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

Siru Korkala

CONTENTS

1   BACKGROUND

As the pandemic closed national borders in spring 2020, it also changed the nature of international activities in the education sector. General upper secondary schools' study visits, learning projects and workshops directed abroad as well as vocational institutions' work-based learning periods abroad and studies at foreign institutions were cancelled. Additionally, development projects including mobility which had already been launched or for which applications had been submitted needed to be completely rethought.

In autumn 2020, a survey and interviews were conducted to investigate educational institutions' capabilities for virtual international activities and the virtual means of continuing international activities that upper secondary educational institutions may already have used. This study examined all international activities of educational institutions, regardless of how their funding was sourced. The survey part of the study was conducted in September 2020 and the in-depth interviews in November 2020. This report aims to shed light on the experiences that educational institutions had gathered and the opportunities they had identified in spring and early autumn 2020.

As this is a new situation, institutions would like good and effective examples of how international cooperation and mobility can be maintained by virtual means.

In 2019, 10.3 percent of students aged between 16 and 25 who had started studying for a vocational qualification spent a period related to their studies abroad. The mobility figures of general upper secondary schools are collected per academic year, and 11.2 percent of the students who had started studying at these schools went on an exchange or had some other period abroad in the academic year 2019–2020. While international mobility had already been declining before the state of emergency was declared due to coronavirus (a drop of 17 % compared to 2018), especially in vocational institutions, the impact of spring 2020 was the most prominent in general upper secondary schools, in which mobility decreased by 66 percent compared to the previous academic year. In earlier academic years, around one third of those who had started their studies at general upper secondary schools spent a period abroad.

Erasmus + is an important support programme for international mobility at upper secondary level. While virtual cooperation was possible in this programme earlier, the pandemic has made it an essential form of internationalisation in educational institutions. Erasmus+ Programme Guide for the 2020 Call for Proposals defines virtual mobility as "a set of activities supported by Information and Communication Technologies, including e-learning, that realise or facilitate international, collaborative experiences in a context of teaching, training or learning." (https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/programme-guide/annexes/annex-iii_fi)

In practice, no specific instructions were provided concerning virtual mobility, for example regarding mobility periods scheduled to take place before the pandemic. In autumn 2020, the programme issued rules for blended mobility, which means a combination of virtual mobility and a physical mobility period. Students can start off with a virtual mobility period and have an actual mobility period later.

In the new programming period of Erasmus+ in 2021–2027, the possibilities offered by digitalisation will be increasingly used in international cooperation. In addition, the European Commission's Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027 has two strategic priorities: fostering the development a high-performing digital education ecosystem and enhancing digital skills and competences for the digital transformation. (https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan_fi)

Chapters 2 and 3 of this report mainly contain quantitative data based on survey results, whereas Chapters 4 and 5 discuss qualitative findings based on interviews. The aim of the interviews conducted following the survey was to find out how educational institutions felt about their virtual internationalisation activities. The findings are based on the experiences and opinions of representatives from six educational institutions, which is why they cannot be generalised in the same way as the survey results.

Methodology and target group of the study

A steering group consisting of experts who represented both the Finnish National Agency for Education and other expert organisations was put together for the study project. In cooperation with the steering group, a survey was prepared, and a web link to it was sent 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. The survey was available for three weeks in September 2020.

Responses were received from a total of 175 educational institutions; 80 vocational institutions and 95 general upper secondary schools. The response rate was 32 percent, which can be considered good. The largest group of respondents was the principals, who accounted for 40 percent of all those who respond. More than one third of the respondents were responsible for international activities (international affairs officers and coordinators). In general upper secondary schools, 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	18 (23%)	7 (9%)	39 (49%)	16 (20%)	**80 (100%)**
General upper secondary school	52 (55%)	16 (17%)	19 (20%)	8 (8%)	**95 (100%)**
Total	**70 (40%)**	**23 (13%)**	**58 (33%)**	**24 (14%)**	**175 (100%)**

Based on the survey findings, six educational institutions were selected for the interviews; three general upper secondary schools and three vocational institutions. Two of the vocational institutions selected for the interviews were large with nearly 10,000 students, whereas one had approx. 3,000 students. All three vocational institution representatives interviewed for the study were international affairs officers. Two of the general upper secondary schools selected for the interviews were medium-sized with 500 to 800 students,

while the third one was small with fewer than 100 students. The general upper secondary school representatives interviewed for the study comprised two international affairs coordinators and one principal.

The interview questions were prepared in cooperation with the steering group, and the objective of the interviews was to describe good practices that the educational institutions have so far used in virtual internationalisation activities. All interviews were conducted virtually using the Teams application.

2   INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

The survey found that mobility periods abroad by students and staff members are the most common form of international activity in normal conditions. One half of the educational institutions that responded to the survey have had development or partnership projects; this figure is considerably higher for vocational institutions (68%) than general upper secondary schools (38%).

The activities reported in the section 'other activities' included school twinning projects and international visitors in general upper secondary schools and education exports and hosting international visitors in vocational institutions.
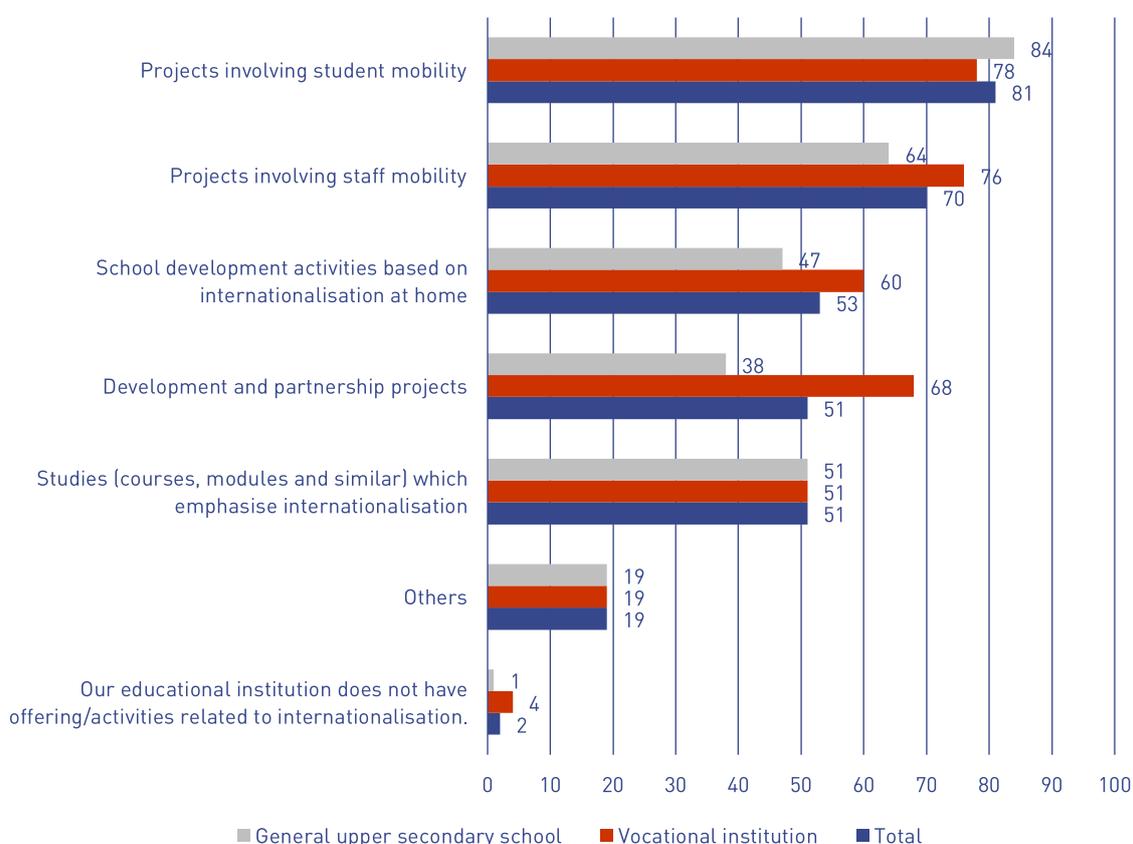

FIGURE 1. WHAT TYPES OF INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES HAS YOUR INSTITUTION MOSTLY HAD? (%)

The coronavirus pandemic put a stop to almost all activities involving physical international mobility in educational institutions. Of all respondents, 76 percent reported that all activities involving mobility had been cancelled. There were more cancellations in vocational education and training than in upper secondary schools. On the other hand, some activities in vocational institutions (including mobility projects) were carried out by virtual means. Having all activities cancelled was more common in general upper secondary schools.
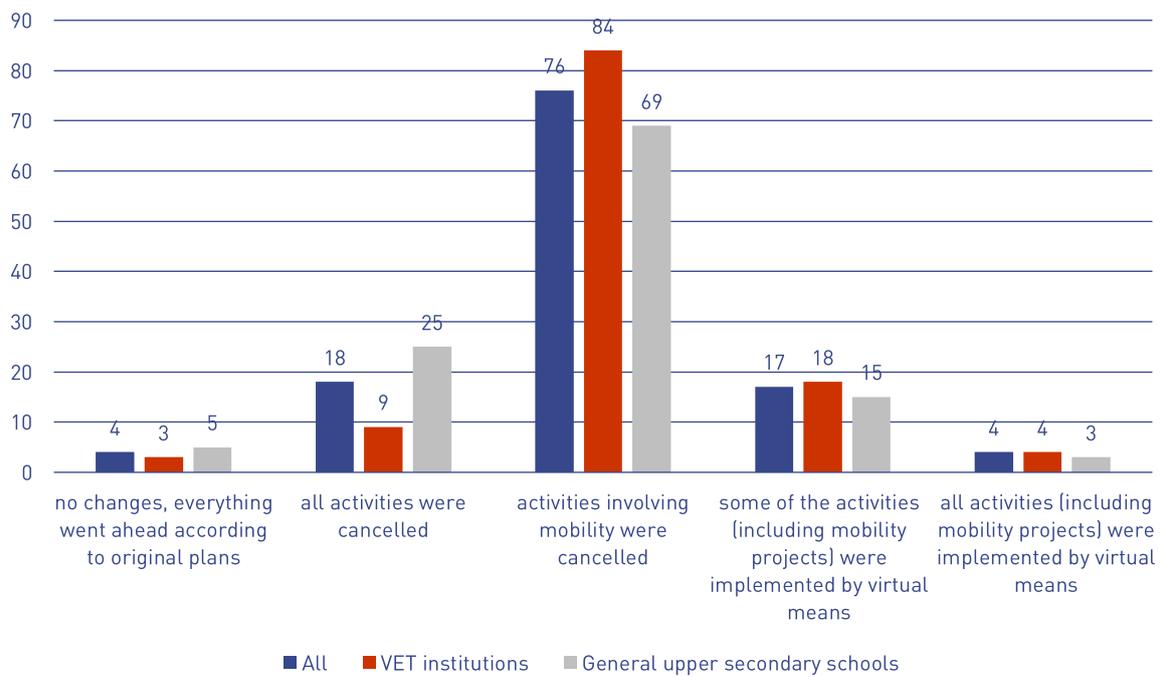
FIGURE 2. HOW DID YOUR PLANNED INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES CHANGE IN SPRING 2020? (%)

3   STATUS OF VIRTUAL INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

As many as 41 percent of the general upper secondary schools and 32 percent of the vocational institutions that responded to the survey had already experimented with virtual international activities, and institutions are constantly coming up with new methods and practices for them. Only 6 percent of general upper secondary schools and 2 percent of vocational institutions had had time to acquire versatile experience of virtual activities. As many as 10 percent of general upper secondary schools and 28 percent of vocational institutions were already preparing for and piloting virtual international activities. One out of five educational institutions were in the planning phase of virtual international activities, while another one out of five said they had no virtual international activities.

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

	Total %	Vocational institutions, %	General upper secondary schools, %
We had none	20	19	21
We have been planning activities	20	19	22
We are currently preparing or piloting virtual activities	18	28	10
We have already experimented with virtual international activities	37	32	41
We have gained versatile experiences of virtual international activities	5	2	6
	100	**100**	**100**

However, the survey responses indicate that educational institutions found maintaining international activities important. For many, virtual activities have meant keeping in touch with international project partners by means of remote meetings. Projects initiated under normal conditions have been continued on various virtual platforms and with the help of social media. An extremely wide range of answers was received to the question "What types of international activities has your institution mostly had?", and the open-ended answers indicate that many institutions are still working on their definition of virtual international activities.

In **vocational institutions**, the activities have been strongly focused on planning future projects and alternative implementation models of mobility, but final seminars of projects have also been organised by virtual means. Long-term planning of international mobility and the planning of digital activities have additionally been continued, and a virtual language and cultural café has been organised. Institutions have also experimented with virtual mobility: students have communicated on different platforms and completed remote assignments with foreign students and so on. The aim is to keep in touch, making it possible to continue the cooperation as before when normal conditions return after the pandemic. As physical mobility has not been possible, resources have also been freed up for developing internationalisation at home.

In **general upper secondary schools**, virtual international activities have mostly consisted of students interacting with their peers abroad on various platforms. Different types of live streaming events, including dance rehearsals with school groups abroad, have also been organised.

> *"The students have kept in touch through WhatsApp groups and similar, planned their future presentations on a common topic and discussed themes."*
>
> (Open-ended answer, general upper secondary school)

Methods and tools of virtual international activities

The survey found that one out of five responding institutions have definite plans to implement courses with international partners using remote connections – general upper secondary schools slightly more often than vocational institutions.

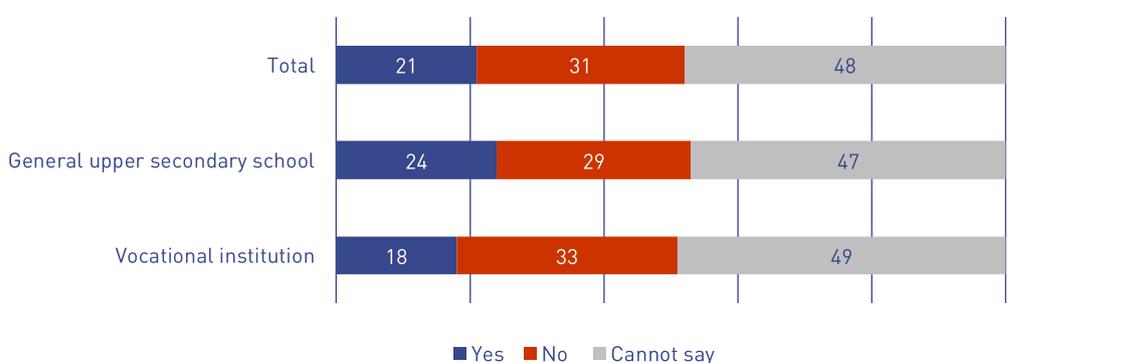|	Yes	No	Cannot say
Total	21	31	48
General upper secondary school	24	29	47
Vocational institution	18	33	49

■ Yes ■ No ■ Cannot say

FIGURE 3. PLANS FOR COURSES RELEVANT TO INTERNATIONAL COMPETENCE WITH AN INTERNATIONAL PARTNER IMPLEMENTED USING REMOTE CONNECTIONS ONLY IN ACADEMIC YEAR 2020–2021, (%)

The answers to the question "What types of cooperation models and methods of virtual internationalisation has your institution used?" included lists of different electronic platforms (Teams, Zoom, Skype, etc.) used to continue projects in which physical mobility could not go ahead. **General upper secondary schools** increasingly use the eTwinning platform in international projects. Students get to know each other on electronic platforms during lessons and often keep in touch in their free time on a social media channel of their choice. Students and teachers have made live presentations and posted them on project websites. One general upper secondary school progressed in its partnership project as follows:

1. A Skype meeting
2. Work on a common topic online, either simultaneously or in the students' own time
3. Presentation of results and outputs on Skype
4. Documentation of the project in the eTwinning environment or internally at the school
5. Continuous reporting on project activities on social media.

In **vocational institutions**, where international activities have mostly been training periods abroad, the cancelled training periods have been replaced by virtual international activities. In practice, joint lessons have been planned with partner institutions on common topics.

Educational institutions have organised joint instruction on different platforms with international partners, and different materials have been shared on Teams and YouTube. Projects have organised national and international webinars.

Teachers have used Teams to plan common assignments in specific fields, a schedule for each assignment and arranged a time when all participants come together, for example on Teams. In addition, independent study of e-learning courses, instructor-led distance learning, and a journal of virtual work-based learning have been used.

The survey responses show that social media and eTwinning are the most commonly used tools in both upper secondary schools and vocational institutions. One out of three responding institutions had used the eTwinning platform, upper secondary schools slightly more often than vocational institutions. Institutions have used eTwinning to map possibilities for different cooperation projects and to find partners for their projects, and it has served as a platform for working on virtual projects. The eTwinning platform has made it easier to sell the idea of virtual collaboration to teachers and students.

Institutions have found eTwinning a good tool for seeking and meeting new partners on the web, also face to face. However, those participating in virtual eTwinning project work need to be prepared for the eventuality that the partners may be more or less motivated to continue the project. Therefore, the partners' commitment to the project must be ensured swiftly, and a common theme for the project should be decided without delay. However well-functioning the tools used in the project are, the most important aspect of the project is to keep the focus and the common goals of the project clear.
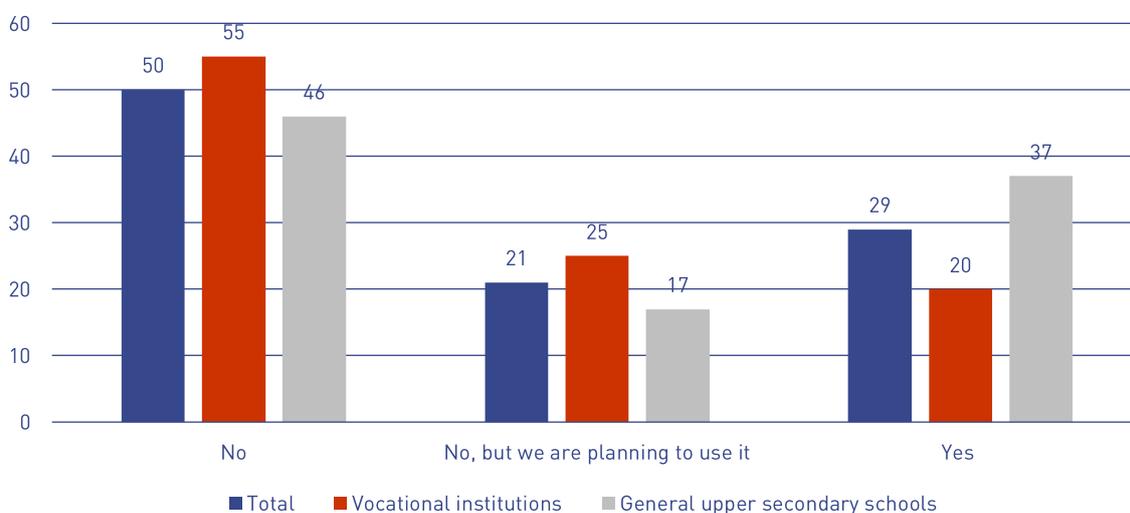
FIGURE 4. HAVE YOU USED THE ERASMUS+ ETWINNING PLATFORM

Educational institutions, and especially general upper secondary schools, have been using digital tools in their normal everyday teaching for a long time. The coronavirus pandemic has motivated educational institutions to increasingly use digital tools also in international activities. In other words, rather than internationalisation increasing the use of digitalisation, digitalisation has made international activities possible in educational institutions.

"They have been mutually supportive. Digitalisation is important in our organisation, and it has taken on an important role in tailoring the students' study paths. The use of digital tools also supports international activities, and we have been able to choose the tools according to our needs in the activities. "

(Open-ended answer, general upper secondary school)

Capabilities for virtual international activities

Skills in digital tool use are at a good level in Finland. More than one out of two respondents to the survey felt that their skills are good.
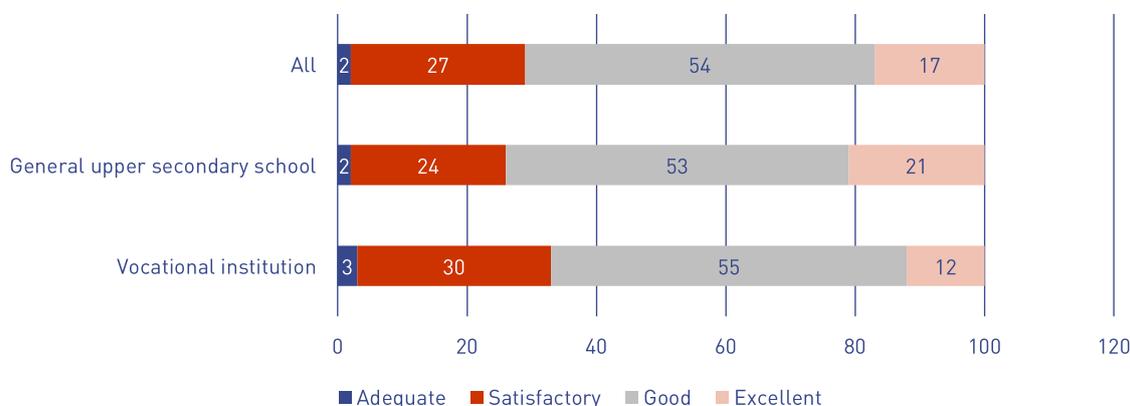

FIGURE 5. PERSONAL SKILLS IN USING DIGITAL TOOLS, %

A study completed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2018 found that less than 40 percent of educators working in the European Union felt ready to use digital technologies in teaching. (https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan_fi) Consequently, it appears that Finnish teachers' skills exceed the EU average.

The respondents were also asked to assess the skills of the staff at their educational institutions, and more than 60 percent of all respondents assessed these skills to be good. In general upper secondary schools, where most of the respondents were principals, staff skills were assessed to be good more often than in vocational institutions, where international affairs officers were the largest group of respondents. Consequently, the survey indicates that principals have confidence in the skills of the teachers in their educational institutions.

FIGURE 6. SKILLS IN DIGITAL TOOLS USE OF THE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION'S STAFF, %

Of the respondents, 66 percent had received support in using digital tools in their educational institutions. This was in most cases IT support provided as part of the institution's normal activities.

The survey thus indicates that educational institutions have positive attitudes towards virtual activities. More than one out of two respondents agreed somewhat or completely with the statements concerning this topic (see Table 3, in which the responses received from general upper secondary schools and vocational institutions have been combined). Finnish educational institutions have had good capabilities for switching their international activities into virtual activities. Especially in general upper secondary schools, remote connections have for long been used for studying, and international activities enrich distance learning further. This also came up in the interviews. All respondents were not able to comment on students' motivation for virtual internationalisation and their level of skills in using digital tools. Fewer than one out of two respondents felt that the level of students' motivation and skills is good.

TABLE 3. CAPABILITIES FOR VIRTUAL INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES (TOTAL OF RESPONSES RECEIVED FROM GENERAL UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOLS AND VOCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS)

	Completely disagree (%)	Somewhat disagree (%)	Somewhat agree (%)	Completely agree (%)	Cannot say (%)
We already have a good grasp of transitioning to teaching/study guidance through remote connections in an international context	7	22	37	24	10
Our students are already relatively familiar with distance learning, and they have good capabilities for switching into an international context.	5	20	36	35	4
We use digital online meeting tools	1	2	19	72	6
The digital devices/connections work without problems	1	7	37	49	6
We have reliable international partners	5	7	29	43	16
Our international partners know how to use digital tools	2	17	39	16	26
We have no problems in our cooperation with international partners	3	16	46	17	18
Our language skills are sufficient for virtual international activities	1	6	29	59	5
Our international partners' language skills are sufficient for virtual international activities	1	14	39	33	13
The management in our educational institution is familiar with the principles of virtual international activities	6	18	40	28	8
Students have a high motivation to participate in virtual international activities	5	28	32	8	27
Students know how to use digital tools in international activities	14	20	32	16	18
We use digital virtual worlds and games to support students	34	28	18	7	13

When we look at the respondents' capabilities for virtual activities **by type of educational institution**, it appears that general upper secondary schools are slightly more familiar with virtual methods and the use of digital tools in teaching than vocational institutions. Students' motivation related to virtual international activities is also assessed to be higher in general upper secondary schools than in vocational institutions. In general upper secondary schools, virtual international activities have traditionally also been more common, whereas in vocational institutions, internationality has very often meant physical mobility in the form of placements abroad.

FIGURE 7. RESPONSES TO STATEMENTS BY INSTITUTION TYPE (ON A SCALE OF 1 TO 4)

Blended mobility as a new possibility

The survey results indicate that in September 2020, slightly more than one out of three educational institutions intended to implement blended mobility, which means a combination of virtual mobility and physical mobility periods. This was slightly more common in vocational institutions than upper secondary schools. Blended mobility was only added to Erasmus+ activities in autumn 2020, which is why experiences or models relating to it remain relatively few. This fuels a need to share different experiences and models as soon as possible to reduce uncertainty. In this context, some of the respondents considered that maintaining motivation may become a challenge if the physical mobility period planned as part of blended mobility cannot go ahead. Respondents also asked themselves whether talking about 'virtual mobility' makes sense in general if the idea of mobility is to travel to a different country.

The study found that one out of two upper secondary schools and vocational institutions were not yet able to say in September 2020 whether they intended to go for blended mobility, and one out of four institutions said they were not planning blended mobility in that academic year.

Total 32 | 25 | 43
General upper secondary school 28 | 25 | 47
Vocational institution 38 | 26 | 36
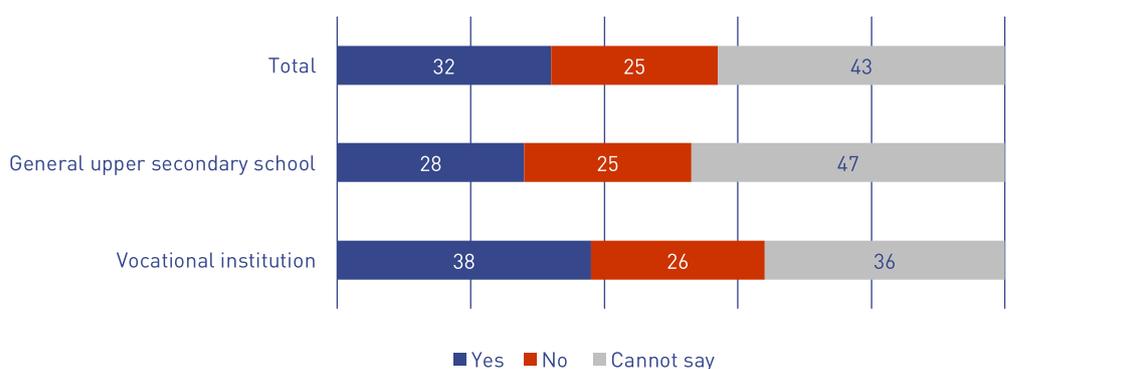
■ Yes ■ No ■ Cannot say

FIGURE 8. PLANS TO COMBINE VIRTUAL MOBILITY AND PHYSICAL MOBILITY PERIODS INTO BLENDED MOBILITY IN ACADEMIC YEAR 2020/2021, %

4 EXPERIENCES OF VIRTUAL INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES

The part of the study consisting of interviews with six educational institutions had an in-depth focus on how educational institutions have experienced the rapid transition to virtual international activities; how they have maintained enthusiasm and what they have learned as a result. The challenges that may have emerged as the nature of the activities changed suddenly were also mapped.

Based on the interviews, the experiences of virtual activities have mostly been positive. For example, **general upper secondary schools** find that virtual activities included in lessons diversify and liven up teaching. According to an international affairs coordinator interviewed for the study, teachers should be encouraged in the increased use of virtual international activities. They teach many types of skills ranging from technology use to communication. Upper secondary schools thus believe that virtual international activities should be more closely integrated into the planning of lessons, even if finding a time for remote meetings with partners that suits everyone is sometimes difficult.

According to an international affairs officer in a **vocational institution**, initial experiences have shown that with the help of suitable virtual methods, the entire class can be quickly involved in international activities. Another international affairs coordinator who was interviewed noted that virtual project work can improve the quality of project cooperation as the work on the project and the cooperation are carried out continuously online, rather than having a strong focus on meetings.

> *"If the idea is easy and well planned, it can be implement without any trouble."*
> (International affairs coordinator interviewed for the study, vocational institution)

The interviews indicate that especially **general upper secondary schools** do not see virtual internationalisation only as work carried out in exceptional circumstances caused by the pandemic, as they have also engaged in virtual project work under normal conditions in addition to physical mobility. The use of virtual methods has been one way of participating in international activities and continuing the projects while responding to the schools' internationalisation challenges in keeping with the new National core curriculum. While the use of virtual methods has been emphasised further in the exceptional circumstances due to the pandemic, such activities are not something completely new.

What inspires institutions to use virtual means in international activities?

The interviewees were asked to give examples of how teachers, other staff members and students can be inspired to show enthusiasm for virtual international activities.

An international affairs officer in a **vocational institution** interviewed for the study said they felt that their role in motivating teachers was essential. An important task was to support teachers in virtual internationalisation activities. Cooperation with teachers must be easy;

when teachers are handed ready-made technical tools and supported in using these tools, rather than leaving them to cope alone, they will be enthusiastic. The international affairs officer had created prerequisites for the activities and enabled the partners to find each other. After this, responsibility for pursuing the activities was transferred to the relevant field of education, which started planning pedagogical content. It is also important to raise enthusiasm about the activities in teachers in the international partner schools. Interaction between teachers is the key to everything.

> *We must inform our staff about internationalisation ideas across a broad front and in a positive spirit to raise enthusiasm among teachers about virtual cooperation with international partners. Various ready-made 'packages/templates' must be prepared for the teachers, ensuring that they do not have to start from a scratch and come up with their own ideas. The International Affairs Office helps them get started and supports them. The main point is that starting should be made very easy for teachers and students.*
> (International affairs coordinator interviewed for the study, vocational institution)

An international affairs officer from another vocational institution said that in virtual activities, having a field-specific international affairs officer is a more effective solution than an institution-specific coordinator. The fact that the field-specific international affairs officer 'speaks the language of the field', in other words knows the relevant field of education, increases the motivation of both teachers and students to engage in international activities. The institution in question has also gained good experiences of involving personnel from different fields of education and working in different roles in project implementation.

An international coordinator of a **general upper secondary school** interviewed for the study pointed out that motivation for the activities is increased by understanding that internationality is not just about mobility; it can genuinely help the school develop while involving different actors in collaboration. The upper secondary school in question engages in cooperation with higher education institutions and employers in an international project. Cooperation across the boundaries of subjects and different organisations motivates teachers. When teachers of different subjects can work together in projects, the results are better and the enthusiasm is great.

Interviewees from **both general upper secondary schools and vocational institutions** emphasised the fact that virtual internationalisation activities should be a fun and inspiring way to study, regardless of whether it ultimately leads to a physical mobility period or not.

> *The challenge of projects lies in motivating the students: usually, mobility acts as a motivator for the actual work. Students do not experience virtual work outside the lessons interesting enough to participate in it - at least not regularly. The project has the best chances of succeeding if it is part of the work carried out during lessons (and everyone participates). The challenge in building cooperation, however, lies in finding partners who have similar ideas which they wish to implement at the same time. If these activities were a built-in part of compulsory courses, they would be accessible to all students."*
> (International affairs coordinator interviewed for the study, vocational institution)

Upper secondary schools and vocational institutions found it important to integrate virtual internationalisation into studies and to ensure that competence acquired in each activity can be recognised in a way that benefits the students.

Even if internationalisation takes place in the student's classroom, it must be a visible part of the studies and lead to course completion or credits.
(International affairs coordinator interviewed for the study, upper secondary school)

What matters is that the virtual parts can be clearly included in vocational studies or common modules, making it possible to recognise them as studies. This will maintain the motivation of both students and teachers as the activities progress.
(International affairs coordinator interviewed for the study, vocational institution)

Vocational institutions emphasised that when the school's internationalisation team creates a framework for virtual activities and enables their implementation, it is easy for teachers to activate students. The international affairs officers who were interviewed were confident that teachers have adequate pedagogical competence to guide students, ensuring that cooperation with international students can also be managed by virtual means.

Additionally, virtual activities should not be chosen that last too long or are too difficult for students. Naturally, keeping groups together on virtual platforms is also more difficult. The instructions should be clear enough to allow the students to easily get a grip of what is expected of them. Before written collaboration by virtual means begins, the students should also meet face-to-face on Zoom or some other platform. The collaboration should be carried out in small groups, progressing step by step and considering the students' different social skills.

While cultural differences can motivate students, the topic must also be interesting and relevant to the students' lives at least at some level. The principal of a **general upper secondary school** that implemented an international social media course by virtual means reported in the interview that it was successful because this topic is familiar for young people.

Tampere classical upper secondary school and Tampere lyseo upper secondary school: A study trip in France

Two schools in Tampere, Tampere classical upper secondary school and Tampere lyseo upper secondary school, decided to develop a virtual school camp to replace a trip that had to be cancelled.

- Teachers in France and Finland got together groups of approximately 20 students in each country.
- Moodle was used as a platform for handing out assignments in Finland, whereas in France this was done by writing
- Communication methods were set out on the Moodle platform
- The tools used were e-mail, videos, PowerPoint presentations and Teams meetings
- Using videos and other links in Moodle, students created their presentations, which allowed them to improve their skills in listening, writing and reading a foreign language
- Language learning motivates communication between students.

Towards more equal and environmentally friendly activities?

As the most inspiring feature of virtual internationalisation, both interview participants and those who gave open-ended answers in the survey brought up promoting sustainable development, as these activities involve little or no physical mobility. Another important factor is the equality of virtual activities. Internationalisation that takes place on the premises of the students' home institution and is integrated into teaching enables a larger group to participate. An international affairs coordinator at a general upper secondary school interviewed for the study found that virtual mobility is, above all, an equal method of internationalisation. For example, it makes participation easier for students who have financial difficulties. As there are no restrictions on numbers, more students can participate in the activities, and greater effectiveness may be achieved than through physical mobility. This way an increasing number of students will embrace tolerance during their studies.

Virtual means can also be a good option for timid students; when they can start off with virtual internationalisation, they may be encouraged to also opt for physical mobility. Both upper secondary schools and vocational institutions have found that the students who are active are completely different in virtual internationalisation than among those who opt for physical mobility.

> *It is encouraging that so many students gain international experience without travelling. The activities are so much more effective when internationalisation is part of the school's everyday life. Those students who would not go abroad also learn international working life skills and lifelong learning skills through virtual activities. Even those who are not brave enough to go abroad can gain up to three years of international experience in their home institution.*
> (International affairs coordinator interviewed for the study, vocational institution)

An international coordinator from a general upper secondary school interviewed for the study found that virtual internationalisation is increasingly gaining ground also in normal conditions – it is easier for more schools to participate in international project work when they are not always required to set aside time and resources for teachers' mobility periods abroad. In addition, these projects give teachers more equal opportunities to attend kick-off meetings, for example, as they take place online. Finding reliable project partners and a good theme is essential.

As virtual mobility becomes more widespread, internationality is increasingly understood to include also other activities besides mobility. Educational institutions focus on education related to attitudes and internationalisation at home. Virtual cooperation and project activities have thus expanded educational institutions' views of internationalisation, and their networks can be geographically quite extensive.

Keuda Vocational Education and Training Group: "My day in my culture" – a virtual project

Keuda, the leading provider of vocational education and training for young people and adults in Central Uusimaa, has actively developed and tested new types of international activities.

Keuda has been conducting a fully virtual international project, in which

- students familiarise themselves with another country's culture using WhatsApp or some other instant messaging application during their English lessons. The project is relevant to their studies, and as the work is carried out in class, a large number of students can be involved in it.
- For five weeks, the students are given different assignments every week, or several times over two weeks, which they share out in small groups using an instant messaging application. Teams calls between classes are also used.
- The teacher's role is to monitor, guide and support the students' work and to hand out the assignments. The aim is to put the students centre stage.
- The teacher has an international contact as a co-teacher.
- International affairs officers enable the launching of the cooperation by finding the partners, providing technical support, informing teachers of inspiring ideas and developing projects further together with teachers.
- As the implementation is completely virtual, the activities will not be disrupted even if the pandemic is prolonged.

5 CRITICAL ISSUES OF VIRTUAL INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES

The survey and the interviews conducted as part of the study mapped the challenges or obstacles that emerged when the pandemic obliged the institutions to launch virtual international activities on a rapid schedule.

Understandably, many interviewees found it a challenge in the early autumn that no models were yet available for the activities, and enough experiences had not been accumulated. Spring 2020 was burdensome for educational institutions, and therefore many teachers had no enthusiasm and energy to start planning virtual international cooperation. Some open-ended answers in the survey gave vent to the tiredness and frustration caused by distance learning in spring 2020 and the cancellation of planned activities for both teachers and students. For some, maintaining international activities purely by means of virtual methods seemed to be an impossible challenge in early autumn 2020. As they considered blended mobility, the uncertainty of whether physical mobility periods would be able to go ahead in spring 2021 was also a concern for respondents.

> *Virtual Erasmus+ mobility periods are challenging as combining them with physical mobility is mandatory. What if physical mobility is still not possible next spring? In this case, all our work on the virtual part will also be 'wasted', and mobility support cannot be used at all.*
> (Open-ended answer, vocational institution)

According to the interviewees, the significance of existing cooperation relationships is highlighted in virtual internationalisation. Creating new networks and relationships based on virtual means alone is considered difficult. Some interviewees also mentioned that virtual project work is slow and requires flexibility, among other things in terms of schedules. Operating in different time zones, especially with partners outside Europe, creates its own challenges in virtual cooperation; enabling face-to-face remote work in the school's daily life is not always easy. Organising project coordinators' meetings has usually been possible but finding a common time for the students can be more difficult.

For many upper secondary level students, motivation to engage in international activities has been associated with physical mobility, and virtual activities alone do not motivate everyone. Additionally, some teachers in educational institutions do not find virtual internationalisation meaningful as there is no possibility for concrete meetings with people. Therefore, teachers are not necessarily always prepared to invest time and resources in it.

Virtual internationalisation activities require specific expertise and resources; some take launching these activities for granted, whereas others have difficulties in getting started. There are differences in the digital skills of international partners, and their digital tools are not necessarily as advanced as in Finland. All interviewees emphasised that their virtual project work was based on strong long-standing networks – new actors are few and far between. They found it difficult to do virtual project work with new people they did not already know. Finding new partners on the web is not impossible, however. A **vocational institution** has organised coordinators' meetings for exchanging good practices, and these meetings have also been a good venue for finding new partners.

An upper secondary school teacher said in the interview that cooperation based on continuous use of remote connections is intensive and stressful in different ways than physical meetings. The good thing about physical meetings has been that the participant can leave their daily life for a while and finds it easier to focus on project work.

Educational institutions look forward to the return to normal conditions after the pandemic. A **vocational institution** representative said in the interview that virtual and physical mobility are closely linked; in emergency conditions, it was necessary to get the Finnish school and the partner school to work together virtually, thus already establishing connections for the physical mobility period. This helps to maintain awareness of internationality also in emergency conditions. In other words, virtual international activities are seen as a temporary springboard for actual mobility. This also came up in many interviews with representatives of **general upper secondary schools**.

Additionally, it emerged in the interviews that the experiences of personal growth achieved through virtual activities do not match those gained through physical mobility. If the activities were purely virtual, a great deal would probably be lost. Virtual activities are also planned to such a high degree that the spontaneity of physical meetings is lost. This is why people sometimes feel they fumble with creativity and innovation in a virtual environment. In virtual meetings, the agenda is followed quite strictly.

> *'Virtuality is rather two-dimensional, and it lacks the sense of warmth and light on your skin that you would have in a different environment, the smells and tastes, the soundscapes and all that, and a sort of 360-degree experience of other people is missing...'*
> (International affairs coordinator interviewed for the study, vocational institution)

6   CONCLUSION

The main questions of the study project conducted in September and October 2020 were:

- How has internationalisation work continued in the exceptional circumstances? What have educational institutions done to maintain internationalisation?
- What has helped institutions to continue virtual internationalisation work?
- What obstacles are there to continuing international activities in the exceptional circumstances?
- What types of skills has virtual international cooperation produced?
- How extensive/active has virtual international cooperation been?

The situation is evolving rapidly, and the realities of autumn 2020 have probably changed in many of the educational institutions that participated in the study. By the time this publication comes out, the uncertainty that prevailed in the autumn will have been alleviated by various sets of instructions. Nevertheless, this report aims to shed light on what virtual internationalisation activities were like in upper secondary educational institutions in autumn 2020 and how these activities were experienced at that time.

The study found that educational institutions continued their international activities also in the emergency conditions. Especially in upper secondary schools, where internationalisation had commonly been based on virtual activities even prior to the pandemic, continuing projects that had already been launched using digital tools seemed natural. Students were encouraged in online interaction, and the staff continued the efforts to develop their educational institutions on various digital platforms.

In vocational institutions, the pandemic interrupted periods of work-based learning and studies at educational institutions abroad or made it necessary to cancel them, which led to a need to develop alternative solutions. It has not been easy; many educational institutions were concerned about how to motivate students, and also teachers, to continue international cooperation when physical mobility periods were not an option.

The continuation of international cooperation was facilitated by good partner networks and the persistent efforts of educational institutions' international affairs officers to motivate teachers and facilitate project work. In both upper secondary schools and vocational institutions, internationalisation work has been closely integrated into studies, allowing students to accumulate credits and attainments even if physical trips did not go ahead.

Some educational institutions experienced problems with the workload and time use required by virtual projects as an obstacle to virtual internationalisation. Planning and organising online meetings and seminars were experienced as burdensome. In addition, clear guidelines were not yet available in early autumn 2020; whereas more detailed instructions were issued, and webinars and training were organised later in the autumn.

Nevertheless, educational institutions have understood the equality of opportunities offered by virtual internationalisation. An increasing number of students and staff representatives are able to participate in international activities that take place within the framework of their home institution. Participants have also learned many technical skills in virtual projects, and new types of communication competence have been gained.

At the time of the survey, virtual international cooperation had not yet been put on a permanent footing in most upper secondary educational institutions. Nearly 40% of the educational institutions that responded to the survey had experimented with it, but both surveys and interviews showed that a return to normal physical mobility was eagerly expected. While virtual activities are regarded as desirable in terms of equality and sustainable development, many felt that meeting people in real life and experiencing different cultures abroad are something that should not be lost.

In autumn 2020, the development of virtual internationalisation activities was only taking its first steps. Experiences related to virtual activities are constantly being accumulated and lessons are being learned, and if this study were repeated in 2021, the results would probably be very different – getting started with something new always takes time. The project had a steering group consisting of experts from Finnish National Agency for Education and from other expert organisations; Kalle Juuti from University of Helsinki, Sanna Ruhalahti from Tampere University of Applied Sciences, Anne-Mari Behm from Samiedu and Teijo Päkkilä from Seinäjoki general upper secondary school. Many thanks to all experts.

Tips for virtual international activities

- Make use of the competence and contacts of the institution's international affairs officers
- Start with small experiments and plan them well. Work with international partners on online platforms goes more smoothly if the activities have a clear structure
- Test different practices and tools
- Establishing a connection between teachers creates a lasting foundation for the cooperation
- Integrate the activities into teaching and studies
- When planning the activities and tasks, make sure that they are sufficiently easy to do
- Carry out the project in cooperation with different subjects or fields of study
- Use a video link: it creates a feeling of genuine encounters
- Enable activities that are not dependent on time

Also remember:

- Information security; student introductions on YouTube, for example, do not meet information security requirements
- Roles requiring different levels of activity must be fair for students
- The activity should be organised like a project, comprising the work stages kick-off – work – conclusion
- Draw on implementation models tested in distance learning
- Remember the Web Accessibility Directive if the material will be permanently available

Examples of educational institutions' virtual international activities:

- Teaching the partners to make a local product or use a technique via a video link (such as baking a local speciality)
- Tourism students' virtual trips
- Language café of the English course or presentation of facilities relevant to a vocational field (for example, presentations on trucks given by logistics students to each other)
- Meetings over a cup of coffee, themed lectures or discussion events between international teachers
- Virtual visits between international network members

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

Survey on online and distance learning on the European School Education Gateway:
https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/viewpoints/surveys/survey-on-online-
teaching.htm

European Commission's Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027:
https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/digital-education-action-plan_fi

About online teaching:
https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/manifesto-teaching-online

About digitalisation and internationalisation:
https://www.aoc.co.uk/pandemic-possibility-can-digitalisation-help-internationalisation

About virtual exchanges and internationalisation at home:
https://www.eaie.org/blog/virtual-exchange-internationalisation-at-home.html