

Stevens
Initiative



2021 Survey of the Virtual Exchange Field Report

Findings from a survey of international virtual exchange programs from
fall 2020 through summer 2021

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ABOUT THE STEVENS INITIATIVE AND THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

The Stevens Initiative is an international leader in virtual exchange, which brings young people from diverse places together to collaborate and connect through everyday technology. Created in 2015 as a lasting tribute to Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens, the Initiative invests in virtual exchange programs between the U.S. and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA); shares research, resources, and promising practices to improve impact; and advocates for broader adoption. Through its 86 grants, the Stevens Initiative will expand its reach by summer 2023 to nearly 75,000 young people in 17 MENA countries and the Palestinian Territories, and in 48 U.S. states, Puerto Rico, one tribal community, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Washington, D.C. Learn more: <https://www.stevensinitiative.org/>

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Virtual exchange
uses technology
to **connect people**
for education and
exchange.

Introduction: Virtual Exchange During a Time of Global Change

Virtual exchange has been expanding in recent years, with more regional, national, and multinational virtual exchange initiatives being established. Yet the dynamics of the field have not been adequately studied, and little is known about the diversity and spread of programs that leverage technology to foster knowledge and cultural exchange. With the goal of filling this gap in knowledge and evidence, the Stevens Initiative launched the first Survey of the Virtual Exchange Field in 2020, capturing information about programs that had been implemented in 2019/20. Building upon last year's effort, the second survey of the field (covering programs that connected young people from fall 2020 through summer 2021) and this ensuing report come at a critical time, given the global pandemic, the disruptions to in-person education and exchange, and a rising tide of nationalism. This confluence of factors has sharpened the need for virtual exchanges that foster mutual understanding and educational diplomacy.

At the same time, while 2020 and 2021 have seen a sharp rise in online learning globally, not all these modalities fit the model of virtual exchange. The best practices and frameworks for virtual exchange developed by the Stevens Initiative, in particular, the [typology of virtual exchange programs](#), have shown that virtual exchanges are fundamentally different from



online learning in that they intentionally further collaboration, as well as reciprocity of knowledge and learning. However, such exchanges can vary tremendously across contexts and countries, and the typology and accompanying glossary represent an important effort toward developing a shared understanding and common definitions among virtual exchange practitioners. This will enable further development of the field, including what types of exchanges exist, how they are created, and what is required for implementation. Despite the global explosion of online learning, we have been mindful in this survey to include only virtual exchange programs that meet these shared criteria.

Covering virtual exchange programs that were implemented globally between September 2020 and August 2021, the second survey offers a significant expansion over the first one in at least **three key ways**:

WHAT IS VIRTUAL EXCHANGE?

Virtual exchange uses **technology** to connect people for education and exchange. Virtual exchange programs typically serve **young people**. Many virtual exchange programs are international, connecting participants in different countries in order to help them gain **global competencies**, among other knowledge, skills, and abilities. Many practitioners feel **facilitation** by prepared, responsible adults—often, but not always, educators—is an important component of successful virtual exchange.

To learn more about virtual exchange watch a [video](#) from the Stevens Initiative.

1

It goes beyond programs that involve the U.S., capturing programs in other world regions and including South-South exchanges;

2

It more than doubled the response rate, reaching a total of 233 virtual exchange institutions and organizations that were able to provide data on their organizational characteristics, of which 177 provided more detailed data on their virtual exchange activities; and

3

It shares new information that helps us better understand the context of virtual exchange, including the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on such programs.

The online survey was distributed globally through the Stevens Initiative's outreach list (which includes virtual exchange providers and Stevens Initiative grantees), through virtual exchange networks such as UNICollaboration and SUNY COIL, and through organizations and institutions in countries like Brazil and India. For more information about the report methodology, please refer to the appendix.

The report begins by sharing highlights from the survey, followed by a presentation of the key findings by major theme. It also shares lessons learned from the survey process, as well as the inherent limitations of studying virtual exchange. A concluding section offers suggestions for the way forward for future work and research.

Five Highlights from the 2021 Survey

1

Impacts of the pandemic: The recent growth and expansion of virtual exchange has been spurred, in part, by the ongoing global pandemic. With teaching and learning mostly shifting from in-person to online since early 2020, most institutions reported an expansion of their virtual exchange programming and anticipated future growth. However, the impacts of the pandemic are complex, and the challenges faced by some virtual exchange practitioners should not be discounted: even where virtual exchange programs were not cancelled outright, some saw a drop in participation.

2

Types of institutions and their roles: For the second year in a row, the higher education sector had the highest level of representation in the survey, whether as the largest group of providers of virtual exchange programs or with postsecondary students being the largest participant group. But as discussed elsewhere in the report, other virtual exchange practitioners play a key role in furthering the overall field through efforts such as training and advocacy.

3

Where virtual exchange is occurring: When it comes to country-level participation in the survey, the U.S. is over-represented. There could be many reasons for this, including the possibility that other countries' virtual exchange activity is not fully captured in the survey. At the same time, regional networks of virtual exchange programs are growing, with many institutions and organizations joining collaboratives or networks within their region.

4

Blended activities: Most virtual exchange programs use a blend of asynchronous and synchronous communication methods. One method does not appear to be favored over the other.

5

Common content areas: The three content areas or topics that are covered most frequently in virtual exchange programs include intercultural dialogue and peacebuilding, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), and global or international affairs. Nonetheless, virtual exchange programs can cover a wide range of content areas and topics beyond the top three, including current issues such as sustainable development, environmental issues, and racial and social justice.

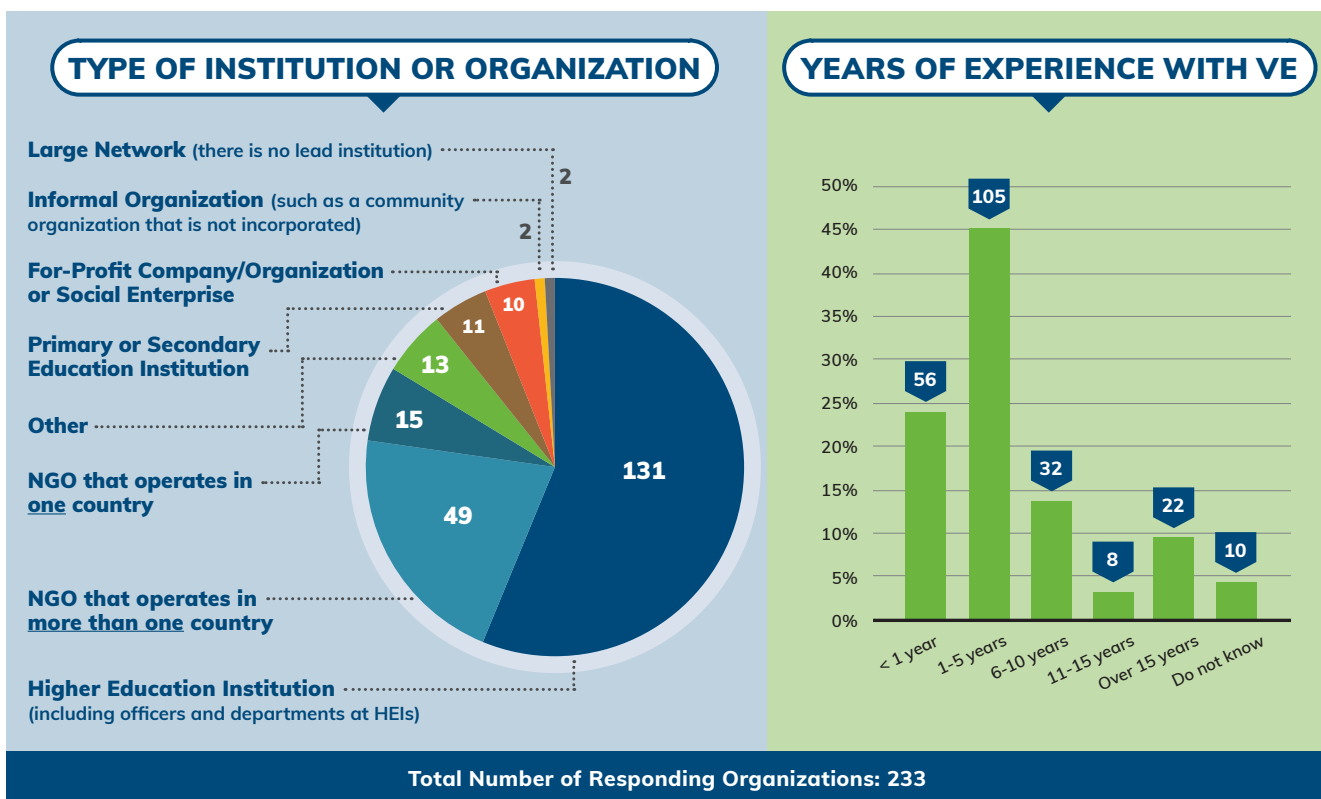


Key Findings

Who Participates in Virtual Exchange Programs

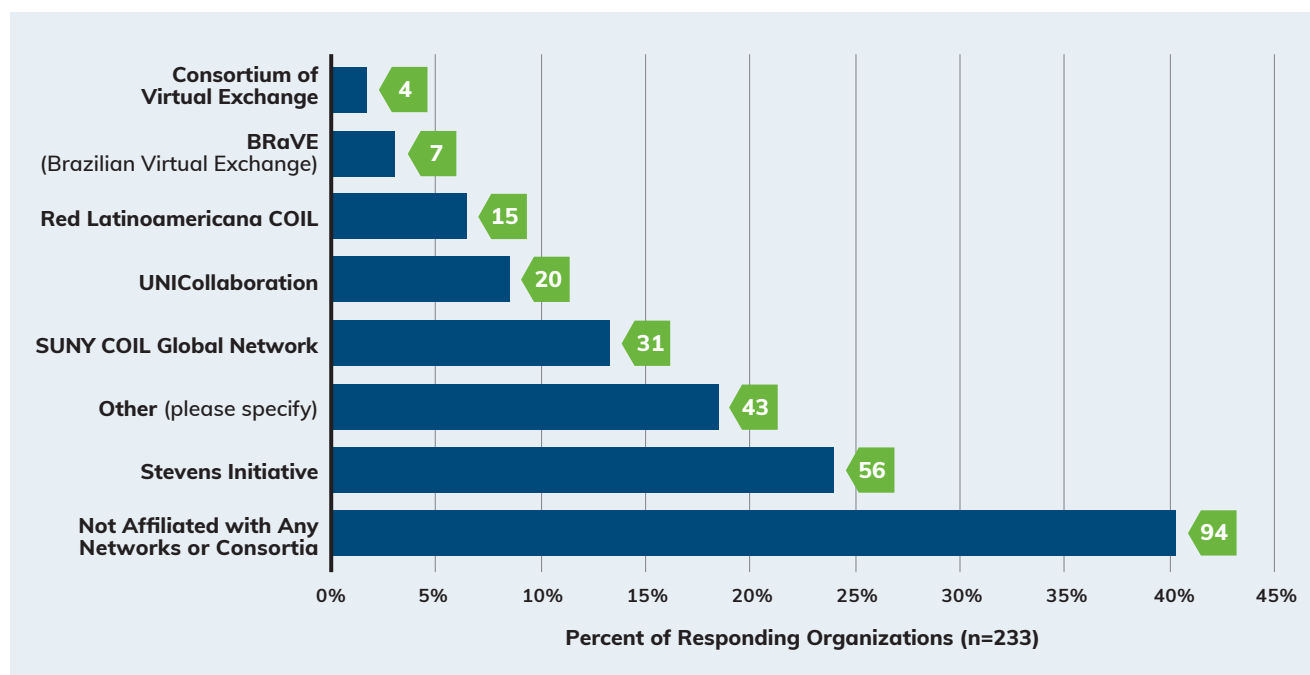
Of the 233 institutions and organizations from around the world who reported implementing virtual exchange programs, most were higher education institutions (56%), followed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that function in more than one country (21%). This is similar to last year's survey results, which also found that most programs were offered by higher education institutions (HEIs) and NGOs. The largest group of respondents (45%) has offered virtual exchange programs for one to five years, with another 25% having offered their programs for less than a year. This reflects the relative nascency of virtual exchange compared to other forms of exchanges.

Institutional and Organizational Characteristics



Virtual exchange providers are increasingly becoming part of implementation networks around the world: almost 60% of respondents indicated they were part of one or more such consortiums, including the Stevens Initiative's own network (24%), the SUNY COIL Global Network (13%), UNICollaboration in Europe (9%), and Red Latinoamericana COIL (6%). Other such networks include BRaVE (Brazilian Virtual Exchange), COIL Connect, Global Ties, and the Virtual Exchange Coalition. It is worth noting that this information is based on how respondents reported their affiliation with these networks, and that these networks themselves are fundamentally different from each other in their purpose and structure. For example, those who reported an affiliation with the Stevens Initiative might be part of the Initiative's wider network or could be grantees/sub-grantees that receive financial support for their virtual exchange programs. On the other hand, SUNY COIL and UNICollaboration are loose networks of class-to-class activities, and at the opposite end of the spectrum is the Virtual Exchange Coalition, a largely informal gathering of practitioners who share knowledge and information without necessarily participating in formal and structured virtual exchange activities.

Association with Virtual Exchange Network or Consortium



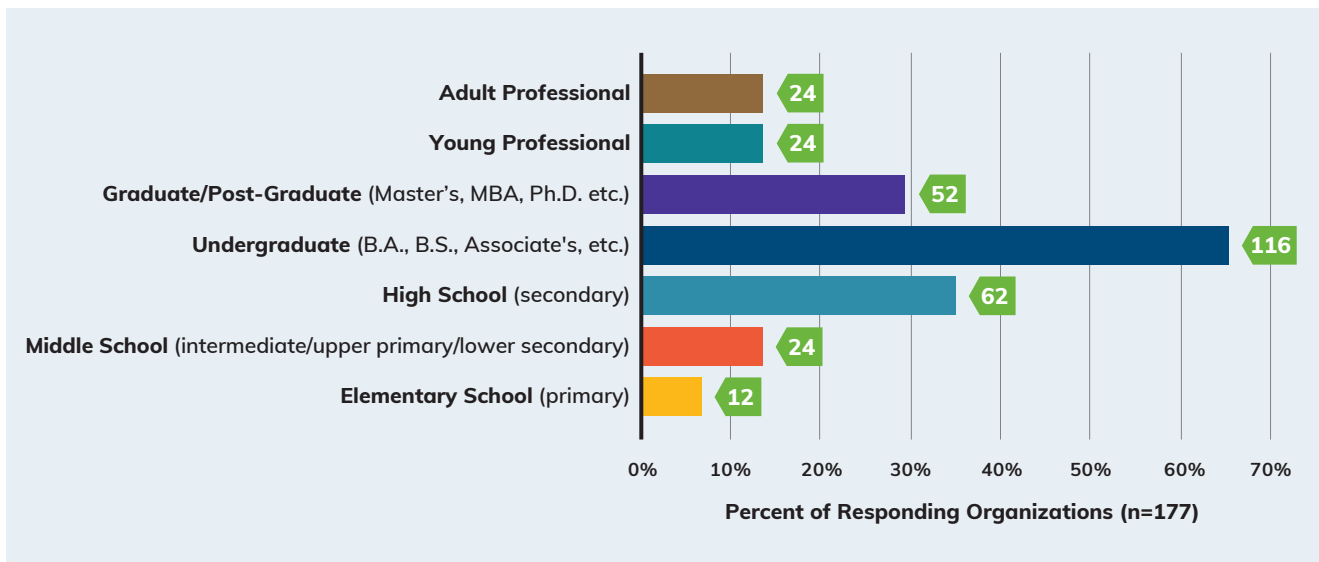
Among the 233 organizations that were able to provide more general data on their characteristics, 214 or 92% indicated offering virtual exchange programs in 2020-2021. Of these 214, about 80% (177) were able to provide data about their programs. They reported offering a total of 3,073 programs that served a total of 224,168 participants. (Although the two surveys are not directly comparable due to a different approach and methodology, we note that last year's survey captured data on 349 programs that served 221,333 individuals.)

Even though the number of programs reported in this year's survey is substantially larger than in the prior survey, a similar growth in participants is not evident. This could be due to a few reasons. First, even though the number of participating institutions and programs increased, many of the programs had small participant numbers. Second, the 2020/21 survey made it much easier for respondents to report that they ran a large number of distinct programs without having to take time to fill out a new page of the online survey for each program. Third, it is possible that even though many institutions continued to offer virtual exchange programs during the pandemic, the participation in those programs either stayed flat or declined.

As with last year's survey, most participants were undergraduate students, with 66% of providers reporting that their programs served this population, followed by high school students (35%), and graduate/post-graduate students (29%). These findings perhaps reflect that the survey mainly reached higher education institutions, and/or that it is challenging for secondary schools and organizations that serve these populations to report virtual exchange data.



Education Level of Virtual Exchange Participants



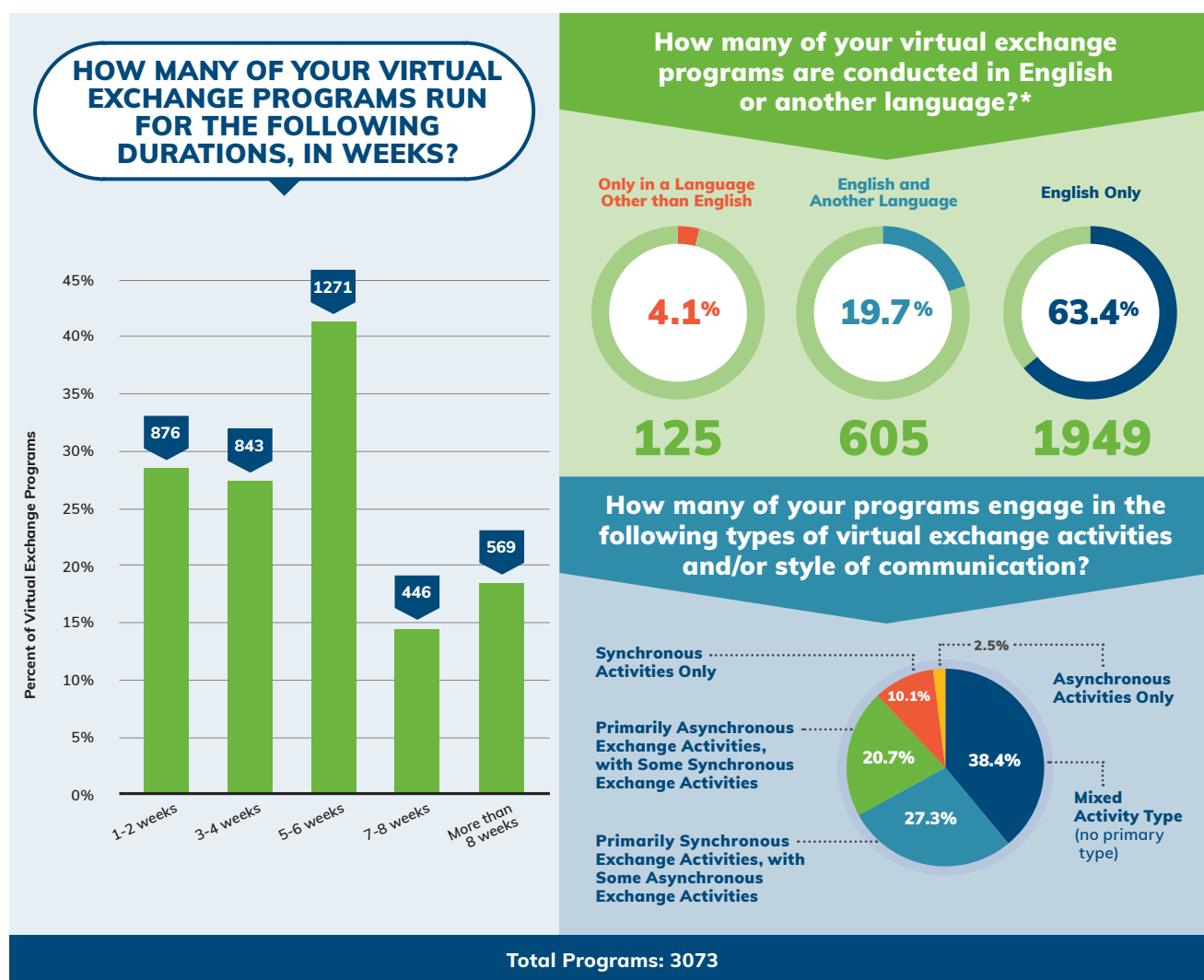
What Virtual Exchange Looks Like

As virtual exchange has grown, so has the **types of programs** offered, with differences in structure and design, in diversity of participants involved, and in the types of activities in which participants engage. Beginning with the Stevens Initiative Virtual Exchange Typology, we refined the classification further this year to better capture recent trends in virtual exchange programs. A notable change was accounting not just for virtual exchange programs, but also for training that many large institutions and initiatives provide.

Among the different types of programs that providers reported offering, the most common type was Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) courses (36%), developed by pairs or small groups of educators working together to develop a virtual exchange that connects two or more academic courses in different places. The second most frequent type of program (24%) was a single virtual exchange program run mostly the same way across several sites, locations, or classrooms. Examples of this type of program include the [IREX Global Solutions Sustainability Challenge](#) and the [AFS Global U Changemaker](#) program. The third most common program type (17%) was a single virtual exchange program run between two sites, locations, or classrooms. An example of this type is the [Hassan II-Kennesaw State University Women's Leadership Virtual Exchange](#). In addition to these specific types of programs, 53% of providers also reported offering training about virtual exchange for educators, facilitators, or others involved in their programs. However, this year's survey was not able to establish the exact nature and intensity of the training.

In terms of **duration**, 41% of programs were between five and six weeks long, followed by shorter programs of either three to four weeks or one to two weeks. When reporting the **language** used, most programs (63%) were offered in English only, with about 20% being offered in English and another language, and only 4% offered solely in a language other than English. The predominance of English probably reflects the fact that English is now the *lingua franca* of most global exchange programs—virtual or otherwise—but also probably underscores the role of the U.S. in virtual exchange (discussed subsequently in this report), where English would be the dominant language.

Virtual Exchange Program Duration, Language, and Activity Types

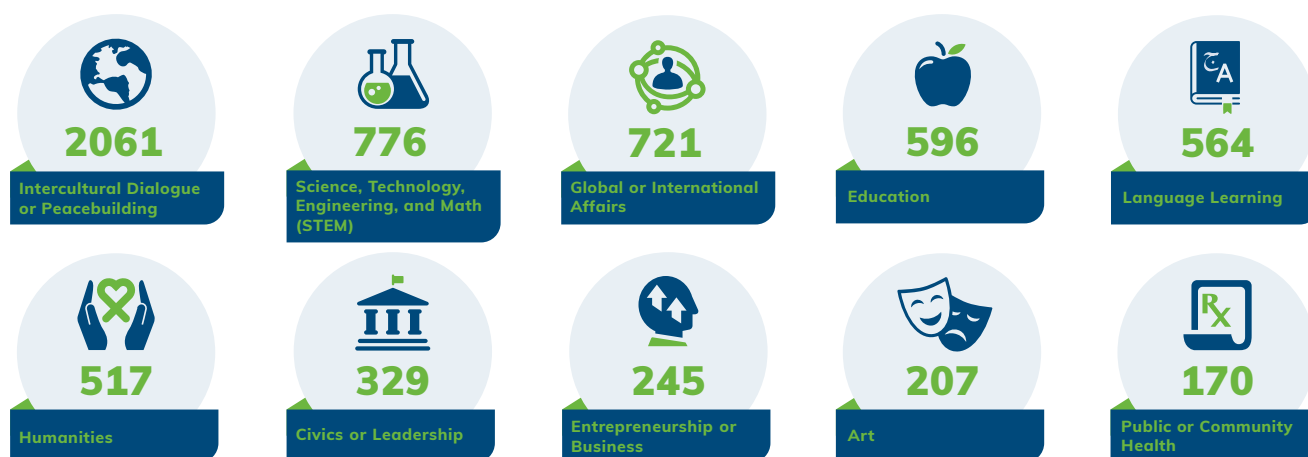


* 12.8% of the respondents were not able to provide language data

Virtual exchange programs use a variety of **communication methods** and **forms of delivery**. The survey reveals that in practice, the largest group of programs (38%) tend to be a blend of asynchronous (in which participants share information and engage at different times) and synchronous (in which the engagement is in real-time). Both categories encompass a wide range of activities and applications that are constantly evolving in response to pedagogical and technological advances. About 27% of reported virtual exchange programs are primarily synchronous with some asynchronous elements.

Respondents were asked about **10 content or topic areas** on which virtual exchange programs often focus. The top three content areas on which programs focused are: intercultural dialogue and peacebuilding (67%); STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) (25%); and global or international affairs (24%). However, beyond these 10 key areas, respondents indicated several other topics were covered in their programming, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); media literacy; communications; race and social justice; and environmental issues, ecology, and sustainability.

Top 10 Content or Topic Areas

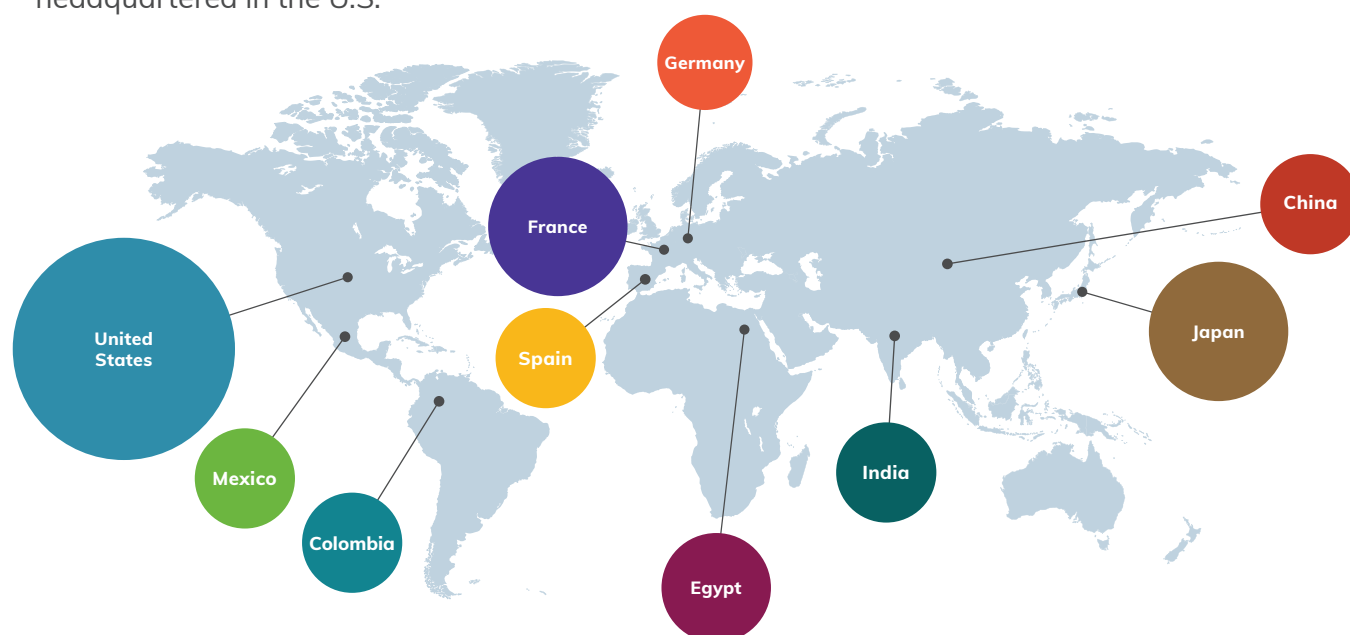


Total Programs: 3073

Which Countries Participate in Virtual Exchange

As with last year's survey, most virtual exchange providers who participated in this year's survey were based in the U.S. and/or their programs originated in the U.S. but involved other countries (75%). The second largest group of virtual exchange providers was based in Europe (11%). A notable difference this year was the effort to administer the survey globally, capturing not just those programs that involve the U.S. but also those that include South-South and other exchanges. But, as we discuss later, capturing this global data remains a challenge.

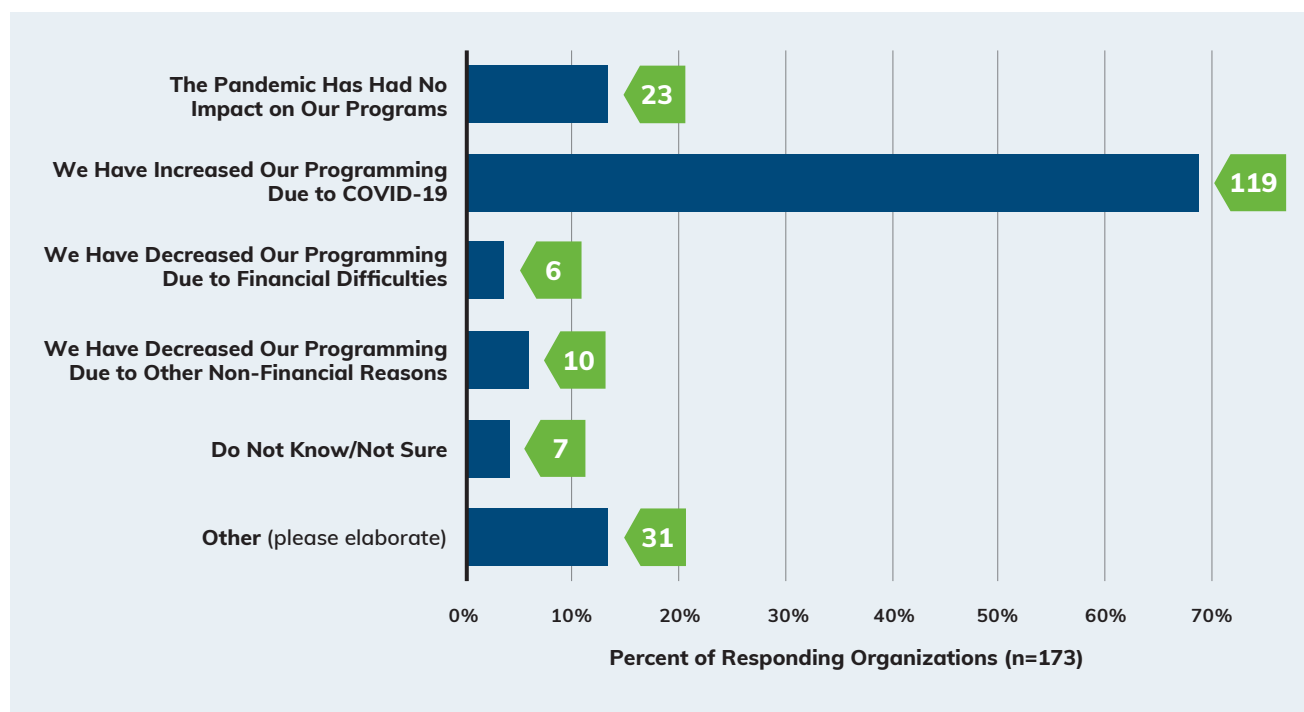
To obtain an idea of the global dispersion of virtual exchange programs, the survey attempted to capture the countries in which virtual exchange participants reside, as well as the number of participants per country. It should be noted that most respondents found it challenging to report this data. While participants resided all over the world, the top 10 countries were as follows (in descending order): United States, Germany, Japan, France, India, Mexico, China, Spain, Egypt, and Colombia. This should be interpreted with caution, as it is not clear whether this actually reflects the predominance of participants in these countries, or whether it is a function of the institutions that were able to respond to the survey, most of whom (almost two-thirds) were headquartered in the U.S.



The Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Virtual Exchange

This year's survey also offered an opportunity to examine the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on virtual exchange. While the pandemic has had a negative impact on education and in-person exchange programs globally, it has created a significant window of opportunity for online learning overall and for virtual exchange in particular. Virtual exchange was already on a growth trajectory, but when in-person exchange ground to a halt in 2020, many institutions and organizations recognized the value of technology in continuing connections between youth and adults and either launched new programs or strengthened existing ones. Sixty-nine percent of survey respondents indicated their programming had increased as a result of the pandemic, while only 13% (or 23 organizations/institutions) indicated it had no impact on their programs.

Impact of Coronavirus Pandemic on Virtual Exchange



In spite of these promising numbers, the impacts of the pandemic are complex, and the challenges faced by some virtual exchange practitioners should not be discounted. About 9% reported they had decreased their programming due to financial or other reasons, which likely stemmed from the negative impacts of the pandemic. Even if virtual exchange programs were not cancelled outright, some saw a drop in participation, which also explains why the total number of participants reported in the survey did not rise at the same rate as the number of programs surveyed (an issue discussed earlier in the report). It is possible, for example, that virtual exchange programs focused on the K-12 student population and run by NGOs were significantly affected by the interruptions to students' in-person learning.

The following comments from survey respondents point to the variable impact of the pandemic:

“It seems wrong to say that the pandemic has had ‘no impact’ on our programs... Planning for exchanges was so delayed that they could not happen last year, but in the spirit of this question about increases/decreases in numbers, it happened that exchanges were not possible in some partner countries/institutions. New opportunities arose, however, so there was not a reduction in the number of exchanges.”

— Higher education institution in the U.S.

“We struggled at the beginning of the pandemic and had to greatly adapt our programmes, and attendance in our programmes dropped. However, we are now offering more programmes than previously and participation is increasing again.”

— NGO that operates in more than one country

“There have been varied responses: we saw increases in demand from some existing partners and in certain areas, such as increased requests for customized VE, while also seeing reduced numbers from other partners due to financial or other problems experienced due to COVID-19.”

— NGO that operates in more than one country

Lessons Learned About Surveying the Virtual Exchange Field

When the Stevens Initiative launched its first survey of virtual exchange in 2020, it was an opportunity to enumerate virtual exchange activity around the world and to surface and share the inherent challenges and findings from gathering and reporting data on virtual exchange programs. This second survey offers five important lessons for the field, while also bringing to light some of the constraints of the current survey.

Defining programs: We found that despite a clear typology developed by the Stevens Initiative, virtual exchange programs and initiatives around the world continue to be defined and understood differently—there is no common language for understanding virtual exchange globally. This challenge exists perhaps because virtual exchange programs are complex and varied, resisting easy and simple classifications or definitions. Another factor at play could be that the Stevens Initiative’s typology, while applicable to many programs, might reflect a U.S.-centric approach to virtual exchange, while other countries might approach the virtual exchange framework and notion of a “program” differently. As such, the survey offers an opportunity to explore and consider other typologies that are still not fully captured.

Maintaining and reporting data: Depending on the nature and size of an organization/institution, it can be difficult for a single individual to report data at the organizational level. For example, professors at a higher education institution may run their own virtual exchange program separate from the International Studies Department or the Education Abroad Office and might not communicate these classroom-level exchanges to their colleagues. Thus, the full picture of virtual exchange occurring at the institution might not be captured. This challenge is not unique to virtual exchange but is also prevalent in other types of international education activities, where there is a lack of centralized data gathering and reporting.

Regional spread of programs: While virtual exchange has clearly expanded its global footprint and this survey attempts to capture some of this expansion, our findings show that the U.S. is over-represented in the survey, whether as the country where the program originates or as the home country of a key partner in a virtual exchange program. It is not clear whether this is an indication of virtual exchange being more established as a practice in the United States, or whether many of the respondents are connected to the U.S.-based Stevens Initiative. It is also possible that institutions and programs in other countries are still building their capacity to report data.

Capturing the role of training: As shared elsewhere in this report, this year's survey attempted to capture the important role of training and professional development in various aspects of virtual exchange—in design, teaching, facilitation, and strategy—to support institutions and organizations in running their own COIL/virtual exchange programs and to ensure quality experiences for participants. As such, these initiatives play a critical role in building the capacity of the virtual exchange field worldwide. Unfortunately, this year's survey only allowed for a mere glimpse into this important aspect of the field, and it is recommended that future survey efforts attempt to differentiate between the distinct nature of virtual exchange programs and the training provided to implement these programs.

Measuring change and growth in virtual exchange: Even though this survey and report include some of the same metrics as last year's survey—total number of providers, total number of virtual exchange programs offered, and the number of participants—we have deliberately not compared this year's estimates to those from last year. The main reason is we still view this survey as an early effort to sensitize the field to the need to capture data on virtual exchange programs. We hope to encourage more institutions to report their data each year. We also added questions to the second survey to better reflect an accurate snapshot of the state of global virtual exchange programs at this moment in time. For these reasons, simply comparing this year's totals with the prior year's data would not be accurate. Instead, for the purposes of this survey, we have chosen to focus on the growth in respondents to the survey, as well as respondents' own projections of whether their virtual exchange programming will expand in the future (described further below).



Looking Ahead

The second survey of global virtual exchange programs conducted by the Stevens Initiative points to a growing and evolving field. In keeping with this growth, many programs surveyed (46%) indicated they expect to offer more programs next year, while 39% plan to retain their current level of programming. Even among those who had not implemented any virtual exchange programs this past year, there are plans to offer one or more programs in the coming year. Thus, while limitations remain around capturing complete data, the survey offers a useful snapshot and metrics for the virtual exchange sector.

Looking ahead to the future, we identify some key areas that need more examination.

- 1 Not much is known about the quality of virtual exchange programs. While our surveys have focused on quantifying and mapping virtual exchange programs worldwide, two key questions for the future are: (1) how do we assess the *quality* of virtual exchange programs? and (2) how can we learn more about the way institutions ensure quality in their delivery of virtual exchange?
- 2 Related to the first point, there is a need to gather more qualitative data on virtual exchange to better understand the context in which virtual exchange programs are implemented. The second survey made clear that virtual exchange is multi-layered in nature, and this complexity can be better captured through a combination of *quantitative* approaches that allow for enumeration and *qualitative* approaches that allow for a nuanced understanding of the global variations of virtual exchange.
- 3 It is crucial for those who administer virtual exchange programs to develop an understanding of how to measure their outcomes and impact. While the Stevens Initiative has adopted a large-scale evaluation strategy for its grantees, it would be useful to adopt similar approaches globally to encourage virtual exchange providers to measure and assess their impact and success.
- 4 For many virtual exchange providers, gathering and reporting program data is often an afterthought and is not built into the program from inception. At other times, the intent is there, but institutions—especially smaller, community-based organizations—may lack the expertise and staff time to develop and follow a plan for data collection and reporting that also enables them to leverage the evidence for their own decision-making. There is a clear need to build the capacity of virtual exchange providers to embrace and implement data collection approaches suited to their programs. The Stevens Initiative is well-positioned to play this capacity-building role.

We conducted this survey at a time of significant shifts in education and exchange globally. While technology opened doors during the pandemic, it also sharpened digital divides and brought to light global inequities. Looking ahead to an altered landscape, it is possible that virtual exchange programs will have an even stronger role to play in addressing some of these shifts, in diversifying teaching and learning, and in enabling students and educators from a range of backgrounds to develop global competencies and to do so in an equitable, accessible, and just way.

Appendix: Methodology

This second survey of virtual exchange programs was implemented by the Stevens Initiative between June and August 2021 and conducted in partnership with Rajika Bhandari Advisors. The online survey captured data about global virtual exchange programs implemented between September 2020 and August 2021.

Survey administration: The 2019/20 survey was used as a starting point to ensure consistency of survey questions, and from there, additional questions were incorporated if deemed relevant. Relevancy was determined based on the team's collective knowledge of global education and the virtual exchange field. Questions were also added to help capture pandemic-related shifts. The final survey was pilot tested with a small group of respondents from last year's survey. To ensure the widest reach possible, the survey was distributed through the Stevens Initiative's network of more than 8,700 individuals and institutions, while also being shared globally through large virtual exchange networks such as UNICollaboration and SUNY COIL to reach more programs worldwide.

Responses: The survey received responses from a total of 233 institutions and organizations that met the criteria for implementing virtual exchanges. These respondents represented a significant increase from the 102 that responded to the first survey. While all 233 were able to provide general information about their organization or institution, only 177 of these were able to provide more granular data about their virtual exchange programs.

Data management and analysis: Survey data were cleaned, validated, and analyzed following standard protocols and best practices. Extensive follow-up was conducted with respondents to clarify responses and complete missing information. This was an intensive and iterative process due to the reasons outlined in the report, where significant global variations exist in how virtual exchange is defined and, therefore, captured through program data.

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