

**Abstract**

Against a backdrop of significant shifts in education and exchange globally, virtual exchange had continued to grow both in scale, scope, and complexity. Based on a third (2022) in a series of annual global virtual exchange surveys by the Stevens Initiative, this article presents key findings about potential growth in global virtual exchange; the context and nuances of virtual exchanges around the world; and implications for program administrators, campus leaders, and decision-makers.

## Evolving Landscape of Virtual Exchange: Findings from the Third Global Survey

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The continued expansion of virtual exchange (VE) programs around the world has been accompanied by important questions about the sustainability of such initiatives, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic wanes and in-person mobility resumes. Building upon two previous iterations, the most recent 2022 Survey of the Virtual Exchange Field—an annual effort from the Stevens Initiative—aims to answer such questions, providing insights into diverse characteristics and models of VE. The 2022 survey includes responses from 126 institutions that shared detailed information about their 2,565 programs which connected 120,714 participants around the world.

A key addition to this year's survey and accompanying report were five case studies that provide a deeper, qualitative understanding of the breadth and complexity of how VE functions around the world. Specifically, this year's report highlights how various "digital divides" impact the delivery of virtual exchange in the Global South (Libya, Mexico, and South Africa) with implications for the role of language, importance of context, and the impact of stratified resources.

**Growth and Change in VE**

While it is inarguable that VE has proliferated over the past few years, this growth has been complex and non-linear, has varied across different providers, and has—to some extent—been shaped by the ongoing pandemic. On one hand, the pandemic has provided a boost to VE, with 58 percent of respondents indicating that they increased their programming due to the pandemic. Hence, the sharp increase in VE observed in the second survey in 2021 could have been a result of the pandemic, with many organizations and institutions exploring VE programs for the first time since traditional mobility programs were inactive. As in-person mobility programs resumed rapidly in 2022, those providers who had adopted VE merely as a stop-gap measure to fill a void might have pivoted back to earlier programming. In summary, the pandemic perhaps led to a spike in VE and growth that some providers are either not inclined to or have struggled to maintain over time.

Given this mixed picture and a varying group of respondents across surveys, the most reliable assessment of change comes from a subset of 71 VE providers who responded in both 2021 and 2022. Within this group, the total number of VE programs implemented increased by 38 percent from 1,464 programs in 2021 to 2,022 in 2022, while the number of participants grew by 22 percent, from 80,737 to 98,750. It should be noted, however, that most of these 71 providers are either higher education institutions or nonprofits/NGOs that operate in multiple countries, which also suggests that such providers are the most able to consistently report data over time.

### Understanding the Context and Diversity of VE

A key takeaway from prior surveys was the need to develop a deeper understanding of how VE around the world functions. To address this gap, the 2022 report features five case studies of VE programs in various geographic locations that reveal the diversity of VE and offer a comparative lens through which one can see a whole variety of issues, such as diversity and access, collaboration (internally and externally), setting and managing expectations across all stakeholders (students, faculty, administrators, leadership, partners), and the role of language and communication.

A recurrent theme is diversity and access in VE, and how this varies across different countries. In the United States, where internationalization efforts at community colleges are often limited, a case study of Gazelle International's CLICK initiative reveals how VE can empower educators to leverage technology to internationalize their classrooms. VE and its potential for internationalization can help attract and recruit more students at the community college level, thereby increasing access to both VE and internationalization for this group of students, who might otherwise be left out of such efforts. When looking in Global South countries, access to VE itself might be limited, as shown in the case study of the Durban University of Technology in South Africa where inadequate infrastructure, including lack of electricity, can often impede VE. A similar theme emerged in the case study of Culturingua in Texas, United States, which reveals the challenges of working in countries such as Libya, where infrastructure and access to technology might be limited outside major cities. Additionally, Culturingua is also working to improve access to VE programs for students who might be left out due to disabilities.

These case studies reveal that as VE providers design and implement programs, it is important to consider the duality of technology, which can, on one hand, be an enabler but at the same time, can also itself create digital divides, since access to technology remains uneven in many parts of the world.

### Looking Ahead

The three Surveys of the Virtual Exchange Field (2020–2022) occurred at a time of significant shifts in education and exchange globally. The current survey suggests that VE will continue to grow, albeit in ways that are complex and that require the sort of sustained and nuanced exploration that could be possible thanks to the survey effort. The findings also help institutional leaders and decision-makers assess how VE can be a key component of their broader internationalization goals, particularly in the post-pandemic period, especially as they consider a strategic approach to and investments in different forms of mobility and exchanges that would complement each other rather than compete.

The survey has served as a critical and early effort to raise awareness about the need to capture data on VE programs. However, as with many new and large-scale research efforts, challenges remain and further inquiry is necessary. We have identified the following areas that need more examination: measuring the quality of VE, including how programs ensure quality in terms of delivery of VE, developing a deeper understanding of the role of VE facilitators and educators, especially with a view to supporting their growth and professional development, and building the capacity of providers to gather and report data on virtual programs, especially for smaller organizations with limited resources. ▲

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*The full survey report is available at <https://www.stevensinitiative.org/resource/2022-survey-of-the-virtual-exchange-field-report/>*