

# 14 Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange for internationalisation in besieged areas: a case study of the Islamic University of Gaza

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## Abstract

The Islamic University of Gaza (IUG) has participated in the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (E+VE) programme since the beginning of 2019. The international relations office, the body responsible for managing the programme at IUG, noticed that there was a positive change in participants' knowledge and perceptions about VE and its role in enhancing their academic competencies and soft skills during the spring and autumn 2019 terms. As a result, IUG conducted an in-depth study to explore the role of a VE programme at the university in enhancing the students' cultural understanding, cross-cultural communication, and collaboration while engaging in project based learning.

**Keywords:** Erasmus+, virtual exchange, cultural understanding, cross-cultural communication, project based learning.

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## 1. Context

The Gaza Strip is the southern part of the Palestinian Territories and is located in the heart of the Middle East, directly on the Eastern coast of the

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Mediterranean sea. It has a 51 km border with Israel and an 11 km one with Egypt. Following the political situation in the Gaza Strip in 2006, a siege was imposed on this territory, affecting all developmental, educational, economic, and international activities. As a result of the blockage, people were not able to mobilise outside the Gaza Strip due to border closure (OCHA, 2020). Therefore, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip missed many scholarship opportunities, exchange opportunities, international project meetings, and conferences (Bowler, 2018). However, educational institutions in the Gaza Strip have deployed information technology and VE to break the isolation of their students and staff by enabling them to participate in different international, educational, cultural, and research activities. This utilisation of VE has supported the universities' internationalisation efforts as a synergy for physical exchange (Oliva et al., 2017). In this way, learners and professors are exchanging their thoughts, acquiring international competencies, and paving the way for future collaboration in education and research, in addition to increasing cultural understanding (Oliva et al., 2017). VE can be viewed as 'low-cost internationalisation' (Michou & Bottin-Rousseau, 2018). Moreover, the trend of universities using VE has created a new type of internationalisation, namely internationalisation at a distance (Mittelmeier, Rienties, Gunter, & Raghuram, 2020).

IUG seeks to internationalise its courses through constructive engagement in online initiatives, which are an ideal way of providing students with an international mindset (Michou & Bottin-Rousseau, 2018; Oliva et al., 2017). Therefore, through its international relations office and different departments, IUG has engaged in virtual activities such as having guest lecturers, organising online workshops, and conducting online examinations of master and doctoral students. Moreover, one of the projects that focuses on students' intercultural exchange is the one done in partnership with the University of Glasgow in Britain. IUG has conducted five rounds of the programme English for Academic Study Telecollaboration (EAST), since 2015. The EAST programme aims at strengthening communication and interaction among the enrolled students by using English. In this five-week programme, each year, the Glasgow students learn about the problems of Gaza, working within mixed groups to develop

suitable solutions for the problems with ultimate benefit from international practices (IUG, 2010-2019).

All examples mentioned are evidence of the importance that IUG has placed on VE as a great opportunity to develop student skills such as effective communication and collaboration, critical and independent thinking, providing constructive feedback, digital literacies, and intercultural awareness. Through these initiatives, IUG also mitigates the risks of the current isolation of the students and staff in the Gaza Strip through virtual exposure to international experience.

IUG has a privileged relationship with Erasmus+ programmes as a participant in many projects and as a partner with other universities in different disciplines. Based on that relationship, IUG was introduced to the E+VE programmes: during 2018, it offered the VE courses to all IUG students as extracurricular activities to improve their personal and academic competencies and introduce them to international students in an interactive space.

Institutionalisation of VE at IUG took two forms, starting from the strategic level and moving to the operational level. At the strategic level, IUG has recognised the significance and contribution of VE and the E+VE initiative to the university's internationalisation efforts. Therefore, its participation and engagement in VE activities is considered a central strategic action that is intended to continue until 2024 (IUG, 2020a).

At the operational level, based on the strategic direction towards E+VE for internationalisation, IUG has started to concentrate on E+VE and has assigned an employee to coordinate IUG's participation. Moreover, some departments integrate the E+VE courses within their courses (for example, the English and the business administration departments for undergraduate students). Many factors motivated IUG to participate in VE:

- effective engagement of IUG students with global issues, allowing them to experience these issues on a personal level;

- orientation for physical mobility, as most of our students have not travelled before, so VE is a great chance for them to be introduced to the wider world;
- a very good place to invest in its invaluable asset, human capital, and enriching the soft skills of students and preparing them to be well-qualified in the 21st century; and
- acceptance of others, as different perspectives are discussed through VE courses, which means a good chance to be more accepting and forgiving.

## 2. Aims and description of the E+VE implemented

Based on the international relations semiannual report (IUG, 2020b), IUG participated in two E+VE ready-made programmes provided by Sharing Perspectives Foundation<sup>3</sup> and Soliya<sup>4</sup>. Within these two programmes, IUG participated in four courses during the first semester 2019-2020 (Table 1).

Table 1. IUG participation in E+VE courses per programme

VE Programme	VE Course	Course at IUG	No. of students who participated at IUG	Language	Duration
Sharing Perspectives Foundation	Cultural Encounters/ Newcomers and Nationalism	Syntax and Semantics and Shakespeare	33	English	10 weeks

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3. <https://sharingperspectivesfoundation.com/>

4. <https://www.soliya.net/>

Sharing Perspectives Foundation	Cultural Encounters: Perspectives on Populism	Introduction to Literary Appreciation	42	English	6 weeks
Sharing Perspectives Foundation	Technology and Society Connections Across Frontiers	Introduction to Entrepreneurship	40	Arabic	6 weeks
Soliya	Identity and Cross-Cultural Communication in Digital World	Discourse Analysis	80	English	5 weeks

These E+VE courses have different names, but they have common learning outcomes for the students, namely fostering the intercultural exchange among the students in addition to developing transversal skills among them such as empathy, self-esteem, curiosity, and the confidence to communicate in cross-cultural settings ([Sharing Perspectives, n.d.](#); [Soliya, n.d.](#)). These aims crosscut all the course learning outcomes and aims at IUG. However, the idea behind the participation is to strengthen these skills among the students through the course's different concepts. For example, the IUG course titled 'Discourse analysis' benefited from the E+VE course titled 'Identity and cross-cultural communication in the digital world' to strengthen IUG students' skills in discussion and analysis of a common cultural issue.

The engagement process in the E+VE activities is a collective effort between the international relations department and the different departments and professors at the university. In more details, the process can be described in the following phases.

- **Phase one:** promotion and networking

As soon as the international relations officer received the announcement for the VE courses, the memorandum of understanding for joining the projects were signed by the university's legal representative. Then, the E+VE coordinator, who is a staff member at the international relations department, contacted potential professors to

engage in the project courses based on the course description at IUG. In addition, the language of the courses and the students' levels of language proficiency were key selection criteria, because IUG students' English language proficiency varied from one student to another and from one discipline to another, i.e. students from disciplines that use English as a medium of instruction have higher English proficiency than students in courses that use Arabic for teaching and assessment. As a result of this promotion and networking, three different professors were interested in the courses as part of their coursework during the 2019 academic year, two from the English art department, and one from business administration.

- **Phase two:** student enrolment and orientation

The professors announced the E+VE courses for the students during lectures where they briefly described the course, the learning objectives, and the evaluation criteria. As it was the first experience for the professors in the E+VE courses, the students' participation in these courses was optional, with a bonus for those who could complete the E+VE course requirements successfully; nevertheless, the students showed great interest in these courses.

Once each professor had a list of interested students, they sent the list to the E+VE coordinator who contacted the students to start the registration process. All registration instructions in addition to the course brochure were sent to the students via email. As a last step, the international relations office organised an orientation session for the students to introduce them to the E+VE programme and answer their questions.

During the registration process, the E+VE coordinator at the international relations office provided students with the required support and assistance to complete the registration process.

- **Phase three:** monitoring and evaluation

Once the students started their participation, the E+VE coordinator at IUG was responsible for receiving and monitoring the weekly achievement reports

of the students sent by the organising foundation. These reports were sent to the professors to inform them about the students' performance in these courses. Additionally, international relations officers usually asked for students' feedback and impressions during the start and middle of the E+VE course. Furthermore, at the end of the course, the E+VE coordinator sent the students' evaluations he had received from the organisers to the professors to be included in the course's overall marks for the students.

IUG students participated in the E+VE courses, however, IUG did not design or offer specific E+VE courses. The student's participation in the courses were implemented in a way that each student joined the E+VE sessions using his/her own computer with good internet connection, and internet browsing application. In particular, the four courses in which IUG students participated had an online group meeting each week, and prior to this meeting each student was asked to watch the week's videos<sup>5</sup> and write a comment on them. Each online group consisted of eight to ten students and one facilitator.

During the group meetings, the facilitators encouraged participants to engage in thought-provoking conversations that allowed them to clearly express their ideas, experiences, and arguments about the topic under discussion. Furthermore, at the end of the sessions, all participants reflected on what they learnt during the session.

### **3. Evaluation, assessment, and recognition**

IUG started the integration between its accredited courses and E+VE courses gradually at the beginning of 2019. Thus, IUG is progressively developing the mechanisms and follow-up procedures for VE programmes from its end. The IUG professors who were involved in E+VE assessed their students based on the final assessment and evaluation sheets that were received from the programme

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5. <https://sharingperspectivesfoundation.com/programme/newcomers-and-nationalism-2/video-lectures/>

monitors. Students received additional credits based on specific criteria ranging from one to five by the end of the course.

Moreover, an evaluation form was prepared and distributed using Google Forms among the participants after the end of the courses. The aim of this form was to identify the benefits of the E+VE courses from the perspectives of the students. The form constituted two main parts: a questionnaire and a qualitative statement.

The questionnaire consisted of five questions that concentrated on the anticipated learning outcomes of the E+VE courses, namely: communication skills, cultural exchange, and using technology in learning. The satisfaction level ranged from one (total disagreement with the statement) to five (total agreement with the statement).

A total of 30 participants from IUG filled in the evaluation form: these students were the participants from one course provided in 2019 and 2020. At the end of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to provide a statement about the E+VE courses. The results are summarised in [Table 2](#).

Table 2. E+VE courses impact evaluation on IUG students

	<b>Impact on Students</b>	<b>Level of Acceptance</b>
1	Satisfaction level	88%
2	The programme helped me to improve my communication skills	85%
3	The programme enhanced my ability to work in a culturally diverse place	82%
4	The programme helped me to build new relationships with new peers from other countries	71%
5	The programme helped me to improve my digital competencies	68%
6	Average	78.8%

Based on the students' opinions, E+VE courses helped them the most to improve their communication skills and secondly to cope with international and culturally diverse contexts. This means that the E+VE courses achieved their anticipated outcomes.



Furthermore, the participants provided feedback about the courses. Overall, they were happy with the experience, but they mentioned the following main constraints they encountered during the sessions:

- technical problems due to connection drops and the challenges of re-entering the group meeting;
- some participants within the group were not very committed to the start time of the group meeting, and late arrivals limited the discussion; and
- the composition of the group sometimes did not consider the geographical distribution, so that some IUG students found themselves in a group that was dominantly from their class or school.

The following opinion is from one of the IUG participants in the VE programme.

“This VE programme have [sic] filled my expectations and even more. I have attended the previous three meetings and I am totally satisfied with how the whole discussion is organised. Beside that, I found this a great opportunity to share my thoughts with various minds from different countries, it actually makes me feel like I am traveling. Moreover, it allowed me to break the barrier of communicating about social and political issues in English language. I think that this experience will add a lot to my personality and to my personal career. I am glad that I have been introduced to such an opportunity by my university. I wish them to work more on similar programs to give the students a path towards active communication and to build a bridge of knowledge between different civilisations” (SH.O).

Whereas another participant commented the below.

“As a student in the English department, I always feel that I need to interact with international students so that I can be able to practise my English language with native speakers. However, living in

Gaza under the siege makes it unrealistically hard for me to leave the Gaza strip, which in turn reduces my chance of interacting with students from all over the world. Therefore, when I heard about this programme and knew that it will allow me to meet with and speak to international students in order to discuss different political and social issues that have an impact on our generation; I was so excited and keen to join this programme. Since it has always been my dream to leave Gaza Strip and travel around the world to discover more about other cultures and work on my language skills... As a matter of fact, it was wonderful to experience the feeling that I am traveling around the world. In my sessions, I had six friends from different countries so for me it was a journey to six countries. However, my experience was not limited to only getting to know about different cultures, but it also involved interesting discussions concerning many different issues. Living in Palestine under strict laws makes [it] really hard for young people to express their own political views... Therefore, I will always be grateful to my university which provided me with such a unique opportunity” (D.O.).

Additionally, we have received a testimonial from one teacher of the Discourse analysis course.

“Allow me first to thank you for giving my students in the Discourse analysis course the opportunity to participate in this virtual connect programme that was a valuable addition to the knowledge and skills the participating students were expected to gain in the course. Much emphasis in the course I teach is on cross-cultural understanding and communication and on realising the role of language/discourse in bringing about effective intra- and intercultural communication. I think this is a primary aim of the connect programme, and therefore, the feedback I got from those participating students underscored the importance of such a programme in giving them further opportunities and the ability and confidence to share ideas, express themselves, and talk to people from various cultural backgrounds. This is precisely

what I have aspired and worked to equip my students with. I am very satisfied with the way the VE was conducted and the progress made by the participants. I would certainly be keen on having another round of connect programme for my next batch of students. I equally recommend increasing the number of participating students in the programme and the number of weekly sessions to cover more topics and issues” (Dr M.A.).

#### **4. Lessons learnt and conclusion**

The E+VE courses have promoted IUG’s efforts and strategic direction to provide its students with international competences and experiences. E+VE connects them to their counterparts, creating a virtual platform of communication and discussion, which plays a vital role in mutual understanding of common issues academically, socially, and politically.

Furthermore, the E+VE integration at IUG provided a rich experience and, with the global presence of a paradigm shift from teaching to learning, IUG finds the VE programme an invaluable chance to contribute in such a smooth transformation. This experience is considered as a great step in improving the perspective towards future teaching practices at IUG.

Some of the things IUG recommends from its own experience in the VE programme in order to make VE a more effective educational tool:

- to reflect on what the students learnt from their online sessions in their classrooms and share it in public spaces, such things would happen when teachers are getting actively engaged as facilitators, direct supervisors, or contributors in designing the VE courses to be aligned with their academic ones; and
- to organise E+VE courses that have more specific academic content and are part of the curriculum, in which the students can utilise the different

context to address some cases in their curriculum. i.e. project based learning.

As IUG is committed to internationalisation and virtual internationalisation as a way to break the siege imposed, the international relations department is planning to start designing VE courses for the international students.

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