



Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report

STEVENS INITIATIVE | 2022

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report, and the impact and learning represented, would not have been possible without the hard work of our grantees and their partners to provide virtual exchange opportunities to thousands of young people across the United States and the Middle East and North Africa. The Initiative thanks RTI International and Rosa Acevedo for conducting the excellent evaluation and analysis that is included in this report. Additional thanks are due to multiple members of the Stevens Initiative team including: Regional Program Manager Manal Elattir, Program Coordinator Gabi Hunt, Senior Program Associate Kyle Kastler, Program Associate Maryam Laly, Senior Program Associate Haili Lewis, Program Coordinator Rawan Nasir, Program Manager Andie Shafer, and Assistant Director Henry Shepherd for their efforts and crucial contributions at several stages throughout the project.

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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The Stevens Initiative is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, with funding provided by the U.S. Government, and is administered by the Aspen Institute. It is also supported by the Bezos Family Foundation and the governments of Morocco and the United Arab Emirates.



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2022 Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report

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Dear colleagues,

The Stevens Initiative is delighted to share the 2022 Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report highlighting the work of Initiative-funded programs from summer 2020 through spring 2021.

Many of us didn't imagine the pandemic would last two years and counting. Our grantees — and countless other educators and exchange leaders — have worked tirelessly to adapt their programs to allow as many young people as possible to learn with global peers at a time when maintaining connections has been so vital. We have challenged ourselves to be flexible and creative to meet the needs that have emerged in this rapidly changing landscape.

In this report, we strive to share what we've learned from the Initiative's work over the past year. We continue to be extremely grateful for the time our partners invest in training and capacity building, implementing virtual exchange activities, and conducting evaluation and research. Through persistence in the face of countless challenges, they have contributed to the evidence that virtual exchange is an invaluable way to help young people engage in international learning.

We continue to see significant positive changes in global competencies among participants in the Middle East and North Africa region and in the United States. For the first time, we are sharing results from an evaluation that used a rigorous comparison group design to show that participation in virtual exchange had a significant effect on young people. We are encouraged by evaluation data that has begun to emerge from our Morocco-U.S. Design with a Partner pathway. And we saw the value of capacity building for the approximately 50 early-stage practitioners who participated in our 2021 Virtual Exchange Academy. We firmly believe that anyone who experiences virtual exchange — young people and facilitators alike — can use their new knowledge, skills, and abilities to make a difference in their communities.

As young people return to the classroom and resume extracurricular programming in their hometowns and abroad, we will continue to champion the importance of virtual exchange, because we believe every person deserves an opportunity to build friendships with peers from different backgrounds, expand their worldview, and develop skills that will prepare them for an interconnected world. We are committed to doing all we can to share knowledge and resources with practitioners across the field to meet this moment of great need and opportunity.

Thank you for your continued support. Please contact us at stevensinitiative@aspeninstitute.org with any questions or comments.

Be well,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Shiau".

Christine Shiau
Director
The Stevens Initiative

Introduction

This is the Stevens Initiative's (the Initiative) third annual report focused on data from evaluation of grantee programs, lessons learned, and recommendations for effective practices for implementing virtual exchange. At the time of publication in early 2022, the coronavirus pandemic continues to dramatically impact travel and in-person education. The disruption of the past two years has led to changes that will persist even after public health restrictions are lifted. Effective practices for using technology to connect young people with each other and engage them in hands-on learning will remain critically important in a transformed world. Far from being prescriptive or definitive, the information shared here is intended to illustrate methods or concepts that new or longstanding practitioners might find useful as they reflect on their own work and refine their future plans.

Evaluation: Summer 2020 and Academic Year 2020-2021

The Stevens Initiative and RTI International (RTI) continue to collaborate on an independent evaluation of grantees' virtual exchange programs. RTI continues to bring a developmental approach to evaluation, providing real-time feedback to enable adaptation and flexibility in response to stakeholders' needs. RTI provides technical assistance to grantee and Initiative staff and facilitates a community of practice to improve evaluation methods and build capacity. More information about RTI and their role in Stevens Initiative evaluation can be found in the [2019 Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning](#) report. The data in this section of the report are drawn from RTI's independent evaluation work shared with the Initiative.

Participant Demographics

During the summer and fall of 2020 and the spring of 2021, 6,990 young people participated in programs supported by the Stevens Initiative: 4,021 participants in 46 U.S. states and the District of Columbia and 2,969 participants in 14 countries across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the Palestinian Territories. In both the United States and in the MENA region, the Stevens Initiative reached secondary (middle school and high school) and postsecondary youth.

Through virtual exchange programming, the Initiative works to increase access to international exchange for young people who might not otherwise engage with peers in another country. Some commonly used metrics to assess access to these opportunities, such as income level, are difficult to ascertain for a number of reasons. RTI continued to collect data about the following institutional characteristics that might suggest students at those institutions may have had fewer opportunities for exchanges compared with students at other institutions.

SUMMER AND FALL 2020: INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Percentage of participants who attended public institutions	U.S. Secondary School Level	44%
	MENA Region Secondary School Level	62%
	U.S. Postsecondary Level	81%
	MENA Region Postsecondary Level	49%
Percentage of MENA region participants who attended institutions where the primary language of instruction was not English	Secondary School Level	81%
	Postsecondary Level	59%
Percentage of U.S. participants	At the Secondary School Level Who Attended Title 1 Schools	13%
	At the Postsecondary Level Who Attended Community Colleges	52%

SPRING 2021: INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Percentage of participants who attended public institutions	U.S. Secondary School Level	61%
	MENA Region Secondary School Level	23%
	U.S. Postsecondary Level	91%
	MENA Region Postsecondary Level	55%
Percentage of MENA region participants who attended institutions where the primary language of instruction was not English	Secondary School Level	39%
	Postsecondary Level	63%
Percentage of U.S. participants	At the Secondary School Level Who Attended Title 1 Schools	24%
	At the Postsecondary Level Who Attended Community Colleges	53%

The Initiative observes that the proportion of participants in some of these categories — for example, the percentage of U.S. secondary school participants who attended public schools or Title I schools (schools that serve a high percentage of students from low-income families) — dropped substantially compared to the data shared in the 2020 Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report. Some of this change is due to an Initiative grantee being unable to

share institutional data as they had in recent years; as a result, the percentage of participants whose institutions was characterized as “unknown” was much higher. However, this single explanation would not account for all of the decline. A separate contributing factor may be the effect of barriers to virtual exchange participation that these institutions faced due to the pandemic, among other unidentified factors.

Many participants, but not all, were asked about their prior experience with international exchange. In summer and fall 2020, 74% percent of MENA and 80% of U.S. respondents had not previously participated in an international exchange. In spring 2021, 69% of MENA and 77% of U.S. respondents had not previously participated in an international exchange.

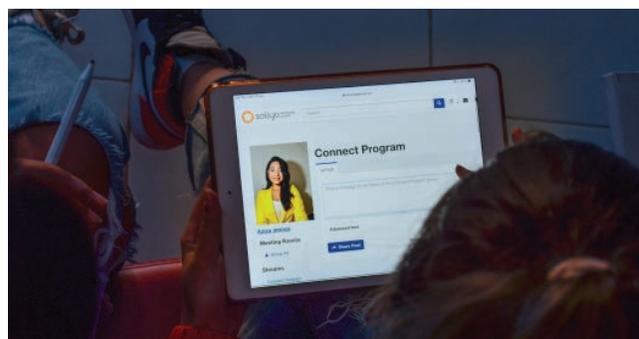
Survey Results

The Stevens Initiative and RTI continue to work with grantees to develop and implement pre- and post-program surveys to measure changes in participants’ global competencies during their participation in their program. Each survey item included in the tables below was developed over time with input from grantee staff who work with educators or facilitators to implement programs. These are publicly available on the [Resources Page](#) of the Stevens Initiative website. The Initiative believes these domains provide an opportunity to examine some of what is gained through participation in virtual exchange.

As part of the developmental approach to evaluation, analysis of collected survey data indicated that the Empathy scale — the pre-program, post-program, and retrospective scales — is not reliable. This scale has been removed from evaluation efforts beginning in fall 2021 and the data on the Empathy scale below should be interpreted with caution.

To understand the impact shown in these tables, it is important to keep in mind:

- The numbers expressed below are effect sizes, a measure of the magnitude of change in average survey responses from the pre-survey to the post survey. A positive effect size indicates an increase in the specific domain of the global competency listed, whereas a negative effect size indicates a decrease in that specific domain.
- Effect sizes of at least 0.2 (20% of a standard deviation), a reasonable threshold for reporting small effects, are highlighted with **bold text**.
- Effect sizes that are statistically significant are marked with an asterisk (*), even if they are smaller than 0.20.
- Many domains included below are retrospective. Retrospective survey items ask participants on the post-program survey to “think back to before you started [program name]” and assess themselves on that survey scale. Retrospective responses are then compared to the post program response to measure change.



SUMMER AND FALL 2020: EFFECT SIZES AND TOTAL NUMBERS (N), BY REGION

	MENA	U.S.	All	n MENA	n U.S.	n Total
Knowledge of Other	0.52*	1.33*	0.90*	845	1068	1913
Perspective Taking	0.34*	0.32*	0.32*	824	1026	1850
Perspective Taking – Retrospective	0.49*	0.49*	0.49*	855	1100	1955
Empathy	-0.04	-0.09	-0.06	248	185	433
Empathy – Retrospective	0.26*	0.25*	0.24*	194	176	370
Cross-Cultural Communication	0.06	0.20	0.11	115	55	170
Cross-Cultural Communication – Retrospective	0.43*	0.48*	0.45*	114	55	169
Cross-Cultural Collaboration	0.12*	0.20*	0.17*	822	1027	1849
Cross-Cultural Collaboration – Retrospective	0.66*	0.58*	0.61*	768	1018	1786
Self-Other Overlap	0.41*	0.84*	0.59*	869	999	1868
Self-Other Overlap – Retrospective	0.23	-0.07	0.00	20	59	79
Warm Feelings	0.31*	0.19	0.26*	60	47	107

“This is an experience I believe every student should have. It has opened up my mind, awareness, and love for other cultures. One of the most life-enriching experiences to discuss real-world issues with students around the globe.”

— Cecilia, Soliya’s Connect Global, United States

SPRING 2021: EFFECT SIZES AND TOTAL NUMBERS (N), BY REGION

	MENA	U.S.	All	n MENA	n U.S.	n Total
Knowledge of Other	0.38*	1.10*	0.70*	796	717	1513
Perspective Taking	0.22*	0.26*	0.23*	804	715	1519
Perspective Taking – Retrospective	0.34*	0.31*	0.32*	1024	966	1990
Empathy	-0.05	-0.12	-0.07	305	212	517
Empathy – Retrospective	0.16*	0.24*	0.18*	245	190	435
Cross-Cultural Communication	0.17	0.11	0.16	111	46	157
Cross-Cultural Communication – Retrospective	0.19*	0.54*	0.28*	112	47	159
Cross-Cultural Collaboration	0.07	0.02	0.05	806	719	1525
Cross-Cultural Collaboration – Retrospective	0.45*	0.35*	0.40*	788	710	1498
Self-Other Overlap	0.39*	0.82*	0.56*	858	733	1591
Self-Other Overlap – Retrospective	0.15	0.74*	0.46*	175	230	405
Warm Feelings	0.34*	0.25*	0.30*	601	563	1164

Participants were also asked at the end of their exchange program if they would recommend the program to their peers. The Initiative interprets these responses as a way to gauge participant satisfaction with their experience.

	MENA	U.S.	n MENA	n U.S.
Percentage of summer and fall 2020 participants who agreed or strongly agreed they would recommend the program to others	89%	82%	930	1164
Percentage of spring 2021 participants who agreed or strongly agreed they would recommend the program to others	91%	83%	1099	1008

Notable Outcomes

Reflecting on these survey results, Stevens Initiative staff observed multiple outcomes or changes that should be noted:

- **Multiple positive changes:** The Initiative is once again encouraged that participants reported statistically significant positive changes in multiple domains during both time periods. Effect sizes for multiple domains were larger than 0.20 — a reasonable threshold for small effects — with many exceeding 0.20. These data indicate that virtual exchange participants experienced gains in global competencies over the course of the programs. While this development cannot be attributed to any particular action, it is encouraging to continue to see indications that Initiative-sponsored virtual exchange programs may be having their intended effect.
- **Knowledge of the other country or culture:** During both time periods, participants overall reported large positive changes in their knowledge of the other country or culture. There were larger gains in this domain for U.S. participants across both time periods. This is consistent with data from previous reports: the Initiative’s 2019 and 2020 Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Reports found similar positive effects.
- **Other gains:** During both time periods, there were moderate positive gains overall on the Self — Other Overlap (i.e. feelings of commonality with people from the partner regions), as well as small gains in the Perspective Taking and Warm Feelings (i.e. warm feelings toward people from the partner region) scales. For retrospective scales, i.e., when participants were asked to “think back to before you started [program name]” and assess themselves, small or medium effects were detected in Cross-Cultural Communication and Cross-Cultural Collaboration across both time periods, as well.

The Initiative and RTI will continue to refine evaluation processes and work with grantees to improve the virtual exchange experience for young people.

“We usually link countries and cultures with politics, economics and stereotypes. However, when you listen to stories told by people from that country, you get to understand them and even relate to them. This influences our opinions and actions, making them more compassionate and more understanding.”

— Aseel, *Global Nomads Group’s Student to World, Jordan*

“Every day I got a new life lesson from the program. In each family [small group] dialogue, I learned something new. I learned to respect cultures more and to be more open minded. The more open minded you are the more open hearted you are towards others. I got to share who I am and connect with others without barriers.”

— Mohamed, *World Learning’s The Experiment Digital, Algeria*

Quasi-Experimental Design Results: Soliya

During the 2018 grant competition, the Initiative offered supplemental grants for grantees to implement more rigorous impact evaluation, using either a randomized controlled trial or a quasi-experimental design (QED). The goal was to use a higher degree of rigor to measure the effects of the virtual exchange program on program participants. A more rigorous evaluation system was important, especially since the Initiative's standard evaluation methods don't include comparison or control groups.

Various stakeholders have said that stronger evidence of impact would help them make a stronger case at their institutions for getting involved or investing in virtual exchange. The Initiative gave two supplemental grants to grantees selected during the 2018 competition — to [Soliya](#) and the [William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan](#) (WDI) — to conduct evaluations using a quasi-experimental design during 2020 and 2021, supported by Initiative and RTI staff. The results, detailed below, showed that participating in the Soliya program had a significant, positive effect on participants' global competencies. WDI's QED work is ongoing, and findings will be shared in next year's Impact and Learning Report.

Methods

Soliya collected pre-program and post-program survey data in the spring 2020 and spring 2021 semesters from its program participants (treatment group) and from similar students who did not participate in a Soliya program (comparison group). Program participants attended one of three Soliya programs offered in colleges, universities, and non-governmental organizations in the MENA region and the United States: Connect Express, a four-week program; Connect Collaborate, a five-week program; or Connect Global, an eight-week program. Comparison group participants were recruited from the same educational institutions attended by treatment group members, but from courses that were not part of the Connect program.

RTI evaluated the impact of Soliya participation by comparing post-program survey outcomes between individuals who did and did not participate in a Soliya program. RTI focused on five global competency outcomes: Knowledge of Other, Perspective Taking, Cross-Cultural Communication, Self – Other Overlap, and Warm Feelings. RTI first estimated program impact for Soliya programs overall, and then separately by region (MENA, U.S.) and program module (Connect, Collaborate, and Express).

Since participation in the Soliya program was not randomly assigned, RTI employed a quasi-experimental design called inverse probability of treatment weighting to equate Soliya participants and comparison group participants on available baseline (pre-treatment) demographic and institutional characteristics. Baseline equivalence between the treatment and comparison group helps ensure that any differences observed in the post-program survey responses are due to participation in the virtual exchange program and not to pre-existing differences between the two groups. This approach is often used in evaluations where randomization is not possible. Pre-treatment data included age, gender, institution type (public institution or private institution/NGO for the MENA region, community college or four-year institution for the United States), semester, region, and baseline global competencies.

Findings

Soliya program participants had consistently higher global competencies in the post-program survey than the comparison group, detailed in Table 1. On average, Soliya participants scored 1.3 points higher than the comparison group on the post-program survey Knowledge of Other scale, 1.1 points higher on Perspective Taking scale, 0.8 points higher on Cross-Cultural Collaboration scale, 1.2 points higher on Self – Other Overlap item, and 12.7 points higher on the Warm Feelings item. This positive effect of Soliya program participation across outcomes is statistically significant ($p < .001$) and substantively meaningful, as effect sizes (ES) range from 0.3 to 0.7. The largest effects were seen for Self – Other Overlap (ES=0.7), Knowledge of Other (ES=0.6), and Warm Feelings (ES=0.6).

TABLE 1: POST-PROGRAM SURVEY OUTCOME ESTIMATES, OVERALL

	Treatment (N=1654)	Comparison (N=211)	Difference	Effect Size
Knowledge of Other	11.29	9.95	1.34 ***	0.62
Perspective Taking	15.54	14.50	1.08 ***	0.34
Cross-Cultural Collaboration	17.42	16.64	0.78 ***	0.29
Self-Other Overlap	4.64	3.40	1.24 ***	0.71
Warm Feelings	81.40	68.70	12.70 ***	0.57

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

RTI next explored whether participation in Soliya had similar effects for MENA participants and U.S. participants with the goal of determining whether program impact differed by region. Table 2 provides estimates separately by region. **Like the overall results, the effect of Soliya participation was positive and statistically significant across all five scales in both regions.** Effect estimates differed by region on two scales (indicated by \wedge in Table 2). For Knowledge of Other, there was a larger effect of program participation in the United States than in the MENA region (1.76 vs. 0.70 points; ES of 0.83 vs. 0.32), while for Warm Feelings, a larger treatment effect was evident in the MENA region compared to the United States (16.82 vs. 9.09 points; ES of 0.76 vs. 0.40). The difference in impact by region was not statistically significant for Perspective Taking, Cross-Cultural Communication, or Self – Other Overlap.

TABLE 2: POST-PROGRAM SURVEY OUTCOME ESTIMATES, BY REGION

	MENA				U.S.			
	Treatment (N=1654)	Comparison (N=211)	Difference	Effect Size	Treatment (N=1654)	Comparison (N=211)	Difference	Effect Size
Knowledge of Other	11.73	11.03	0.70 ^{^ **}	0.32	10.90	9.14	1.76 ^{^ ***}	0.83
Perspective Taking	15.78	14.41	1.36 ^{***}	0.44	15.33	14.48	0.84 ^{**}	0.27
Cross-Cultural Collaboration	17.66	16.61	1.06 ^{**}	0.40	17.21	16.67	0.54 [*]	0.20
Self-Other Overlap	5.20	3.87	1.33 ^{***}	0.77	4.14	3.06	1.08 ^{***}	0.62
Warm Feelings	84.08	67.25	16.82 ^{^ ***}	0.76	78.85	69.76	9.09 ^{^ ***}	0.40

* p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001, ^ Difference between MENA and U.S. is statistically significant at p<0.05.

Finally, detailed in Table 3, RTI explored the effect of program participation separately for two of the three Soliya modules: Connect Global and Connect Express. Connect Global is Soliya’s longest program, with a duration of eight weeks, 40 total hours, and 16 hours of synchronous communication. Connect Express is much shorter, lasting four weeks, with 10 total hours and eight hours of synchronous communication. The sample size was insufficient to include Connect Collaborate in this estimate. **While treatment effect estimates were positive for both programs, effect sizes were consistently larger for Connect Global compared to Connect Express (effect sizes ranging from 0.31 – 0.74 for Connect Global compared to 0.19 – 0.50 for Connect Express).** Although these results suggest that different program characteristics, including program length, may contribute to different participant outcomes, more research is needed to understand whether and how specific program characteristics contribute to changes in participants’ global competencies. In addition, future research should investigate whether program impact varies across institutional and student characteristics.

“The Connect Program was a great opportunity to gain insight into how people of differing cultural and geographic backgrounds communicate. Learning how to be an active listener in digital mediums was a major accomplishment for me. Letting myself be quiet for a minute. Making listening to the stories of other people be the number one thing you’re doing... I learned by experience how it’s so difficult to humanize experiences from just textbooks; hearing and sharing personal stories was really interesting and very valuable.”

— Nicole, Soliya’s Connect Global, USA

TABLE 3: POST-PROGRAM SURVEY OUTCOME ESTIMATES, BY PROGRAM MODULE

	Connect Global				Connect Express			
	Treatment (N=1369)	Comparison (N=208)	Difference	Effect Size	Treatment (N=241)	Comparison (N=169)	Difference	Effect Size
Knowledge of Other	11.35	9.96	1.39 ***	0.65	10.89	10.04	0.85 ***	0.37
Perspective Taking	15.37	14.28	1.08 ***	0.34	15.93	15.11	0.81 **	0.27
Cross-Cultural Collaboration	17.47	16.66	1.81 ***	0.31	17.34	16.80	0.54 *	0.19
Self-Other Overlap	4.69	3.42	1.27 ***	0.74	4.21	3.34	0.86 ***	0.50
Warm Feelings	81.60	68.30	13.30 ***	0.60	79.97	68.59	11.38 ***	0.48

* p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Implications and Future Steps

Soliya’s QED results are particularly rigorous for the virtual exchange field and may be helpful in building interest in virtual exchange among stakeholders who seek evidence of impact beyond the evaluation data and participant testimonials that practitioners routinely share. Continuing its effort to conduct rigorous evaluation in addition to the standard methods used with all grantees, the Initiative is currently providing support to a supplemental project by Florida International University to analyze the effect of different amounts of participation in synchronous exchange activities — called “dosage” in the Initiative’s typography — on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of students in Algeria, Morocco, and the United States.



Design with a Partner: Program Evaluation in Morocco, Spring 2021

Through the Design with a Partner (DWP) pathway, the Stevens Initiative matches and provides funding to Moroccan and American institutions to collaboratively design a virtual exchange program that equitably addresses the needs of their youth, educators, and institutions. This pathway deliberately centers equity by changing traditional funding structures between partners, bringing balance to the decision-making process, and ensuring that all the needs of all parties are considered from program design to program management to virtual exchange implementation. The DWP pathway is comprised of four large processes:

- **Outreach and Selection:** Through targeted outreach, the Stevens Initiative invites Moroccan and American institutions (such as youth-serving non-governmental organizations, schools, higher education institutions, or networks) to participate via an application process.
- **Matching:** The Initiative follows a matching process designed to maximize compatibility among international partners.
- **Capacity Building:** Matched partners participate in virtual exchange training and receive resources, including funding, to support their virtual exchange journey.
- **Co-Design:** Partners receive continued support as they innovate and collaboratively design and implement a unique virtual exchange program for their youth.

Initiative-Supported Partnerships

To date, the Stevens Initiative has supported five virtual exchange programs through this process. Read more about their characteristics and design on our [Projects Page](#).

- Mohammed VI Polytechnic University (UM6P), Benguerir, Morocco, and Texas A&M University (TAMU), College Station, TX
- Lycée D'Excellence de Benguerir (LYDEX), Benguerir, Morocco, and Arizona State University Prep Digital (ASUPD), Tempe, AZ
- Hassan II University of Casablanca (H2UC), Casablanca, Morocco, and Kennesaw State University (KSU), Kennesaw, GA
- ENACTUS Morocco and ENACTUS US
- International Foundation for Training and Development (IFTD), Marrakesh, Morocco, and the Onslow County School District, Jacksonville, NC



Reflections on the DWP Process



I never had an opportunity to co-design a program with a U.S. partner. It was life-changing to be in such an equitable process and be able to lead the change needed for our community of youth in Morocco.

— M'HAMED ENNOSSE, DIRECTOR, IFTD



Through virtual exchange, I have found that I share more things with people that I've never met before, who I've just met online, than with people across the street; people that have lived near me my whole life.

— PARTICIPANT, H2UC



The same skills that make for successful intercultural communication — flexibility, patience, and empathy — also prove essential to promoting effective virtual exchange in a pandemic.

— DR. DAN PARACKA, DWP PROJECT LEADER, KSU



Virtual exchange has made me more open-minded when interacting with people, even people of the same culture, simply learning how to respect diverse experiences.

— PARTICIPANT, ASUPD

Evaluation and Lessons Learned

DWP grantees are evaluated differently from the RTI evaluation process outlined above. This process is led by Rosa Acevedo, an independent evaluator in Baltimore, Maryland. Based on data collected through pre- and post-program surveys, participants have reported the following outcomes:

- **Virtual Exchange Experience:** Among the programs surveyed, 65% had no previous exchange experiences prior to their enrollment in the DWP virtual exchange.
- **Perspective Taking and Empathy:** As a result of participating in the DWP virtual exchange, 89% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they exhibited Perspective Taking and Empathy behaviors, as defined by Stevens Initiative global competency scales.
- **Cross-Cultural Communication and Cross-Cultural Collaboration:** As a result of participating in the DWP virtual exchange, 88% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they exhibited Cross-Cultural Communication and Cross-Cultural Collaboration behaviors, as defined by Stevens Initiative global competency scales.
- **Satisfaction:** Among the programs surveyed, 88% of participants agreed or strongly agreed they would recommend the DWP virtual exchange program to other students.

The DWP pathway is a unique opportunity for the Initiative and other institutions to learn about effective and equitable partnership development. A few specific lessons include:

- A pilot cohort for virtual exchange should be simple at first and should include an opportunity for partners to add various elements as they progress in their program. This pacing enables partners to learn how they can best solve problems, make decisions together, and collaborate.
- Partners should engage youth participants and educators/facilitators early in the program to solicit feedback on what is working, what is challenging, and what could be done differently. Partners must be ready to pivot and adjust their program quickly to better serve their youth and educators based on this feedback. Input from these sources is invaluable to the success of the program.



Lessons Learned from the 2021 Virtual Exchange Academy

The Initiative launched a month-long Virtual Exchange Academy in March 2021 to meet a need for high-touch training tailored to education and exchange leaders interested in getting involved. The Academy filled a gap in the Initiative's engagement pathways, going beyond the helpful but limited introduction provided by the Initiative's newsletters and freestanding events, while also broadening access beyond the small number of organizations that receive an Initiative grant. It grew out of a similar training the Initiative conducted in Morocco in 2019 to prepare institutions with very little or no previous virtual exchange experience to create their own programs.

After receiving more than 320 applications from education and exchange leaders and practitioners, the Initiative selected 53 participants from 19 U.S. states, Washington, D.C., five countries in the Middle East and North Africa, and the Palestinian Territories. About a third of the selected participants work with young people at the primary or secondary education level and about two-thirds work with young people at the higher education, postgraduate, or young adult age level. Participants were not required to have prior experience with virtual exchange.

Participants received a comprehensive introduction to virtual exchange through pre-session reading and coursework and during weekly, two-hour live sessions with experts. The pre-session readings, which were accompanied by a quiz, gave participants a preview of the content to be discussed during live sessions, which allowed them to use session time to recap challenging concepts, ask questions, and interact with other participants. Activities varied from week to week to maintain interest, and the Initiative modified session plans based on the learning needs identified in the quiz results. Each week covered two units, listed below, that are critical to effective program design and implementation.

- **Unit 1, Basic Concepts and Terms:** This unit introduced key terms and topics to set the stage for the rest of the Virtual Exchange Academy. Participants learned more about the diversity of virtual exchange programs and practices.
- **Unit 2, Program Design:** Participants learned about key decisions and common features and considerations about the way a virtual exchange program should be set up. Through interactive breakout sessions, participants examined existing programs and identified and discussed the elements of program design.
- **Unit 3, Facilitation and Activities:** This unit highlighted the important role that facilitators play in ensuring a safe and meaningful virtual exchange experience for participants. Participants also learned about the role that program implementers and facilitators play in selecting, sequencing, and implementing activities.
- **Unit 4, Partnerships:** This unit expanded on the importance of partnerships, explored how to find partners, and touched on the importance of equitable international cooperation.
- **Unit 5, Technology and Logistics:** This unit explored how to formulate a technology plan that is simple, low-cost, participant-centered, accessible, and informed by the perspectives of all involved countries, regions, and partners. It also addressed best practices for formulating a work plan developed in collaboration with all partners.
- **Unit 6, Evaluation and Impact:** This unit addressed key principles for monitoring and evaluating virtual exchange programs at all phases of design, data collection, and analysis. It also explored other ways and opportunities to demonstrate impact.

- **Unit 7, Building Buy-in:** Participants learned how to present the value of virtual exchange to key groups and individuals whose support will be needed to sustain and grow their programming.
- **Unit 8, What's Next?:** The final unit covered the continued support participants will receive from the Stevens Initiative, and the different steps and pathways they can take towards further involvement in the field of virtual exchange.

Based on data collected through pre- and post-program surveys, participants reported notable gains in their knowledge and their feeling of preparedness to participate in virtual exchange. Specifically:

- **Virtual exchange knowledge:** Before the Academy, a majority of participants reported they knew little about virtual exchange. In a post-program survey, 94% of participants agreed or strongly agreed they knew a lot about virtual exchange following their participation in the Virtual Exchange Academy.
- **Virtual exchange preparedness:** Seventy-seven percent of participants said they did not feel prepared to design and run a virtual exchange prior to their participation in the Virtual Exchange Academy. After the training, 90% of respondents shared that they agreed or strongly agreed they were prepared to design and run a program.
- **Satisfaction:** Ninety percent of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the training, and nearly 97% of respondents indicated they would recommend this training to others.

During an online reunion four months after the Academy, participants reported significant progress in their efforts to conduct virtual exchange at their institutions. Several participants started pilot projects, testing virtual exchange programs designed or enhanced based on what they learned during the Academy. Two educators who met in the Academy were inspired to formalize a partnership between their two universities. One participant reported receiving funding for their virtual exchange program and attributed their success to their participation in the Academy. Another was able to establish virtual exchange as a permanent part of their institution's international education strategy. While some participants struggled to secure institutional buy-in, they remained dedicated to raising awareness and overcoming barriers through persistent effort over time.

The Initiative is applying lessons from the 2021 Academy to plan for 2022, including:

- **The training model allows participants to experience virtual exchange:** Participating in the Academy helped education and exchange leaders understand the value of virtual exchange by experiencing international communication and collaboration for themselves. The Initiative prioritized selecting a diverse group of participants and taking plenty of time for dialogue and relationship building. The Academy also gave participants a firsthand experience grappling with technology issues, time zone differences, and other challenges that are common in virtual exchange.

- The Academy must balance brevity and thoroughness without sacrificing either:** The Initiative conducted the 2021 Academy as a series of four two-hour sessions over the course of one month. Based on participant and staff feedback, the Initiative will extend the Academy from four weeks to six, allowing participants to spend more time asking questions, engaging in discussion, and practicing what they learn.
- Participation should be more equitable in terms of geographic representation:** Americans made up about half of the 2021 cohort. The Initiative plans to broaden participation from other countries in 2022 to make the group more balanced and include a wider range of experiences and perspectives.
- Continue pre-session prep and live sessions:** The combination of pre-session preparation and live sessions was an effective way to structure the program. Assigning participants reading, videos, and other resources ahead of time helped establish a shared baseline knowledge level. It also allowed more time in the sessions for discussions and hands-on activities, rather than lengthy lectures or presentations. Initiative staff were also able to draw on quiz results to identify topics that participants hadn't fully understood in the pre-session materials.
- Make clearer plans for follow-up engagement:** The Initiative will put more emphasis on getting participants in future rounds of the Academy to take concrete steps to join an existing program, create their own program, or mobilize young people in their community to join an open enrollment program. Holding participants accountable to this type of commitment may make the Academy more impactful. The Initiative will also provide mentorship opportunities to support future participants as they get started.
- Differentiate distance learning and virtual exchange:** Online learning has been a cornerstone of education during the pandemic. Some applicants weren't aware of the important differences between distance learning and virtual exchange. Better defining virtual exchange in the application will ensure that applicants are interested in virtual exchange specifically.



2022 Update: Effective Practices and Common Challenges in Virtual Exchange

This section is a supplement to the lists of common challenges and effective practices shared in the [2019](#) and [2020](#) Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Reports. These items are drawn from RTI's site visits (which included observing activities, interviewing key stakeholders such as administrators and facilitators, and conducting focus groups with participants) and from Initiative staff's grantee and practitioner engagement. They may not be applicable to all programs or contexts.

Effective Practice: Include multiple opportunities for participants to get to know their peers in other countries and learn about their cultures. Virtual exchanges often have multiple learning goals: specific content areas, collaboration skills, other global competencies, etc. Building in multiple opportunities for participants to get to know their peers in other countries and learn about their lives and cultures can help accomplish many of these goals. Opportunities to share can include icebreakers, cultural presentations, introductions, teamwork through videoconference, unstructured asynchronous spaces like WhatsApp channels or Flip Grids, and virtual homestays, among others. Including these activities early and often in the program can yield a more substantive cross-cultural experience and can encourage participants to more fully engage throughout the program.

Effective Practice: Provide administrative support for educators and facilitators. By planning activities and providing resources to support educators, facilitators, and others who lead exchange activities directly, virtual exchange administrators can set an exchange up for success. These activities and resources could include training, practice sessions for exchange activities (especially synchronous sessions), ongoing coaching, technology support and troubleshooting, and community building activities for facilitators. When possible, the administrative burdens of facilitators should be lessened so they can focus on participant support and learning.

Common Challenge: Effectively balancing the representation of multiple countries or communities in exchange activities. All participants stand to benefit when a virtual exchange program has an approximately balanced number of participants from the countries or places involved in the program. The optimal mix varies from program to program. While exact parity is not necessarily the best arrangement, programs can falter when participants in one place or another significantly outnumber their peers. Underrepresentation of a region or community that was meant to be included can mean there is less of an opportunity to learn about other cultures or communities. The overrepresentation of a country or community, can lead to an imbalance of participation level, such as participants doing more or less work, dominating discussions, etc.

Effective Practice: Balancing asynchronous and synchronous activities can create a more equitable exchange. As mentioned above, participants often express a desire for more opportunities to connect directly with peers. Since a direct connection can be facilitated in multiple ways, program administrators and facilitators should consider how different types of activities can affect equity and feelings of inclusion within the exchange. Participants who connect outside of normal work or school hours, contribute to the exchange in a second language, or who need additional time to reflect are well served by asynchronous activities. If technology challenges make synchronous connection difficult, or if they require a great deal of effort to perform successfully, providing participants

“The Business & Culture (B&C) program has prepared me well for my future. Regardless of where you are, you don’t just work with one culture. Here in the U.S., we’re a mixture of cultures and most people have to learn how to operate among those. Taking a class like B&C really prepares you for this — it puts you in the right mindset. It’s a great way to learn how to operate in a more globalized work environment and more internationally connected world.”

— **Alexa, William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan’s Business & Culture, United States**

with more asynchronous opportunities to engage in the program can both ease the burden on facilitators or tech support, while also allowing participants other ways to connect successfully. A balance between synchronous and asynchronous activities can better mimic common 21st century work environments, helping participants develop important skills to effectively navigate both types of activities.

Common Challenge: Inattentive facilitation can hinder the participant experience and the exchange program overall. When facilitators fail to set clear expectations, reach out to disengaged participants, or check in about the progress of small group or independent work, participants can lose their sense of connection or commitment to the program. Participants may feel under-supported or directionless and might decide to stop engaging in program activities altogether. A lack of monitoring of facilitation or a lack of support provided to facilitators by program staff can exacerbate this problem.

Effective Practice: Establish norms, roles, and responsibilities among all partners designing a program. Prior to beginning a virtual exchange, it is crucial for implementing partners to regularly and clearly communicate to establish norms for collaboration and to appropriately set expectations. Work and tasks should be distributed evenly, as appropriate, to ensure all parties are invested and contribute to the program. Strong and communicative partnerships contribute to virtual exchange programs that are inclusive of all partners and participants and are better prepared to address challenges that will inevitably arise during implementation.

Common Challenge: Ensure equitable competencies of the technology platform(s) used for the virtual exchange. While it is not inherently problematic to introduce participants to new technology platforms, using platforms that some participants are familiar with and others are not can create or accentuate power imbalances. A school that uses Canvas as its preferred learning management system, for example, may be familiar with the technology, but a partnered school may have never used the platform and may have difficulty adding students to the platform or supporting them when they try to use it. Taking the time to work with partners to choose tech platforms that are accessible for all participants, and ensuring all participants feel supported as they try to use them, can help mitigate power differences and make the exchange more equitable.

Effective Practice: Allow enough time to establish a virtual exchange program. Setting up a virtual exchange program requires a substantial amount of preparation — usually more time than anticipated. Incorporating a virtual exchange program into a master schedule in a school district or on a roster of university courses or getting approval from a ministry in a country with federal involvement in education or exchange can take months. In order to set themselves up for success, organizers need to account for these steps, take ample time to collaboratively design the program with partners on all sides of the exchange, and remain adaptable and flexible at every stage of planning and launching a new program.

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