mobility period associated with it later, or vice versa. The instructions have now been supplemented and a fairly comprehensive package on the subject is available, for example, on the website of the Finnish National Agency for Education. https://www.oph.fi/en/programmes/administration-strategic-partnerships-ka2-projects-funded-2014-2020

Methodology and target group of the study

In September 2021, the survey was sent as a web link to all general upper secondary schools and vocational institutions. The survey was addressed to principals in general upper secondary schools and international affairs coordinators or officers in vocational institutions. However, each educational institution was asked to identify the best person to respond to the survey.

Responses were received from a total of 128 educational institutions (175 in 2020); 68 vocational institutions and 60 general upper secondary schools. The response rate declined slightly from 2020. At the time, it was 32 per cent, but now declined to 24 per cent. Teachers and persons responsible for international activities are the largest group of respondents, 48 per cent of all who responded. In general upper secondary schools, however, more than one out of two respondents were principals.

TABLE 1. SURVEY RESPONDENTS BY INSTITUTION TYPE.

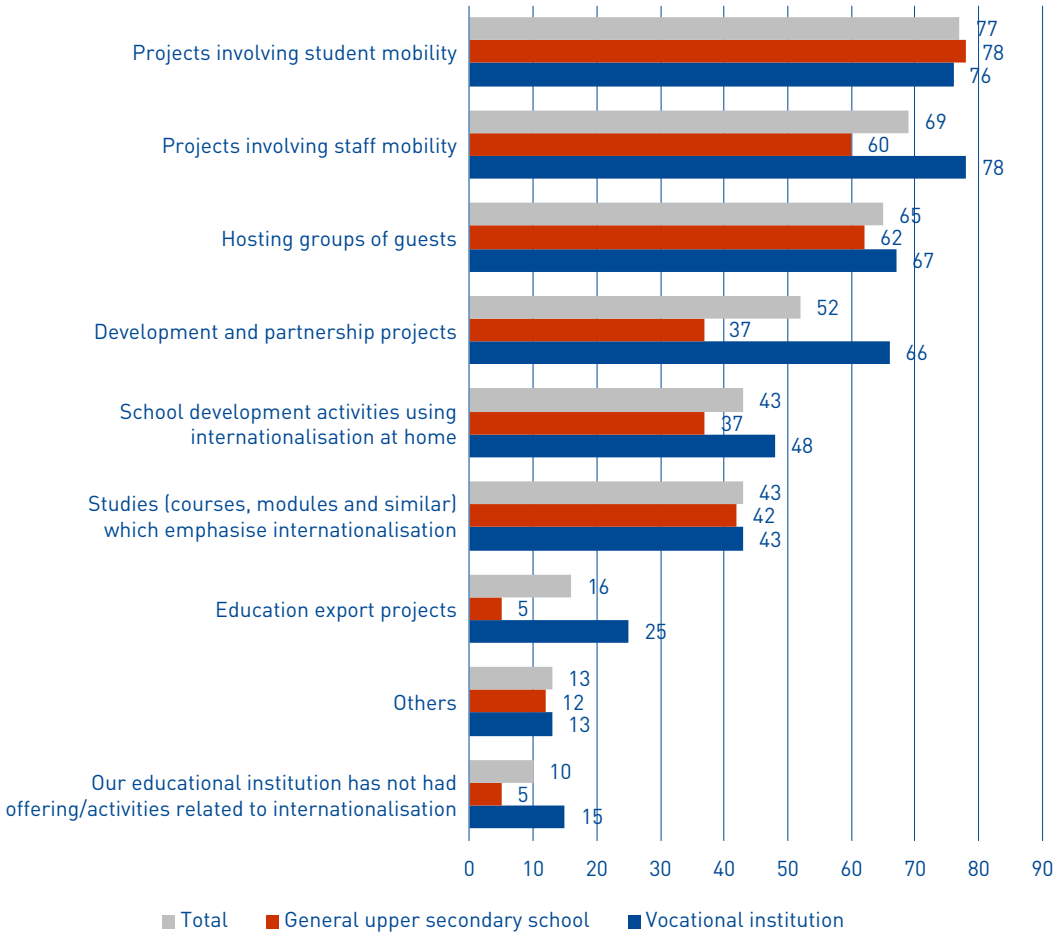
	Principal	Teacher/ International affairs officer	Other	Total
Vocational institution	10 (15%)	37 (54%)	21 (31%)	**68 (100%)**
General upper secondary school	32 (53%)	25 (42%)	3 (5%)	**60 (100%)**
Total	**42 (33%)**	**62 (48%)**	**24 (19%)**	**128 (100%)**

2 INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19

According to the respondents, before the COVID-19 pandemic, international activities in educational institutions focused on physical mobility, i.e. the periods completed abroad by students and staff. More than one half of the educational institutions that responded to the survey have hosted groups of guests and implemented development and partnership projects. However, vocational institutions have done this more than general upper secondary schools (see Figure 1).

Under the option "other activities", school twinning activities and school camps were among the activities reported by general upper secondary schools, and education exports and vocational skills competitions among the activities reported by vocational institutions.

FIGURE 1. WHAT TYPES OF INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES DID YOUR INSTITUTION MOSTLY HAVE BEFORE THE PANDEMIC? (%)



If educational institutions have had international activities since spring 2020, the activities have been almost exclusively virtual. One fifth of the educational institutions that responded to the survey reported that they had no virtual international activities at all, but more than one half had conducted experiments with it and 8 per cent already had versatile experiences of virtual international activities. According to the survey, vocational institutions were slightly

more experienced in this than general upper secondary schools. The number of educational institutions that have experimented with virtual international activities has risen by 20 percentage points since the autumn of 2020. An increasing number of educational institutions has proceeded from the planning stage to implementation.

TABLE 2. ROLE OF VIRTUAL INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS.

	Total %	Vocational institutions, %	General upper secondary schools, %
We had none	21	21	22
We have been planning them	13	13	13
We are currently preparing or piloting virtual activities	4	5	3
We have already experimented with virtual international activities	54	51	57
We have gained versatile experiences of virtual international activities	8	10	5
Total	**100**	**100**	**100**

In **vocational institutions**, internationalisation at home has been conducted in the form of workshops. For example, students from different countries have exchanged examples of practices in different professions through the internet. Cooperation has often been carried out with educational institutions that have been the institutions' partners in mobility activities before. Teaching staff have planned projects through remote connections.

> *'Afternoon workshops on internationalisation at home: the partner sends a video about some kind of concrete activity or instructs it on Teams, and we follow the instructions. Alongside the activity, students enjoy small delicatessens from the partner country and receive information on international activities.'*
>
> (Open-ended answer, vocational institution)

It has been possible to continue international activities virtually also during distance learning. Students have made videos to the YouTube platform and, for example, participated at home in a dance lesson led by Japanese students.

> *'A Finnish sport coaching student held a floorball class to Dutch students through a video connection. Several video meetings preparing the class preceded the actual class.'*
>
> (Open-ended answer, vocational institution)

Vocational institutions have also used education export companies in the implementation of virtual international activities. Students' on-the-job-learning periods abroad have also been implemented virtually. This has been carried out in a project-like manner, in cooperation between the workplace instructor in the foreign company, students, teachers of the vocational field and the coordinator of international affairs.

Virtual workshops and group work have been implemented in **general upper secondary schools**. Virtual international activities have also been successful in distance learning in general upper secondary schools. In addition, students and teachers of foreign educational institutions have visited the educational institutions through the Teams application. Visitors may have given a lecture to a large group or sometimes even to the entire school.

Online mobility, in which students work in groups for 3 days and present the results. A preparatory preliminary meeting before the mobility and a presentation of the results after the mobility.
(Open-ended answer, general upper secondary school)

Methods and tools of virtual international activities

The digital tools most commonly used in international activities are Teams (62% of respondents) and Zoom (47% of respondents). WhatsApp has been used by 41 per cent of the educational institutions and Skype by 14 per cent. Other frequently mentioned tools are Google Meet and YouTube.

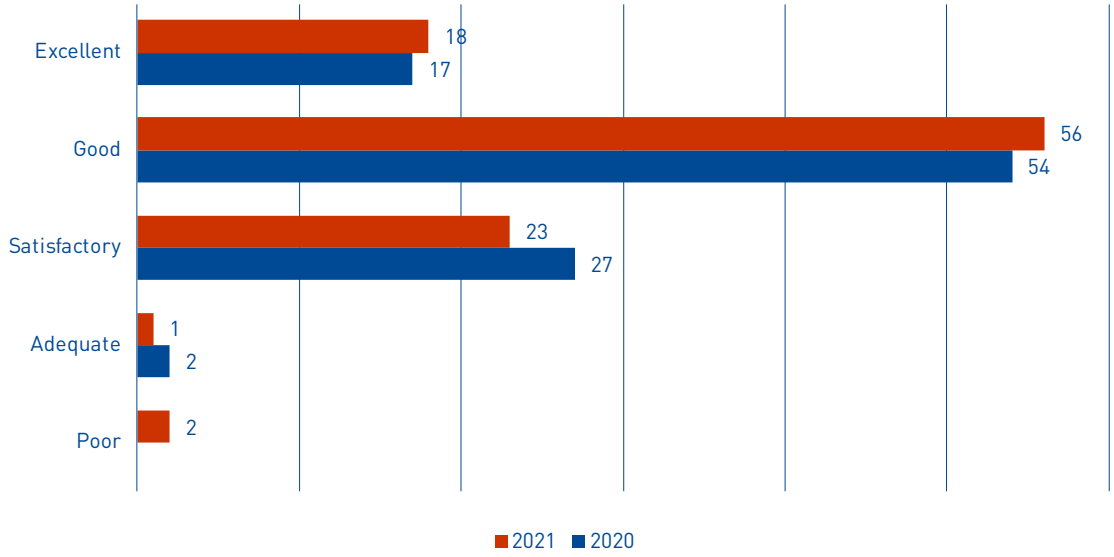
New digital tools or platforms have been introduced into use by 23 per cent of the educational institutions. Such new tools include different gaming platforms and Webex. Thirty-two per cent of the respondents, slightly more than in the survey organised in autumn 2020 (29%), mention that they have used the eTwinning platform of Erasmus+. For example, eTwinning has been used as a tool in project planning and the presentations of cooperation partners.

Capabilities for virtual international activities

Skills in digital tool use are at a good level in Finland. Competence is better than in the EU on average. This is revealed by a study conducted by the OECD, among other things: (https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan_fi)

According to the survey, more than one half of all those who responded assessed their competence to be good and almost one fifth estimated it to be excellent. The proportion of those who assess their skills to be good has increased from the previous survey.

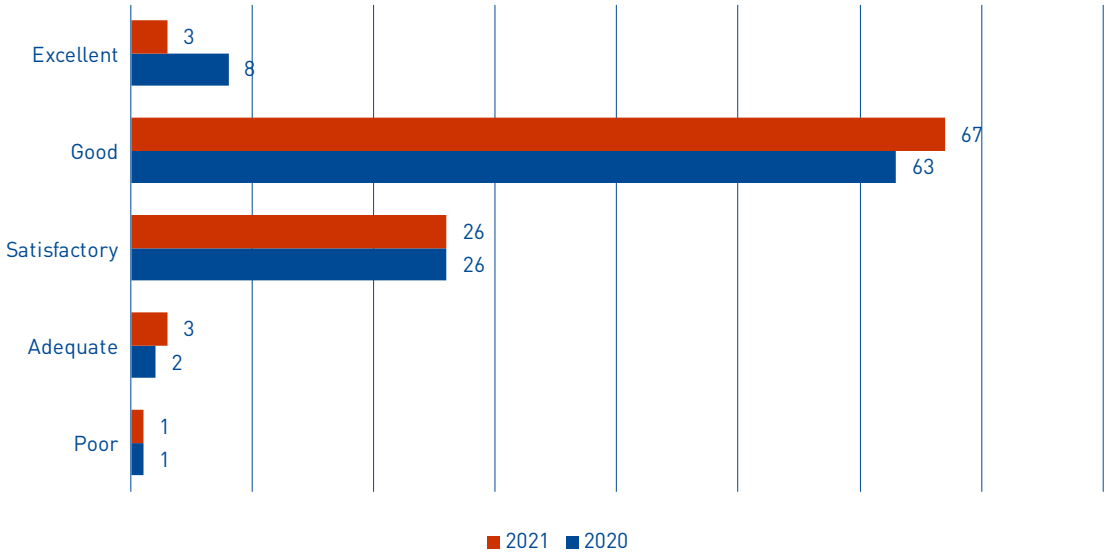
FIGURE 2. PERSONAL COMPETENCE IN THE USE OF DIGITAL TOOLS IN UPPER SECONDARY EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN 2021 AND 2020 (%)



In addition to their own competence, the respondents were asked to assess the competence of the staff in their educational institution. Sixty-seven per cent estimated it to be good, which

is slightly more than in autumn 2020. However, the proportion of those who assessed the skills of the staff to be excellent was smaller than in the previous survey.

FIGURE 3. COMPETENCE IN THE USE OF DIGITAL TOOLS AMONG STAFF OF THE UPPER SECONDARY EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN 2021 AND 2020 (%)



What kind of competence does the staff need for planning and implementing international cooperation through remote connections?

Vocational institutions call for more courage to use different electronic channels and tools – also ones that the staff are not yet familiar with. In many of the open-ended answers, the respondent would have wanted to see more courage in the activities. Many respondents also reflected on language proficiency, cultural competence, time management and working within the time differences between different countries. Respondents hoped to get practical tips on how to start virtual international activities. Sharing good experiences between educational institutions would be useful.

> *'You need to be able to use Teams (dividing people into groups) and different applications suitable for using shared information. Virtual cooperation is carried out in the long term. You need to know the other party and you also need enough time.'*
>
> Open-ended answer, vocational institution)

General upper secondary schools would also like to have more competence in the use of digital platforms and good practices for implementing virtual international activities.

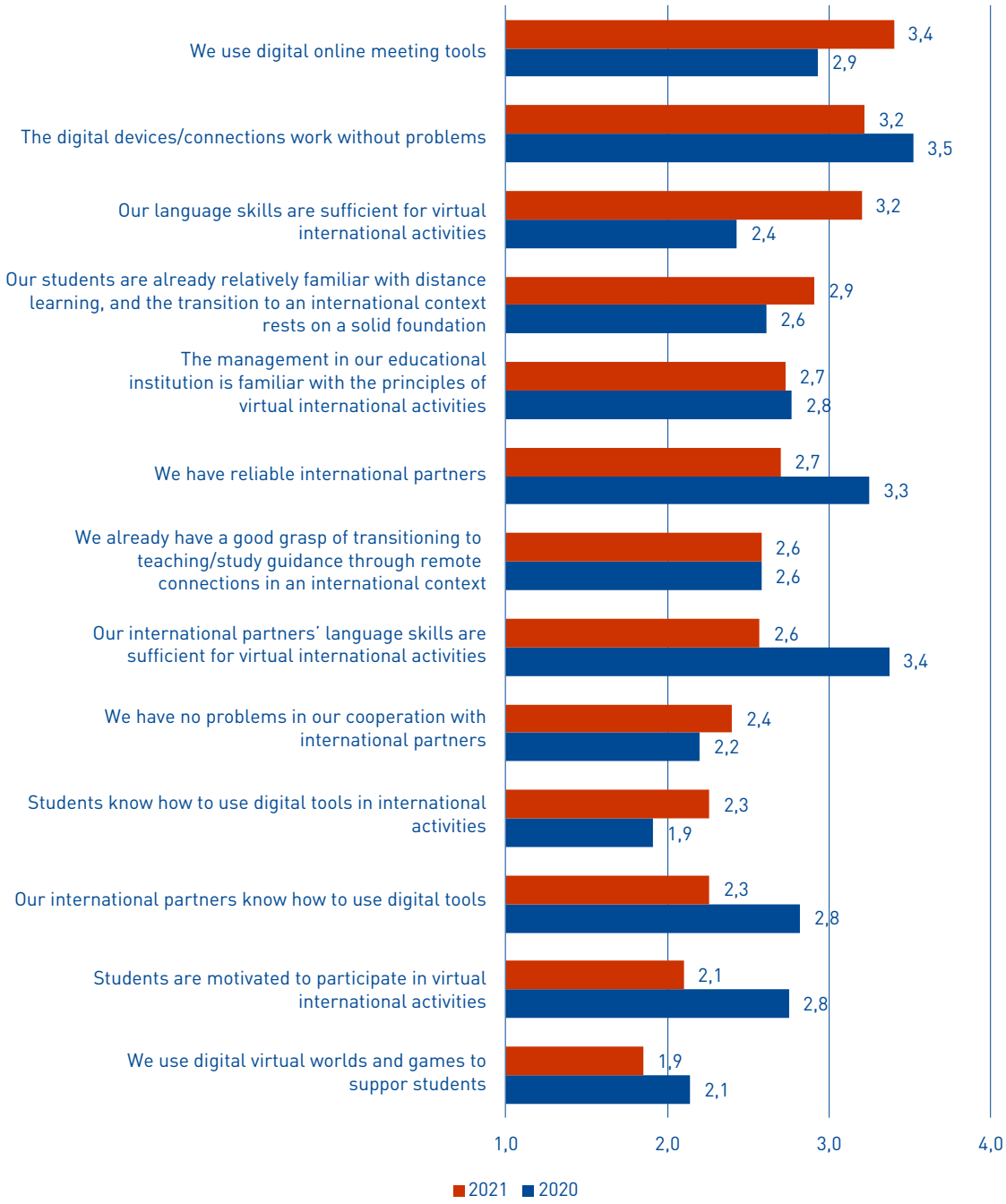
> *What we would need is mainly models that work and that can be developed into permanent practices. There is quite a mix of tools and practices at the moment.'*
>
> (Open-ended answer, general upper secondary school)

When the distributions of the responses to the statements in Figure 4 are compared between the surveys, the most significant progress has taken place in the use of digital online meeting tools. Similarly, an increasing number of respondents considers the language proficiency of the staff in their educational institution sufficient for virtual international activities. Students are also more and more familiar with activities carried out with remote connections in international contexts. In autumn 2020, many of the respondents were not able to express an

opinion about students' motivation to engage in virtual international activities and the level of their competence in the use of digital devices. However, in autumn 2021, especially motivation was considered to be lower than in the previous survey. On the other hand, the level of competence is estimated to have risen slightly.

An interesting result is that when experiences of virtual international activities have increased, the competence and reliability of the international partners have been assessed to be weaker. Naturally, the more the institution has engaged in virtual activities, the more the cultural differences and the differences in digital competence between different actors are emphasised.

FIGURE 4. CAPABILITIES FOR VIRTUAL INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES IN 2021 AND 2020 (AVERAGE OF RESPONSES RECEIVED FROM GENERAL UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOLS AND VOCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS, ON A SCALE OF 1 COMPLETELY DISAGREE – 4 COMPLETELY AGREE)



When we look at the respondents' capacities for virtual activities **by type of educational institution**, it appears that the assessments of one's personal language proficiency and the functionality of digital tools are more positive in general upper secondary schools than in vocational institutions. Students' and staff's motivation related for virtual international activities is also assessed to be slightly higher in general upper secondary schools than in vocational institutions. Trust in international collaborative partners and their competence in turn is higher in vocational institutions than in general upper secondary schools.

FIGURE 5. RESPONSES TO STATEMENTS BY INSTITUTION TYPE IN 2021 (ON A SCALE OF 1 TO 4)

3 LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE ACTIVITIES

In an open-ended question, the respondents were asked to describe what they had learnt when planning and/or implementing international activities virtually.

In vocational institutions, many responded that virtual cooperation is best suited to be implemented when students are in contact teaching, in other words, when everyone is physically in the same space. Virtual international activities were found cumbersome during distance learning.

Educational institutions also found that motivating teachers to take responsibility for projects and convincing the leadership of the educational institution about the importance of the activities was essential. The motivation of students must also be invested in, for example, by ensuring that the topics the projects deal with are sufficiently easy. The implementation period of the projects must not be too long or the motivation declines. It is advisable to invest in the functioning of the technical equipment to ensure the smooth running of the activities.

Respondents also found that it may be difficult to start fully virtual new projects. Participants' possible weak language proficiency is emphasised in virtual meetings. Respondents were of the view that virtual cooperation is easier if the participants know each other from before.

Projects must be well planned and time should be reserved for planning. The planning time should also be included in the annual working time planning of teaching staff.

> *'The teachers involved in the implementation should be strongly engaged in the planning from the very beginning so that the contents of the cooperation would be as suitable a part of teaching as possible and as closely integrated into everyday life as possible. A student-oriented approach should also be pursued. Coordinators do not lead the implementations; however, the implementers need quite a lot of support from coordinators'.*
>
> (Open-ended answer, vocational institution)

Virtuality was also found to provide a lot of opportunities. Students can already familiarise themselves with the destination country and learn to know the people before the actual trip. The activities are also efficient and effective when the whole class can participate. Previously, only a few people from the group went on exchange.

> *'The world can be conquered, connections can be created and international working life cooperation can be carried out even without travelling.'*
>
> (Open-ended answer, vocational institution)

Along with virtual activities, educational institutions have made huge progress in the learning of digital skills and learning has affected everyone equally.

In **general upper secondary schools**, the distance learning periods have improved the digital skills of teachers and students and simultaneously laid a basis for the virtual implementation of international activities. Advance planning, providing instructions to students

and motivating them have been found to be essential elements in successful activities. The themes discussed should be inspiring and they should be linked with the studies. Activities integrated into the lessons motivate best.

''The implementation is extremely laborious, but rewarding, of course.'
(Open-ended answer, general upper secondary school)

4 MAINTAINING THE CONTINUITY OF THE ACTIVITIES AND CHALLENGES RELATED TO IT

The implementation of international activities virtually is not only an opportunity for educational institutions to learn new skills but also challenging, and it divides opinions among the respondents.

Vocational institutions are concerned about the flexibility of time and financial resources when projects are implemented virtually. How can sufficient working time be reserved for planning and a genuine encounter with the collaboration partners be enabled virtually in such a way that projects will be planned well. However, the main challenge for the continuity of the activities is a lack of motivation. New and interesting points of view and themes should be constantly developed in order to maintain the activities.

> *'How do you maintain motivation and clarify the understanding of why virtual international activities are worth implementing.'*
>
> (Open-ended answer, vocational institution)

Teachers consider the fundamental problem from the point of view of the continuity of international activities to be the fact that teachers' working time is not flexible as such. In their view, the planning time and the implementation of the cooperation should be supported with separate funding.

> *As regards funding and the recognition of studies, virtual activities should also be made visible and eligible for funding.*
>
> (Open-ended answer, vocational institution)

The weak digital skills of the international collaboration partners and their unwillingness to engage in virtual cooperation was mentioned as one factor complicating the activities. In addition, there may also be factors in one's own organisation that slow the activities down, such as a leadership that does not support virtual international activities. The continuity of virtual activities is also shadowed by the fact that actors often feel that the teaching and the experience gained in a foreign work community in the destination cannot be replaced with virtual activities.

In can be concluded from the responses given by the staff of **general upper secondary schools** that the educational institutions have the know-how required for virtual international activities, but not enough time resources have been allocated for them. Furthermore, it was felt that virtual international activities easily remained at the level of lecture-like presentations, and interaction and genuine encounters were missing.

> *'Content and shared projects are bland without encounters.'*
>
> (Open-ended answer, general upper secondary school)

The lack of motivation also prevents virtual international activities in general upper secondary schools, and time and schedule differences and the changing groups in the schools make long-term international collaboration between students challenging.

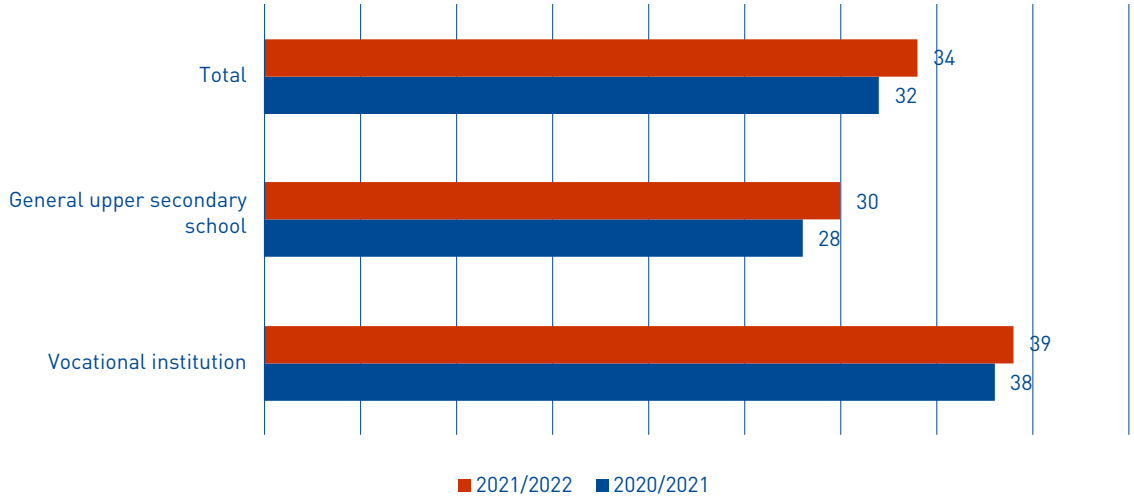
> *Students and teachers do not want any more digital connections and tools as there are already so many of them in the daily life.*
>
> (Open-ended answer, general upper secondary school)

> *At times, internet connections in different schools are very unreliable. It is sometimes really challenging to reconcile the schedules and find times that suit everyone. The implementation is not always possible during school days in all countries.*
>
> (Open-ended answer, general upper secondary school)

5 VIRTUAL INTERNATIONALISATION IN THE FUTURE

Many educational institutions already look forward to physical mobility periods being possible again. However, virtuality in international activities is not about to disappear and blended mobility, i.e. a combination of virtual mobility and physical periods abroad, is already increasingly common. Compared to the survey of 2020, slightly more educational institutions had plans to implement blended mobility during the current academic year in the autumn of 2021.

FIGURE 6. BLENDED MOBILITIES HAVE BEEN PLANNED FOR THE CURRENT ACADEMIC YEAR (%)



At the end of the survey, respondents were asked to describe what they anticipated the virtual international activities of educational institutions to be like in 2025.

One respondent working in a vocational institution expressed a wish that international cooperation through remote connections would be a natural part of all courses and that there would also be time for it.

> *'Virtual internationalisation means all normal qualification units for which learning tasks are planned and implemented together with international partners and in which it is natural for students to present them to student groups or representatives of companies from other countries.'*
>
> (Open-ended answer, vocational institution)

Blended international periods tailored to meet students' personal goals and in which virtual familiarisation with the destination country and the workplace would support the preparation for the physical exchange period could be routine in 2025. Respondents also described that there would be new forms of internationalisation at home and new opportunities for it and internationalisation would be even more equal: participation will be possible for everyone.

Virtual activity will be part of the studies. Everyone can try it on a small scale. Every qualification has at least one unit that includes a virtual international activity. Before that, every qualification must be examined and the method of implementing internationalisation in the qualification must be agreed.

(Open-ended answer, vocational institution)

The instruction of languages will develop, enabling the use of the foreign language and the studying of the content of the vocational field to become intertwined. The foreign language will become a natural means of communication in studying the substance of the vocational field, which will increase the students' motivation to learn and use the foreign language.

In 2025, virtual international activities will be a natural part of the educational institution's operation. They will be used in the mobility of students and staff, in the recruitment of international professionals to local companies, and in cooperation and development projects. The activities will be voluntary and tailored to meet the needs of each person.

'We have already planned that those members of staff who want to travel will visit the partner countries and those who stay in Finland will participate in the trip through virtual meetings.'

(Open-ended answer, vocational institution)

The sustainable development theme has been integrated into all mobility activities, both physical and virtual. The studies of every VET student include some kind of international experience, at least a virtual one.

General upper secondary schools anticipate that internationalisation in the future will comprise blended activities that include both physical mobility and virtual meetings.

'Virtual meetings online strengthen the project activities and make the cooperation more concrete as it is possible to meet the partners more often, even if it is only online.'

(Open-ended answer, general upper secondary school)

One general upper secondary teacher envisioned that virtual internationalisation could be used to enliven the studies of the more rarely studied languages. It was also hoped that an increasing number of teachers would participate in international activities and that more information would be provided in schools to increase participation in international activities.

6 CONCLUSION – WHAT CHANGED DURING ONE YEAR

This report is a continuation of the report carried out in autumn 2020, when the lock down during the pandemic had been imposed the preceding spring. By the time the survey was repeated in autumn 2021, educational institutions had already carried out international cooperation virtually for 1.5 years. The main questions in the recently completed survey were:

- What kind of role do virtual international activities currently play in the educational institution?
- What have international activities been like in the educational institutions and what kind of tools and methods have been used to organise it?
- What kind of competence is needed and, on the other hand, what has been learned from virtuality?
- What kind of obstacles or challenges have emerged to the continuation of international activities as virtual?
- How do educational institutions anticipate virtual internationalisation in the future?

Educational institutions' experiences of virtual international activities have naturally increased since autumn 2020. More than one half of the educational institutions that responded now reported that they had already had experiments. In the survey of autumn 2020, the corresponding proportion was one third of the educational institutions. Different digital devices have become more and more familiar to the personnel and students of educational institutions. Changing over to distance learning and the digital competence brought about by this has also been reflected in international activities: international cooperation can also be organised virtually. On the other hand, there were comments that international virtual projects were easier to implement when the participants in Finland were physically in the same place, and not in distance learning.

Like in the survey implemented a year ago, respondents in this survey also emphasised the importance of good planning and the motivation of students in virtual international activities. In addition, the activities are easier if the leadership of the educational institution supports them, as virtuality has been found to take up a lot of the staff's working time.

A lack of time and motivation and the international partners' insufficient digital skills and unwillingness to engage in virtual activities still continue to be the main challenges faced in virtual internationalisation.

Many good elements were also seen in virtual activities: environmental friendliness and the equality related to participation were found to be factors that encouraged the activities. These elements were also emphasised in the activities of the future. The respondents themselves anticipated that virtual internationalisation will be part of everyday life in the educational institutions of the future even if physical international mobility returns to the pre-pandemic level.

USEFUL SOURCES

Instructions for blended mobility for VET mobility projects in Erasmus+:
https://www.oph.fi/sites/default/files/documents/erasmus-ka1_virtuaalinen-liikkuvuus_ohje_2112020.pdf

Instructions for all education sectors:
https://www.oph.fi/en/programmes/administration-strategic-partnerships-ka2-projects-funded-2014-2020

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