Virtual Exchanges in higher education and youth

Virtual exchanges projects consist of online people-to-people activities that promote intercultural dialogue and soft skills development. They make it possible for every young person to access high-quality international and cross-cultural education without physical mobility. While virtual debating or training does not fully replace the benefits of physical mobility, participants in virtual exchanges ought to reap some of the benefits of international educational experiences. Digital platforms represent a valuable tool in partially answering the global constraints on mobility caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual exchanges also help spreading European values. Moreover, in some cases virtual exchanges can prepare the ground for future physical exchanges not funded under this action.

Virtual exchanges take place in small groups and are always moderated by a trained facilitator. They should be easily integrated into youth (non-formal education) projects or higher education courses. Virtual exchanges can draw participants from both sectors, even if, depending on specific projects, they could involve participants from either only one of them or from both. All projects under this call will involve organisations and participants coming from both EU Member States and third countries associated to the Programme, and third countries not associated to the Programme in eligible regions.

Objectives of the Action

The action will aim to:

- encourage intercultural dialogue with third countries not associated to the Programme and increasing tolerance through online people-to-people interactions, building on digital, youth-friendly technologies;
- promote various types of virtual exchanges as a complement to Erasmus+ physical mobility, allowing more young people to benefit from intercultural and international experience;
- enhance critical thinking and media literacy, particularly in the use of internet and social media, such as to counter discrimination, indoctrination, polarization and violent radicalisation;
- foster the digital and soft skills\(^1\) development of students, young people and youth workers\(^2\), including the practice of foreign languages and teamwork, notably to enhance employability;
- promote citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education;
- strengthen the youth dimension in the relations of the EU with third countries.

Thematic Areas / Specific Objectives

The Virtual Exchanges should be organised in one or more of the following thematic areas, which correspond to the priorities of the Erasmus+ Programme:

- Inclusion and diversity
Digital transformation
Environment and fight against climate change
Participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement

Within this broad framework, since Virtual Exchanges are a bottom-up initiative, participating organisations are free to choose the topics on which they will focus, but proposals must demonstrate their expected impact in relation to one or more of the objectives mentioned above (see also ‘Expected impact’ section below). Gender aspects should be taken into account as needed, depending on the projects’ scope and themes (e.g. by introducing gender sensitivity aspects in the trainings). Special attention needs to be given to the inclusion of socially and economically vulnerable people and persons unable to apply for physical mobility.

Activities

Projects will be funded based on work plans that integrate online cooperation activities, including:

- online-facilitated discussions between young people of youth organisations based in different countries, as part of youth projects. They could include role playing simulations;
- training for youth workers willing to develop a virtual exchange project with colleagues from other countries;
- online facilitated discussions between students of Higher Education institutions based in different countries, as part of higher education degrees;
- training for university professors/staff willing to develop a virtual exchange project with colleagues from other countries;
- interactive open online courses including traditional course materials such as filmed lectures, readings, and problem sets (like the well-known MOOCs, Massive Open Online Courses, but putting an emphasis on interactive user forums in small groups to support community interactions among students, professors, teaching assistants, young people and youth workers).

Setting up a project

All virtual exchange projects need to be:

- moderated by trained facilitators;
- secure and protective from the perspective of participants and hosts, in full compliance of the EU data protection rules;
- politically sound and culturally relevant: virtual exchange activities must be firmly embedded in the youth and higher education sectors and be up to date with young people’s online and offline cultures in the participating countries;
- open and accessible at user experience and interaction level. Registration and interactions with peers, facilitators, administrators, and other stakeholders should be straightforward and easy;
- mainly synchronously, with possible asynchronous components (e.g. readings, videos) and finally, they must foresee a method of recognition of participation and learning for young people at the end of the exchange.

Participant organisations must arrange virtual exchanges for people in the 13-30 age range. If a project involves people under 18, participating organisations are required to obtain prior authorisation for participation from their parents or those acting on their behalf. Individual participants must be based in the countries of the organisations participating in the project.
In order to carry out their activities, projects should rely, as far as possible, on existing tools and platforms.

**Eligibility criteria**

In order to be eligible for an Erasmus+ grant, project proposals for Virtual Exchanges in Higher Education and Youth must comply with the following criteria:

**Eligible participating organisations (Who can apply?)**

The applicants (beneficiaries and affiliated entities, if applicable) must be legal entities (public or private bodies) and may fall under the following categories:

- entities active in the field of higher education or youth (non-formal education);
- youth organisations;
- higher education institutions, associations or organisations of higher education institutions, as well as legally recognised national or international rector, teacher or student organisations

These entities must be established in one of the eligible countries, i.e.:

- An EU Member State,
- A third country associated to the Programme, or
- A third country not associated to the Programme from an eligible region. The eligible regions covered by this action are Regions 1, 2, 3 and 9 (see section ‘Eligible countries’ in part A of this Guide). Each project proposal must involve organisations and participants from only one of the eligible regions of third countries not associated to the Programme.

**The coordinating organisation must be a youth organisation or higher education institution and be legally established and located in an EU Member State or third country associated to the Programme.** The coordinating organisation applies on behalf of all participating organisations involved in the project. It cannot be an affiliated entity.

Other entities may participate in other consortium roles, such as associated partners.

Other entities may participate in other consortium roles, such as associated partners, subcontractors, third parties giving in-kind contributions, etc. Affiliated entities are not eligible for funding.

**Consortium composition (Number and profile of participating organisations)**

Proposals must be submitted by a consortium of at least 4 applicants (beneficiaries, not affiliated entities), which complies with the following conditions:

- Minimum 4 independent entities (no affiliated entities) from 4 different eligible countries;
- Minimum 2 higher education institutions or youth organisations from 2 EU Member States and third countries associated to the Programme and 2 higher education institutions or youth organisations from 2 eligible third countries not associated to the Programme belonging to the same eligible region;
- The number of organisations from EU Member States and third countries associated to the Programme must not be higher than the number of organisations from third countries not associated to the Programme;
- Only beneficiaries (not affiliated entities) count for the consortium composition.
Associated partners do not count for the consortium composition.

**Venue of the activities**

Activities must take place in the countries of the participating organisations.

**Duration of the project**

Projects should normally last 36 months (extensions are possible, if duly justified and through an amendment of the grant agreement).

**Where to apply?**

To the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) via the Funding & Tender Opportunities Portal (FTOP).

Call ID: ERASMUS-EDU-2024-VIRT-EXCH

Before applying, please, see the relevant FAQs in FTOP.

**When to apply?**

Applicants have to submit their grant application by **25 April at 17:00:00 (Brussels time)**.

Applicant organisations will be assessed against the relevant exclusion and selection criteria. For more information please consult [Part C](#) of this Guide.

**Award criteria**

**Relevance of the project - (maximum score 30 points)**

- **Relevance**: The application is relevant to the chosen general and specific objectives of the call. It is consistent with the requirements of the call and is clearly explained. The application addresses the thematic areas identified for this call.

- **EU Values**: the application is relevant for the respect and promotion of shared EU values, such as respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, as well as fighting any sort of discrimination.

- **Needs analysis**: The application is based on an adequate analysis of challenges and needs. The different needs of the different partners have been identified and are well taken into account.

- **Consistency**: The different components of the application are coherent and consistent. The objectives are realistic and address issues relevant to participating organisations and the direct and indirect target groups. Evidence of the application are clearly defined, realistic and address issues relevant to the participating organisations and the target groups.

- **Activities**: The virtual exchanges are clearly defined and promote intercultural dialogue and soft skills development, as well as principally contribute to the educational, personal or professional development of participants from third countries not associated to the Programme. Evidence of the effectiveness of the proposed virtual exchange approach is provided.

- **Scaling up**: The application demonstrates the potential for scaling up its practice(s) at different levels (e.g. local, regional, national, EU) and its transferability to different sectors. The scaling up is likely to generate impact not only at the level of the different partner
organisations but also at system and/or policy level. The proposal has the potential to develop mutual trust and enhance cross-border cooperation.

- **European added value**: The application brings added value at EU level, through results that would not be achieved at country level alone, and there is potential for transferring results to countries not involved in the project. The project outcomes have the potential to feed into relevant EU policy agendas.

**Quality of the project design and implementation** - (maximum score 30 points)

- **Coherence**: The overall project design ensures consistency between project objectives, methodology, activities and budget proposed. The application presents a coherent and comprehensive set of appropriate activities to meet the identified needs and lead to the expected results.
- **Methodology**: The quality and feasibility of the methodology proposed and its appropriateness for addressing the needs identified, including those of the different partners. A clear concept of how these different needs will be managed has been developed. The pedagogical approach(es) chosen are also in keeping with these different needs.
- **Learning outcomes**: Learning outcomes are evaluated and recognised (e.g. Youthpass). Learning outcomes are clearly defined before each virtual exchange activity and measured after each activity, progress recorded and achievements recognised.
- **Work plan**: The quality and effectiveness of the work plan are clear and cover all project phases.
- **Management**: The project management plan is sound, with adequate resources allocated to the different tasks. Timelines, organisation, tasks and responsibilities are well defined and realistic.
- **Budget**: The budget shows cost effectiveness and value for money. There is coherence between tasks, roles and financial resources allocated to partners. The financial management arrangements are clear and appropriate.
- **Evaluation**: Specific measures for monitoring processes and deliverables (i.e. indicators of achievement and means of verification) ensure that the project implementation is of high quality. There is a clear quality assurance plan which also covers project management adequately. The monitoring strategy includes risk identification and a mitigating action plan.

**Quality of the partnership and the cooperation arrangements** - (maximum score 20 points)

- **Configuration**: The partnership is capable of ensuring full achievement of the project’s objectives. The consortium has all the necessary skills, expertise and experience in the areas covered by the project. Adequate allocation of time and input among the partners is ensured. Skills and competences of the partnership are complementary.
- **Commitment**: Each participating organisation demonstrates full involvement corresponding to its capacities and specific area of expertise.
- **Cooperation**: The cooperation arrangements are balanced. Effective mechanisms are proposed to ensure coordination, decision-making and communication between the participating organisations, stakeholders and any other relevant party.

**Impact** - (maximum score 20 points)

- **Dissemination**: A clear awareness raising, dissemination and communication strategy ensures reaching the relevant target groups, as well as the general stakeholders and the public during the lifetime of the project. This strategy includes plans for making any produced
materials accessible through open licenses.

- **Exploitation**: The application demonstrates that the selected virtual exchange approach(es) can be successfully disseminated and/or scaled up, that it creates a wider impact and influences systemic change. The exploitation approach is clearly described and the proposed measures to exploit the project results are potentially effective.

- **Impact**: The foreseeable impact, notably for the identified target groups is clearly defined and measures are in place to ensure that the impact can be achieved and evaluated. The results of the activities are likely to be significant. The project outcomes have the potential to support long-term changes, improvements, or developments for the benefit of the target groups and systems concerned. The application also explains how the impact of learning (learning outcomes) through virtual exchange will be evaluated in order to make (data) informed recommendations to improve virtual exchange teaching & learning beyond the project.

- **Sustainability**: The application includes appropriate measures and resources to ensure that the results and benefits can be sustained beyond the project lifetime.

To be considered for funding, proposals must score at least 60 points. Furthermore, they must score at least half of the maximum score points in each of the categories of award criteria mentioned above (i.e. minimum 15 points for the categories "Relevance of the project" and "Quality of the project design and implementation"; 10 points for the categories "Quality of the partnership and the cooperation arrangements" and "Impact").

Ex-aequo proposals will be prioritised according to the scores they have been awarded for the award criterion 'Relevance’. When these scores are equal, priority will be based on their scores for the criterion 'Quality of the project design and implementation’. When these scores are equal, priority will be based on their scores for the criterion 'Impact’.

If this does not allow to determine the priority, a further prioritisation can be done by considering the overall project portfolio and the creation of positive synergies between projects, or other factors related to the objectives of the call. These factors will be documented in the panel report.

**Expected impact**

The activities and outputs of the different projects will aim at reaching a positive impact in relation to the objectives of the call that, while varying in accordance with the projects’ specificities, should be closely connected to the learning dimension of the virtual exchanges.

Each project proposal should include information on this expected impact. Applicants are encouraged to foresee feedback from participating individuals and organisations, particularly as for the learning value, when reporting about the projects’ impact.

**Geographical targets**

The EU’s external action instruments are contributing to this action. The budget available is divided between different regions and the size of each budgetary envelope is different. Further information on the amounts available under each budgetary envelope will be published on the Funding and Tender Opportunities Portal (FTOP).

Sub-Saharan Africa: Applicants are encouraged to give priority to least developed countries in this region and to put a special emphasis on migration priority countries; no country will access more than 8% of funding foreseen for this region. Applicants are also encouraged to involve participants from a wide range of countries in their proposal, including partners that have less experience in
As a general rule, and within the limits of existing national and European legal frameworks, results should be made available as open educational resources (OER) as well as on relevant professional, sectorial or competent authorities’ platforms. The proposal will describe how data, materials, documents and audio-visual and social media activity produced will be made freely available and promoted through open licences, and does not contain disproportionate limitations.

What are the funding rules?

This action follows a lump sum funding model. The amount of the single lump sum contribution will be determined for each grant based on the estimated budget of the action proposed by the applicant. The amount will be fixed by the granting authority on the basis of the estimated project budget, evaluation result, and a funding rate of 95%.

The EU grant per project will be of a maximum of 500,000 €, with EUR 200 as maximum investment to organisations per participant (i.e. a project of 500,000 € would have to reach at least 2,500 participants). The grant awarded may be lower than the amount requested.

Financial support to third parties in the form of grants or prizes is not allowed.

Volunteer costs are allowed. They shall take the form of unit costs as defined in the to the Commission Decision on unit costs for volunteers.

SME unit costs for SME owners are allowed. They should take the form of unit costs as defined in to the Commission Decision on unit costs for SMEs owners.

How is the project lump sum determined?

Applicants must fill in a detailed budget table in the application form, taking into account the following points:

1. The budget should be detailed as necessary by beneficiary/-ies and organised in coherent work packages (for example divided into ‘project management’, ‘training’, ‘organisation of events’, ‘mobility preparation and implementation’, ‘communication and dissemination’, ‘quality assurance’, etc.);
2. The proposal must describe the activities covered by each work package;
3. Applicants must provide in their proposal a breakdown of the lump sum showing the share per work package (and, within each work package, the share assigned to each beneficiary and affiliated entity);
4. Costs described can cover staff costs, travel and subsistence costs, equipment costs and subcontracting as well as other costs (such as dissemination of information, publishing or translation).

Proposals will be evaluated according to the standard evaluation procedures with the help of internal and/or external experts. The experts will assess the quality of the proposals, against the requirements defined in the call and the expected impact, quality and efficiency of the action.

Following the proposal evaluation, the authorising officer will establish the amount of the lump sum, taking into account the findings of the assessment carried out.

The grant parameters (maximum grant amount, funding rate, total eligible costs, etc.) will be fixed in
the Grant Agreement. Please refer to Part C of this Programme Guide, section ‘Eligible Direct Costs’.

The project achievements will be evaluated on the outcomes completed. This funding scheme will allow putting focus on the outputs rather than the inputs, thereby placing emphasis on the quality and level of achievement of measurable objectives.

More details are described in the model Grant Agreement available in the Funding and Tender Opportunities Portal (FTOP).

---

**Footnote**

1 Soft skills include the ability to think critically, be curious and creative, to take initiative, to solve problems and work collaboratively, to be able to communicate efficiently in a multicultural and interdisciplinary environment, to be able to adapt to context and to cope with stress and uncertainty. These skills are part of the key competences, as outlined in the Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (OJ C 189/1 of 4.6.2018).

2 Youth workers are professional or volunteers involved in non-formal learning who support young people in their personal socio-educational and professional development.

3 I.e. any organisation, public or private, working with or for young people outside formal settings. Such organisations can be, for example: a non-profit organisation, association, NGO (including European Youth NGOs); a national Youth Council; a public authority at local, regional or national level; an education or research institution; or a foundation.

4 As per the OECD Development Assistance Committee list of Least Developed Countries: DAC-List-of-ODA-Recipients-for-reporting-2022-23-flows.pdf (oecd.org).

5 The following are migration key third countries not associated to the Programme: Burkina-Faso, Burundi, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, South Sudan, and Sudan.