

VIRTUAL EXCHANGES AS A TOOL FOR YOUTH-DRIVEN GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FOR SDGS

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional concept of on-site education is changing. Alongside traditional teaching, distance education is increasingly becoming available. Virtual Exchange (VE) is a tool with which students' interest in distance education can be increased and the element of interaction can be added (O'Dowd, & O'Rourke 2019, O'Dowd 2021, Schenker 2013). UHEL is currently coordinating two European Union ERASMUS+ VE projects. Climate University for Virtual Exchanges (CLUVEX, www.atm.helsinki.fi/cluvex) and UnaEuropa for Virtual Exchanges (UnaVEx, www.atm.helsinki.fi/unavex) will be implemented during the years of 2023-2026. The projects focus on the challenges of climate change and sustainable development. The goal of these projects is to bring a total up to 5,000 university students to VEs within three years. The projects support the continuation of studies in the subject area through existing MOOCs. The CLUVEX project is based on the Climate University (CU, climateuniversity.fi) MOOCs, developed and coordinated by UHEL while the UnaVEx project is based on sustainable development MOOC of the UnaEuropa network (www.una-europa.eu). UHEL, together with the projects' partners from Europe, Europe Neighbourhood East (e.g., Ukraine, Armenia), and Africa (e.g., South Africa, Republic of the Congo, and Kenya), is developing and researching the VE concept as a part of distance learning.

METHODS

During VEs, university students from different countries receive science, based information related to the SDG themes e.g. climate change, sustainable development and exchange ideas in small groups working online (in virtual environment). After the VE, the students will submit reports for the 1 credit point granted by University of Helsinki's Open University and VE Certificate given by the projects (in CLUVEX – so-called the Climate Messenger certificate, and in UnaVEx – so-called the Climate Advocate certificate). Both projects will collect necessary information on students' motivations before the start of each VE and feedback after VE completed.

RESULTS

In CLUVEX, since summer 2023, preparatory steps were taken for developing concept, elaborating guidebooks such as VE Guidebook, Climate Literacy Guidebook, Climate Messenger Code of Conduct, and other supporting educational materials. In May and Sep of 2024, a series of trainings (TR) for moderators was successfully carried out. These included: TR1 - CLUVEX concept and technical skills, TR2 - Climate University MOOCs, TR3 - Soft skills, TR4 - CLUVEX guidebooks and materials, and TR5 - CLUVEX Group Exercise "Climate Horizon" and tools for climate-related data visualisation and analysis. The 1st CLUVEX VE Week will take place online during 14-18 Oct 2024. In recent months it has been actively advertised and promoted through participating in the project Universities, as well as their collaborators, students' local and international various networks, etc. Students successfully completed the VE Week, in

addition to 1 credit and certificate, will have an opportunity to attend free of charge the CU MOOCs related to climate change themes.

In UnaVEx, since spring 2024, preparatory work has been taken for developing concept and the exercise for the virtual exchange week. We will start Nov 2024 and Feb of 2025, a series of trainings (TRs1-5) for moderators. The UnaVEx Group Exercise will be based on the “Introduction to Sustainability” (<https://courses.mooc.fi/org/uh-inar/courses/introduction-to-sustainability>). The 1st UnaVEx VE Week will take place online during five days (“week”) on 24 Feb, 7 Mar, 14 Mar, 21 Mar, 28 Mar in 2025.

CONCLUSIONS

Base on the preliminary results of the 1st virtual week of the CLUVEX project, it seems that the virtual week can act as a low-threshold motivator in distance learning of climate competences. At the same time, the virtual exchange also promotes students' skills, such as remote working e.g. related technical skills and working in small groups and interaction skills.

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