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## The Results of a Virtual Exchange (VE) Project Carried Out by Universities from Three Different Countries – Benefits of Collaborative Initiatives on Cultural Sensitivity Involving International Students at Universities

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### Abstract

The VE project was implemented with the cooperation of three universities: Budapest Business University, University of Applied Sciences, Hungary; University of Sfax, Tunisia; and Izmir Democracy University, Turkey, in 2023. The main objective of the Virtual Exchange project was to provide students with opportunities for intercultural and interactional development through the performance of collaborative intercultural tasks. The further aim of the project was to provide students with international intercultural experience and to foster mutual understanding, global education, and digital literacy. We focused significantly on creating joint activities that encouraged international students to communicate in ways that enabled them to grasp knowledge beyond what they could merely acquire from websites or books. Both a preliminary survey and a follow-up survey were conducted among the students involved from the three universities, exploring their initial expectations and cultural perspectives before and after the project. The present study summarises the details and the experiences of the implementation of the Virtual Exchange Project, while another paper presents the results of the questionnaires in more detail.

*Keywords/key phrases:* virtual exchange, intercultural cooperation, developing soft skills, international projects

### 1. Introduction

Internationalisation is an essential aspect of higher education in today's globalised world. Universities everywhere are increasingly focusing on providing opportunities for students to interact with peers from different countries. One way to achieve this is through common projects that involve international students. This article explores the benefits of having common projects with international students at universities.

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Working with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds in international teams can offer uncountable benefits. International teams often possess a wider range of skills and expertise due to the diverse backgrounds of their members. This diversity allows for a more comprehensive skill set within the team, enabling them to tackle complex challenges from various angles. Working with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds enhances communication skills. Furthermore, collaborating with individuals or providing peer-to-peer mentoring from different cultures encourages mutual understanding, cultural sensitivity, and the development of soft skills, which are just a few examples.

These benefits can lead to gains in the workforce. In his study, Schulz (2008) encourages educators to invest more in emphasising the importance of developing the soft skills of their students. Seetha (2013) also points out that employers are more likely to hire and support individuals who are resourceful, able to work well independently, and have soft skills. According to LinkedIn's Global Talent Trends 2019 report, 92% of professionals think soft skills are as important as or even more important than hard skills. Moreover, 85% of workplace success is attributed to having strong soft skills, while only 15% is due to hard skills (National Soft Skills Association, 2015).

While hard skills refer to specific, teachable abilities or technical expertise that can be quantified and measured, soft skills encompass a wide range of attributes such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, problem-solving, leadership, emotional intelligence, time management, and conflict resolution. Laker and Powell (2011) studied the differences between the development of soft and hard skills, with reference to the extent of knowledge transfer. Several international studies focus on the labour market situation of young people (Cook et al., 2015; Kluge et al., 2016; Balan, 2017; Furlong et al., 2017) regarding soft skills. Multiple surveys (DuBois et al., 2011; Brady, 2015; Dong & Deng, 2016) have shown that employees stay at least 25 % longer at a company that uses mentoring than where they do not have mentors. Mentoring has a positive effect on the desire to apply and helps to retain young people in the long run. It was also confirmed that mentored graduates are enthusiastic about the new challenges, respecting those who sacrifice their knowledge, time, and energy for their support.

Soft skills predict success in life, so programs that enhance soft skills are important (Heckman et al., 2012). Higher education institutions are placing increasing emphasis on imparting adequate knowledge about Cultural Intelligence, as more and more students are willing and eager to study abroad globally. The number of Hungarians studying abroad exceeded 16,000 in 2021/22, while in 2016/17 the number was just over 13,000, according to Szabó (2022). According to hvg.hu, the six most popular countries for Hungarian students are the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, Denmark, the UK, and the US, although Brexit has profoundly reshaped the international higher education market, with the number of undergraduate students in British universities falling by 71% since the 2020/2021 academic year.

Cultural intelligence is an indispensable competence that provides the key to an individual's ability to communicate and successfully understand the international arena. Based on the research by Gooden, Creque, and Chin-Loy (2017), Cultural Intelligence encompasses a toolbox of skills that are essential for effective interactions between individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

The concept of cultural intelligence is based on the idea that acting intelligently in diverse cultures may require more than general intelligence and its subfactors (Ang et al., 2020).

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Cultural Intelligence, often referred to as the "Bennett Scale"(2019), provides the typical manners in which individuals encounter, interpret, and engage with cultural distinctions. The Bennett model outlines a developmental spectrum where individuals can advance towards a more profound comprehension and acknowledgement of cultural diversity, along with greater adaptability and effectiveness in intercultural interactions.

The main goal of this research was to see how much university students' cultural awareness and sensitivity could evolve when they collaborate on project-based tasks with peers from other countries in a virtual, international setting over a semester. In their study, Brandy and Brown Perkl (2016) showcased how mentoring can serve as a powerful tool for enhancing cultural intelligence. This explains why the author considered peer-to-peer learning, in the form of cooperative learning, to be important and effective. Kram and Higgins (2008) suggested in their research that formal networking programs are not as effective as informal networks; this concept also supports the idea of using self-directed learning in the classroom.

Cultural intelligence refers to the students' capability to function effectively across various cultural contexts. As it involves cultural norms, adapting behaviours, and effectively interacting with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, the author aimed to evaluate students' cultural awareness and soft skills when they began the project across all three participating countries. Additionally, we wanted to emphasise the significance of engaging in international projects in enhancing students' cultural awareness. The present paper focuses on showcasing the step-by-step implementation of the international VE project, while another article will look at the results of measuring cultural intelligence.

## **2. What is a Virtual Exchange Program?**

A Virtual Exchange program uses technology to allow geographically separated people to interact and communicate. Our VE project was carried out with the cooperation of Budapest Business University, the University of Applied Sciences, Hungary; the University of Sfax, Tunisia; and Izmir Democracy University, Turkey. The project, spanning six weeks, offered students chances for both intercultural and interactive growth by engaging in collaborative tasks that fostered intercultural understanding. Additionally, instructors and group leaders held firm convictions that the project's execution would significantly enhance students' employability skills, encompassing digital proficiency, teamwork, collaboration, language fluency, and communication abilities in a diverse cultural setting. During the VE project, the main concept was that students could develop the following proficiencies. On the one hand, students could enhance and practise their hard skills within the frame of the subject of the course. They would have a better understanding of the language of media and communication with all its compulsory elements, such as writing and reading film reviews, writing offers, creating print adverts and screen adverts, analysing market trends, and setting up a marketing communication strategy. On the other hand, students would have the opportunity in teams to develop their soft skills such as teamwork, time management, active listening, flexibility, leadership skills, planning and organising skills, strategic skills, critical thinking, negotiating skills, and many others.

### **2.1. Universities involved in the VE Project**

There were three universities involved in the project: Budapest Business University, University of Applied Sciences, Hungary; University of Sfax, Tunisia; and Izmir Democracy University,

Turkey. From Hungary, 23 second-year students majoring in Media and Communication Studies participated in the project; from Tunisia, there were 25 third-year students majoring in English Studies, and from Turkey, 25 students (aged between 19 and 22) studying Psychology and Sociology.

## 2.2. Virtual Exchange Calendar

Building on Gilly Salmon's 5-step model (<https://www.gillysalmon.com/five-stage-model.html>), O'Dowd & Ware (2009) developed a task-structure model, which was used in the present VE project (<https://polipapers.upv.es/index.php/eurocall/article/view/7636/9681>). Table 1 summarises the in-class activities, the joint activities, and the technologies used by the students from all three universities throughout the 6-week project.

- Introductory and icebreaker exercises - 2 weeks
- Comparative and analytical exercises - 2 weeks
- Collaboration and joint "creation" - 2 weeks

TABLE 1. VIRTUAL EXCHANGE CALENDAR

Week /Dates	In-class Activities of the three universities	Education software used	Joint Activities	Technologies Used Comments/Notes
Week 1	<b>Ice-breaking activities</b> (preparing intro videos for each other) before the first online meeting; ice-breaking activity	Vyond: <a href="https://www.vyond.com/">https://www.vyond.com/</a> Kahoot: <a href="https://kahoot.com/">https://kahoot.com/</a> Padlet: <a href="https://padlet.com/">https://padlet.com/</a> Genially: <a href="https://www.genial.ly/en">https://www.genial.ly/en</a>	Ice-breaking activities: <a href="https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/ice-breaker-games">https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/ice-breaker-games</a>  <a href="https://www.zoomshift.com/blog/icebreaker-games/">https://www.zoomshift.com/blog/icebreaker-games/</a>	Skype/Teams/Google Meet/FB Messenger/group chat among students
Week 2	<b>Ice-breaking activities</b> (preparing intro videos for each other) before the first online meeting; ice-breaking activity	Vyond: <a href="https://www.vyond.com/">https://www.vyond.com/</a> Kahoot: <a href="https://kahoot.com">https://kahoot.com</a> Padlet: <a href="https://padlet.com/">https://padlet.com/</a> Genially: <a href="https://www.genial.ly/en">https://www.genial.ly/en</a>	Same as the previous week	Skype/Teams/Google Meet/FB Messenger/group chat among students
Week 3	<b>Comparative and analytical exercises</b>	Piktochart: <a href="https://piktochart.com/">https://piktochart.com/</a> Mentimeter: <a href="https://www.mentimeter.com/">https://www.mentimeter.com/</a>	Group discussions, research, writing, ...	Skype/Teams/Google Meet/ FB Messenger/group chat among students

source: Own compilation

## 2.3. The main objectives of the VE project

1. To engage students in meaningful discussions on key topics and current issues with international peers;

2. To broaden students' horizons by sharing diverse perspectives on tackling common problems;
3. To experience Peer-to-Peer (P2P) Learning, which involves knowledge sharing, mentoring, and learning from peers, learning from each other. The project participants could seek mutual understanding and shared learning, creating knowledge based on their own experiences.

## 2.4. Implementation of the project

The VE project took six weeks, starting from 27 February 2023 and lasting until 21 April 2023 (1 week in February, 2 weeks in March, 3 weeks in April). It perfectly fit into the original syllabus of the Media and Communication Studies course as during the project implementation, the international teams (2-3 Hungarian students + 2-3 Tunisian students + 2-3 Turkish students, therefore, approximately 6 to 9 students per group) elaborated media-related sub-projects, such as creating a podcast, vlogs, writing promotional views, reviews, etc. The teams fulfilled written and oral tasks as well, consequently practising those very same skills.

Within the topic outlined in the title of the VE project, the following sub-topics were given to the university students and finally ten out of the suggested 19 topics were chosen by the international groups. Each group had a different topic to deal with. Table 2 shows the 19 sub-topics the 10 international groups were able to choose from:

TABLE 2. 19 POSSIBLE TOPICS FOR THE GROUP-PROJECTS

1	famous sights in your city/world heritage - tourists in your countries
2	everyday life of a university student /house, expenses, courses/, daily routine/differences
3	presenting the university - school/educational differences - learning methods, used apps - studying opportunities for international students, politics-how does it affect a university student's life
4	common points and differences among the 3 countries: regarding music, TV/radio, culture - movies and films (internationally watched) - famous films of the 3 countries
5	labour market/how difficult is it to find jobs in your countries?
6	style/fashion, how it changes, what university students wear nowadays, what shops they buy from (second-hand, vintage, CSR)
7	tradition, interview with elderly people - local traditions/customs, religious differences in the 3 countries
8	gastronomy, secret ingredients of traditional foods, cooking shows, eating at home vs eating out, do you have restaurants in your country representing the other 2 countries?
9	public transport, vehicles, pros and cons, difference between city and village
10	university subculture, where university students have fun/entertain themselves
11	challenges of today's youngsters - addiction of university students, online games

12	introduce your own families, every life of a Hungarian family, roles, tasks in the family, challenges/problems they must cope with
13	effects of social media on university students - how social media and smartphones affect students' everyday life - what kind of contents are students watching today?
14	the media representations of each other's countries
15	gender role, equality, ratio between male and female students, stereotypes
16	historical background of the countries, how are the Hungarian-Turkish (Tunisia?) wars taught in history books?
17	national days, famous people of the 3 countries
18	what does it mean being Gen Z for the students?
19	famous sports clubs, famous sportsmen, the most /least well-known sports, people, and movie stars, popular celebrities in your countries -thoughts about other generations (X, Y, boomer)

Source: Own compilation

Prior to starting the project, the instructors/lecturers of the three universities interacted three times, when we introduced ourselves, our universities, and our courses to each other. Furthermore, we exchanged ideas about the content of the project and decided on the theme and length of the project. The instructors communicated via Skype and TEAMS. All the students from the three participating universities underwent thorough preparation for the project prior to its commencement. They were provided with detailed information about the other two universities and the potential project topics. Subsequently, they were tasked with creating a 2–3-minute introductory video about themselves, which was then shared with their project partners. The lecturers of the three universities conducted the orientation on the first class of the semester, where they discussed the following points: how many groups they were going to have, who would be in one group, what was the chosen topic of the group they wanted to work on, what were the deadlines, what was the expected outcome (end-product) of the project, how to do self and peer-evaluation, what were the in-house rules, and how the teacher would assess their work during the semester.

Everything was documented: forms were created for self-and peer evaluation, for writing a group report about the student meetings, and about the in-house rules as well. These documents were shared with all the students.

## 2.5. Student interaction and collaboration

After the groups were set and created in each country, the students with the same chosen topic introduced themselves to each other, and the groups decided on the platform they would prefer to use for communication. They agreed on timing and shared the tasks with each other. Most of the international groups conducted six meetings throughout the project and prepared a summary of everything they agreed on. The group reports were then uploaded to a common platform and were also sent to their own lecturers, as it was previously stated that all the materials designed, elaborated, and written by the members of the international groups would become part of the assessed materials.



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Students could interact in several ways. On the one hand, they had synchronous communication, which occurred in real time either orally or in writing (for instance, videoconferencing or instant messaging chat conversations), and, on the other hand, they had asynchronous communication as well, which occurred on a time-deferred basis either orally or in writing (for instance: discussion forums or email conversations). One of the first challenges that synchronous communication posed to VE participants was finding a date and a time that suited all of them, especially when participants were in different time zones.

The students did their best to keep in touch with their foreign peers continuously throughout the six weeks. Their communication happened at an individual level, e.g.: on Facebook or at an organized group level, e.g. TEAMS calls or meetings. The purpose of each interaction was to get to know each other deeper and to share ideas and knowledge with peers while focusing on elaborating on the given project task.

The four lecturers (1 from Hungary, 1 from Turkey, and 2 from Tunisia) supported the students if there were problems in the flow of the work, if there were personal misunderstandings, or if the group was “lost” and did not know how to continue the project. There was a private Facebook group made for all the participants, including the lecturers as well, where apart from having conversations about issues related to everybody, students usually posted photos taken in class or taken at the university and thus initiated further conversation between the three universities.

### 3. Assessment and evaluation of the project

The VE project fit well into the original syllabus of the Media and Communication Studies class as the international groups elaborated media-related sub-projects, such as creating podcasts, vlogs, and writing promotional views and reviews. The evaluation of the project work was based on the following criteria:

1. The quality and elaboration on the given/chosen topic;
2. The quality and complexity of the end-product (YouTube channel, podcasts, magazines, vlogs, article, research, secondary study material, etc.), which had to be uploaded to the agreed platform;
3. Written activities (questionnaire for evaluation, article, letter, etc.).
4. Oral activities (telecollaboration, Skype, Zoom, etc., calls, etc.).
5. Participation in group meetings with the students from the two foreign universities (based on the individual tasks in organising group meetings/managing the group meetings-active or passive role), written group report of group meetings (one Hungarian student was assigned to write the report in each group).
6. Self and peer evaluation (based on the questionnaire), self-evaluation (1 page) in writing.
7. **Individual** contribution to the elaboration of the chosen artefact (teamwork, leadership skills, flexibility, conflict-management, time-management, etc.).
8. Keeping a connection with their peers (platform, frequency, participation, plan, dynamics, etc.), written report about it.
9. Written proof of individual work handed to the lecturer at the end of the VE Project.

## 4. Results

Table 3 summarises the artefacts/end-products of the international groups.

TABLE 3. END-PRODUCTS OF VE GROUPS

GROUP	TOPIC	SUMMARY OF THE END-PRODUCT
1	8/ Gastronomy, secret ingredients of traditional foods, cooking show, eating at home vs eating out do you have restaurants	The final result is a cooking show where each country showcases the 'national dish' of a different country. Hungary presented the Tunisian national dish, Tunisia prepared the Turkish national dish, and Turkey cooked the Hungarian chicken paprikash. The video can be found on YouTube.
2	13/ Effects of social media on university students - how social media and smartphones affect students' everyday life - what kind of content are students watching today?	The final outcome is a PowerPoint presentation wherein students highlighted various mental health issues stemming from social media. They conducted a survey and presented their findings within the presentation. In the concluding project meeting on TEAMS, small breakout rooms were utilised to discuss the identified mental health problems.
3	6/Style/fashion, how it changes, what university students wear nowadays, what shops they buy from (second-hand, vintage, CSR)	The end-product is a ppt comparing the traditional clothes of the three countries with precise descriptions depicting the similarities and the differences between the national traditional clothes, mainly for women, and discussing the advantages of buying second-hand clothes.
4	1/Famous sights in your city/world heritage - tourists in your countries	The end-product is a video where students show the most famous sights of their own cities by giving information about the historical and cultural importance of the places. The video is funny, entertaining, and educating at the same time.
5	11/Challenges of today's youngsters - addiction of university students, online games	In-depth interviews were carried out with some volunteer university students from the three countries and at the end the results were discussed at the project-closing final meeting on TEAMS.
6	17/ National days, famous people of the 3 countries	The final product is a blog where students shared pictures and articles about their national days. They focused mainly on one national day from each country.
7	4/ Common points and differences among the 3 countries: regarding music, TV/radio, culture - movies and films (internationally watched) - famous films of the 3 countries	The aim of the final product was to mix and combine the traditional songs of the three countries on a common denominator. To do this, the students first chose songs from their own countries and then mixed them in a studio environment. The song is uploaded to YouTube.
8	5/Labour market/how difficult is it to find jobs in your countries?	The final product is the following: each nationality conducted an interview where they asked a professional to tell them about their work. They asked a total of 10 questions. Their aim was to get to know a profession



		better. The results were discussed during the final meeting on TEAMS.
9	2/ Everyday life of a university student /house, expenses, courses/, daily routine/differences	The final product consists of a ppt presentation about the questionnaire results that highlights the differences between the three universities in terms of daily routine, courses, as well as school systems.
10	9/Public transport, vehicles, pros and cons, differences between city and village	The final product is a video. The video contains the public transport opportunities of the three countries. Students also created a TikTok account, where they uploaded short videos.

source: own compilation

After having taken part in the Virtual Exchange learning experience, most students are able to:

- Initiate future cooperations with international partners.
- Develop strategies to bridge cultural, social, and geographical gaps between participants.
- Develop valuable skills-sets by promoting self-reflection, empathy, understanding, and acceptance, and intercultural sensitisation.
- Gain insight into a larger slice of the world.
- Develop a broader spectrum and perspective on current world events through the eyes of university students from other nations.
- Develop intercultural awareness, interdisciplinarity, collaborative skills and media competencies, and add soft skills such as project management.
- Develop a high level of self-organisation as all members of the international groups are jointly responsible for their work results.
- Collaborate, cooperate, and communicate effectively in international teams under the supervision of their lecturers.
- Share knowledge and experience in a shared language.

## 5. Research

The author conducted a survey with the project participants of the three universities. The main task of the survey was to examine the participating students' cultural sensitivity and to examine to what extent their cultural sensitivity could change after working together virtually with students from different cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, the researcher also wanted to see whether there was a correlation between the number of languages spoken or the number of countries visited and cultural openness with reference to Bennett's framework, which describes the different ways in which people can react to cultural differences. Bennett's initial idea was to utilise the model to evaluate intercultural awareness and help improve intercultural sensitivity, which is the ability to accept and adapt to a brand-new and different culture.

The questionnaire focused on five research questions, out of which one research question is discussed and explained in the present paper. The first research question was the following:

Q1: Are university students who speak more languages or who have visited more countries more culturally sensitive? Are there any significant differences in this area between the nations studied?

To answer the research question, the author created a 16-item principal component to measure cultural openness. Table 4 shows cultural openness as a key component. The variance explained by the principal component is 43.833%, which is adequate given the number of items.

TABLE 4. CULTURAL OPENNESS AS A KEY COMPONENT

If something unexpected happens while working in a new culture, I can easily find out the solution. (Rate the extent to which you agree with each statement. using the scale (Cognitive)	0.528
I can change the way I act when a cross-cultural situation seems to require it. (Rate the extent to which you agree with each statement. using the scale (Behavioural)	0.606
I can alter my expression when a cultural situation requires it. (Rate the extent to which you agree with each statement. using the scale (Behavioural)	0.543
I can easily accept cultural differences in greetings, in traditions and other norms. (Rate the extent to which you agree with each statement. using the scale (Behavioural)	0.689
I can handle cultural differences easily. (Rate the extent to which you agree with each statement. using the scale (Behavioural)	0.685
I can adapt to the lifestyle of a different culture easily. (Rate the extent to which you agree with each statement. using the scale (Motivational)	0.700
I am confident that I can deal with a cultural situation that's unfamiliar. (Rate the extent to which you agree with each statement. using the scale (Motivational)	0.606
I am patient and respectful when communicating with someone from a different culture. (Rate the extent to which you agree with each statement. using the scale (Motivational)	0.722
Before settling on a new belief or idea about a different culture, I use questions and observations to see if it is accurate. (Rate the extent to which you agree with each statement. using the scale (Motivational)	0.640
I have prejudice against certain cultures. (Rate the extent to which you agree with each statement. using the scale (Motivational)	-0.514
When working with people from a different culture, I research that culture and try to improve my knowledge about it. (Rate the extent to which you agree with each statement. using the scale (Cultural)	0.505
I prefer to work in teams with people from different cultures. (Rate the extent to which you agree with each statement. using the scale (Cultural)	0.631
I feel comfortable collaborating with people from very different cultures to me. (Rate the extent to which you agree with each statement. using the scale (Cultural)	0.730

I try to learn a few foreign words in the language of any culture I visit. (Rate the extent to which you agree with each statement. using the scale (Cultural))	0.763
I feel a natural drive to connect with other cultures. (Rate the extent to which you agree with each statement. using the scale (Cultural))	0.814
I am open towards getting to know other cultures. (Rate the extent to which you agree with each statement. using the scale (Cultural))	0.804

source: own table

When looking at the students from all the countries together, the ANOVA test results show no significant difference in cultural openness based on the number of foreign languages spoken (F: 0.731, df: 2, sig.: 0.486  $p > 0.05$ ). The number of foreign languages spoken is divided into two groups in order to obtain the appropriate number of elements (1 - speaks one foreign language, 2 - speaks several foreign languages) for the analysis of the countries and the analysis of foreign language speakers. When considering all three countries together, the independent samples T-test still shows that there are no significant differences between the groups (t: -1.111, df: 62, sig.: 0.271  $p > 0.05$ ). T-test results for each country separately are: regarding Turkey (t: -1.244, df: 19, sig.: 0.229  $p > 0.05$ ), Tunisia (t: -0.141, df: 20, sig.: 0.889  $p > 0.05$ ), and Hungary (t: 0.516, df: 19, sig.: 0.612  $p > 0.05$ ). There is no significant difference between the students in the two groups mentioned above.

For the number of countries visited, the ANOVA test showed no significant difference between the means of the groups (F: 1.012, df: 2, sig.: 0.369  $p > 0.05$ ). In this case, the extremely uneven distribution of the number of items did not allow a breakdown by country. The analysis also examined whether average cultural openness differs across the three countries. The ANOVA results revealed significant differences in this case (F: 4.901, df: 2, sig.: 0.011  $p < 0.05$ ) with the highest cultural openness being observed for Tunisian students (mean: 0.459), followed by Turkish students (mean: -0.042), and the lowest mean for Hungarian students (mean: -0.439). It may also be worth looking at whether there is a correlation between the student's origin and the foreign languages spoken and the number of countries visited. In the cross-tabulation analysis it is possible to use the two-category recoded version for both variables, otherwise the expected number of items in several cells will be less than five. Chi-squared tests show a significant and relatively strong correlation with the origin of the students for both languages spoken (Chi-Square: 22.964, df: 2, sig.:  $< 0.001$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , Cramer's V: 0.599) and countries visited (Chi-Square: 40.234, df: 2, sig.:  $< 0.001$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , Cramer's V: 0.799). In the case of foreign languages, Turkish students are most likely to speak only one foreign language, followed by Hungarian students, while Tunisians are more likely to speak several foreign languages. Table 5 shows the number of foreign languages spoken and the students' nationalities.

TABLE 5. NUMBER OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES SPOKEN AND STUDENTS' NATIONALITIES

Students' nationality	One foreign language	More than one foreign language	Total
<b>Hungarian</b>	8 38.1%	13 61.9%	21 100%
<b>Tunisian</b>	2 9.1%	20 90.9%	22 100%
<b>Turkish</b>	17 81%	4 19%	21 100%
<b>Total</b>	27 42.2%	37 57.8%	64 100%

source: own compilation

In terms of foreign countries visited, all the Hungarian students had been outside the country, while all but one Tunisian student and 66.7% of Turkish students never visited another country (Table 6).

TABLE 6. FOREIGN TRAVEL AND NATIONALITY

Students' nationality	Never been abroad	Went abroad	Total
<b>Hungarian</b>	0 0%	20 100%	20 100%
<b>Tunisian</b>	21 95.5%	1 4.5%	22 100%
<b>Turkish</b>	14 66.7%	7 33.3%	21 100%
<b>Total</b>	35 55.6%	28 44.4%	63 100%

source: own table

## 6. Conclusion

The presented Virtual Exchange project offered an exceptional opportunity for international students to engage with their peers from different countries. Active participation in joint projects alongside international peers served as an excellent platform for enriching their cultural comprehension. This involvement exposed students to diverse cultures, customs, and traditions, fostering a broadening of perspectives and a deeper appreciation of diversity. Interacting with international peers facilitated the development of effective cross-cultural communication skills, a valuable asset in our increasingly globalised world.

Despite occasional minor conflicts within the groups, students adeptly resolved arising issues, at times seeking guidance and support from their lecturers. Collaborating on shared projects with international counterparts also bolstered teamwork capabilities, teaching students to function efficiently within diverse team dynamics. This experience honed vital skills like

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communication, collaboration, and conflict resolution, all of which are indispensable in today's workplace, often characterised by diverse team structures.

Another advantage of engaging in joint projects, such as the Virtual Exchange project with international students, was the substantial improvement in students' language proficiency. This environment provided a practical context for students to hone their language abilities, inevitably fostering confidence and fluency. Furthermore, students had the opportunity to acquire new vocabulary and idiomatic expressions directly from their international counterparts, enriching their linguistic skills beyond traditional classroom learning.

Involvement in international projects could significantly expand career prospects for students. In today's job market, employers highly regard individuals with exposure to working in diverse global settings. Therefore, students who have engaged in joint projects with international peers can showcase the skills and experience that are essential for thriving in a global workplace. This exposure grants them a competitive advantage when seeking job opportunities.

To sum up, engaging in joint projects with international students at universities yields manifold advantages for students. It fosters enriched cultural understanding, language proficiency, teamwork capabilities, and expands career horizons. It is imperative for universities to sustain opportunities for students to collaborate with peers from diverse backgrounds through joint projects. This invaluable experience plays a pivotal role in equipping students for success in our contemporary globalised society.

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