

HIGHER EDUCATION

WITHOUT BORDERS: GLOBAL LEARNING AND VIRTUAL MOBILITY IN COLLABORATIVE INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS

EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR SIN FRONTERAS: APRENDIZAJE GLOBAL Y MOVILIDAD VIRTUAL EN PROYECTOS INTERNACIONALES COLABORATIVOS

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ABSTRACT _____

This article examines how virtual mobility and collaborative international projects are becoming essential strategies for the internationalization of higher education, enabling students from diverse backgrounds to participate in global experiences without physical or geographical barriers. These modalities, including COIL programs and hybrid experiences, foster intercultural competencies, effective communication, critical thinking, and remote collaboration, while promoting inclusion, equity, and academic diversity. The research was based on a literature review, document analysis, and case studies, identifying best practices, emerging trends, and challenges related to the digital divide, curriculum adaptation, and faculty preparation. The findings show that structured pedagogical design, adequate technological infrastructure, and strategic institutional collaboration are fundamental to maximizing the impact of these experiences, strengthening international partnerships, and offering meaningful and sustainable learning. In short, virtual mobility and collaborative projects are transforming contemporary higher education, contributing to the development of globally competent professionals prepared to thrive in multicultural and digital environments.

Keywords:

Virtual mobility, global learning, higher education, COIL, educational inclusion, internationalization.

RESUMEN _____

El artículo examina cómo la movilidad virtual y los proyectos internacionales colaborativos se consolidan como estrategias esenciales para la internacionalización de la educación superior, permitiendo que estudiantes de diversos contextos participen en experiencias globales sin barreras físicas ni geográficas. Estas modalidades, incluyendo programas COIL y experiencias híbridas, fomentan competencias interculturales, comunicación efectiva, pensamiento crítico y colaboración remota, al tiempo que promueven inclusión, equidad y diversidad académica. La investigación se basó en revisión bibliográfica, análisis documental y estudios de caso, identificando buenas prácticas, tendencias emergentes y desafíos relacionados con la brecha tecnológica, adaptación curricular y preparación docente. Los hallazgos muestran que el diseño pedagógico estructurado, la infraestructura tecnológica adecuada y la colaboración institucional estratégica son fundamentales para maximizar el impacto de estas experiencias, fortalecer alianzas internacionales y ofrecer aprendizaje significativo y sostenible. En síntesis, la movilidad virtual y los proyectos colaborativos transforman la educación superior contemporánea, contribuyendo a la formación de profesionales globalmente competentes y preparados para desenvolverse en entornos multiculturales y digitalizados.

Palabras clave:

Movilidad virtual, aprendizaje global, educación superior, COIL, inclusión educativa, internacionalización.



INTRODUCTION

Contemporary higher education is undergoing a profound transformation, characterized by the increasing globalization of knowledge, the digitalization of educational processes, and the need to train professionals capable of operating in intercultural and multidisciplinary environments. In this context, global learning and virtual mobility are emerging as key strategies for promoting the internationalization of higher education, overcoming geographical, economic, and social barriers that have traditionally limited student participation in international programs.

Virtual mobility, defined as the participation of students in international educational experiences through digital platforms and online collaborative projects, has become a strategic component for universities seeking to expand their global reach and strengthen intercultural and professional skills (Ruiz-Corbella & Álvarez-González, 2014; Sabzalieva et al., 2022).

Virtual mobility programs allow students to interact with peers and faculty from diverse cultural backgrounds, share collaborative projects, and access international experiences without the need for physical relocation. This approach not only democratizes international education but also fosters inclusion, equity, and a more diverse educational experience, integrating global perspectives into students' academic training (Ruiz-Corbella & Álvarez-González, 2014). Furthermore, recent research indicates that international cooperation models through virtual mobility strengthen strategic alliances between universities, generating synergies that extend beyond simple student participation and contribute to the consolidation of joint research and training programs (Enkhtur et al., 2024).

The implementation of these initiatives has become especially relevant in the post-pandemic context, where the disruption of physical mobility forced institutions to adopt digital alternatives to maintain educational continuity and the internationalization of their programs. The study by Sabzalieva et al. (2022) shows that virtual mobility not only overcame the logistical limitations imposed by the pandemic but also opened opportunities to design more flexible, accessible, and sustainable educational experiences in the long term. Similarly, recent literature on Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) highlights the importance of structuring virtual collaborative experiences that integrate clear academic objectives, participatory methodologies, and appropriate assessment mechanisms to ensure the effectiveness of intercultural learning (Yuk Chan, 2025).

Global learning through virtual mobility also aligns with emerging trends in higher education, which emphasize the integration of technological tools, interdisciplinary approaches, and 21st-century skills. For example, the use of digital platforms for collaborative international

projects allows students to develop intercultural communication skills, remote teamwork, critical thinking, and complex problem-solving abilities, complementing traditional academic training and preparing graduates for increasingly globalized work environments (León-González & Pire-Rojas, 2025). Similarly, initiatives such as those promoted by Erasmus+ in Europe have documented implementation guides for blended mobility that combine face-to-face and virtual experiences, demonstrating how hybrid programs strengthen active learning and transnational cooperation (European Commission, 2022).

However, virtual mobility also faces significant challenges that require attention. These include the digital divide, differences in curriculum frameworks, the need for teacher training in digital pedagogies, and the creation of inclusive and culturally sensitive virtual environments (Sabzalieva et al., 2022; Yuk Chan, 2025). These challenges underscore the importance of designing virtual mobility programs with sound pedagogical strategies, institutional support, and continuous evaluation to maximize the benefits of digital internationalization and ensure meaningful learning experiences for all students.

Within this framework, this article proposes a comprehensive exploration of the opportunities and challenges of virtual mobility in collaborative international projects, considering implementation experiences, best practices, and pedagogical approaches that promote effective global learning. It seeks to create an overview that links recent academic research, educational policy guidelines, and case studies on international higher education programs, with the aim of providing applicable recommendations for institutions wishing to strengthen their internationalization initiatives through virtual learning.

The objective of the article was to analyze how virtual mobility and international collaborative projects in higher education facilitate global learning, identifying effective strategies, challenges and good practices that allow the design of inclusive, sustainable and high-impact educational experiences for students and universities.

METHODOLOGY

This article was developed using a qualitative-descriptive approach, combining a literature review, document analysis, and case studies, with the aim of comprehensively understanding the practices, trends, and challenges associated with virtual mobility and global learning in higher education. The selection of sources included empirical research, systematic reviews, bibliometric analyses, institutional guidelines, and studies of mobility program implementation, which allow for the identification of patterns, best practices, and effective strategies for the digital internationalization of university programs.

A thematic analysis was conducted of more than twenty recent sources, encompassing literature published between 2014 and 2025, including research on Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), blended learning experiences Mobility, virtual exchanges, traditional and digital international mobility programs, as well as studies on inclusion and intercultural skills, are all considered. These sources include case studies from universities across different continents, analyses of student experiences, evaluations of digital learning platforms, and institutional guides such as the Erasmus+ Blended program guide mobility (European Commission, 2022).

The methodological process consisted of a detailed reading and systematization of the selected documents, identifying three central categories: a) design and management of virtual mobility programs, b) experiences and perceptions of students and faculty, and c) impacts on intercultural and global competencies. Within these categories, variables such as student participation, technological access, inclusion, program sustainability, and the effectiveness of collaborative learning environments were analyzed. This analysis provided a broad overview of how universities are adapting their internationalization programs through virtual and blended learning modalities.

Furthermore, results from bibliometric studies and systematic reviews were integrated to contextualize the expansion of virtual mobility globally and to identify emerging trends in digital higher education. Studies by Armellini et al. (2021); Chávez-Cárdenas et al. (2025); and Wang and Ghasemy (2025) provided information on active learning methodologies and digital tools, while research such as that by Enkhtur et al. (2024); Yuk Chan (2025); and Zhu et al. (2023) offered evidence of successful implementations of COIL programs and international partnerships. Meanwhile, studies by Collins et al. (2022); Davies- Vollum et al. (2024); and Sabzalieva et al. (2022) complemented the perspective on intercultural competencies, inclusion, and program sustainability.

The methodological analysis also considered the diversity of mobility modalities: in-person, hybrid, and fully virtual. This distinction allowed for an examination of the advantages and limitations of each modality, as well as the factors that influence program effectiveness and participant satisfaction. Special attention was paid to the technological, pedagogical, and administrative elements that facilitate the integration of international experiences in digital environments, as well as to the challenges related to access, teacher training, and curriculum adaptation.

The methodology employed combined a comprehensive literature review, thematic analysis, and representative case studies, with an integrative approach that allowed for the identification of best practices, challenges, and trends in the implementation of virtual mobility and

collaborative international projects. This approach provides a solid foundation for understanding how higher education can promote global, inclusive, and sustainable learning by leveraging the opportunities of digitalization and educational internationalization.

DEVELOPMENT

Virtual mobility and collaborative international projects are key tools for the internationalization of higher education, enabling institutions to expand their global reach and students to develop essential intercultural and professional skills. Recent literature indicates that online international collaboration models offer significant benefits for both students and universities. Enkhtur et al. (2024) highlight that virtual mobility programs foster strategic alliances between institutions, strengthening cooperation in research, curriculum innovation, and joint project design, thus contributing to the sustainability of international programs beyond physical mobility.

One of the main benefits of virtual mobility is its ability to democratize access to international experiences. Traditionally, participation in exchange programs was limited by economic, geographic, and logistical factors. However, virtual mobility initiatives allow students from diverse regions, including those from less privileged backgrounds, to participate in international collaborative projects without the need for physical relocation (Ruiz-Corbella & Álvarez-González, 2014). This approach not only broadens the diversity of participants but also fosters more inclusive, equitable, and global learning by enabling interaction among students with different cultural, academic, and professional perspectives.

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) programs have emerged as one of the most effective strategies for structuring these virtual experiences. According to Yuk Chan (2025), COIL programs integrate clear academic objectives, participatory methodologies, and formative assessment tools, ensuring that virtual collaboration is not merely a superficial exchange but a space for deep learning. For example, implementing COIL allows students to work on joint projects, solve real-world problems, and participate in intercultural debates, developing communication, critical thinking, and teamwork skills in virtual environments. When effectively designed, these programs generate a lasting impact on students' holistic development and strengthen universities' capacity to operate in a globalized educational context.

Integrating virtual mobility into higher education also requires considering technological and pedagogical aspects. The digital infrastructure must be robust and accessible to ensure that all students can participate effectively, while faculty need specific training in digital pedagogies and collaborative teaching methodologies (Sabzalieva et al., 2022). Furthermore, the learning experience must be culturally sensitive and promote

inclusion, preventing differences in language or socioeconomic background from becoming barriers to full participation. In this regard, the design of hybrid virtual experiences, such as those promoted by the Erasmus+ Blended program, is crucial. Mobility combines face-to-face activities with virtual components, optimizing interaction and active learning in international environments (European Commission, 2022).

Another relevant aspect is the capacity of virtual mobility to contribute to students' professional and personal development. León-González & Pire-Rojas (2025) argue that these experiences strengthen key 21st-century skills, such as intercultural intelligence, adaptability, and collaboration in digital environments. Furthermore, by participating in international projects, students learn to manage distributed teams, overcome cultural differences, and apply academic knowledge to real-world contexts—skills that are highly valued in the globalized job market.

However, the challenges are significant. The lack of standardization in virtual mobility programs, curricular differences between institutions, and the need for continuous evaluation of pedagogical effectiveness represent major obstacles (Sabzalieva et al., 2022; Yuk Chan, 2025). Overcoming these challenges requires establishing clear institutional policies, designing robust evaluation frameworks, and fostering a culture of collaboration among universities, faculty, and students. Furthermore, it is crucial to ensure the sustainability of these programs through long-term cooperation agreements, resource allocation, and adequate technological support (Enkhtur et al., 2024).

In this way, virtual mobility and collaborative international projects not only offer opportunities for educational internationalization, but also constitute inclusive, sustainable, and effective strategies for developing globally competent professionals. The combination of rigorous pedagogical design, adequate technological infrastructure, and strategic institutional collaboration allows virtual mobility programs to transcend physical and geographical limitations, establishing themselves as an essential component of higher education in the 21st century. Available empirical evidence and case studies underscore that virtual mobility, when implemented comprehensively and in a planned manner, has the potential to transform the university experience, promote equity, and prepare students to face the challenges of a globalized world.

This transformative potential of virtual mobility is not limited to mere technological connectivity, but depends on how learning experiences are designed and implemented, taking into account the opportunities and challenges students face in different international contexts. Global research shows that recent trends point toward an increase in hybrid and fully virtual programs that combine digital interaction with

structured collaborative experiences, adapting to diverse socioeconomic and cultural realities.

The effectiveness of these programs is linked to factors such as access to digital platforms, teachers' pedagogical preparation, and the institutional capacity to guarantee inclusive and equitable environments. Considering these dimensions, virtual mobility not only expands educational internationalization but also fosters intercultural skills, remote collaboration, and critical thinking, aligning with global trends that seek to prepare students to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and digital world.

Cheng et al. (2023) examine how digital platforms, such as Zoom, have transformed the student mobility experience during the pandemic, demonstrating that the virtualization of international education generates differentiated experiences depending on students' technological access and socioeconomic conditions. This research contributes a critical perspective to the article on how inequalities can influence the effectiveness of virtual mobility and the need to design inclusive experiences that consider the diversity of student contexts.

Davies-Vollum et al. (2024) highlight the capacity of virtual mobility to strengthen intercultural competencies and promote educational sustainability, showing that participation in collaborative international projects can develop communication skills, cultural empathy, and remote collaboration. Their study supports the article's central argument regarding the importance of designing virtual experiences that contribute to global learning and the holistic development of students.

Mammadova & Allen (2025) analyze the reconfiguration of global mobility in higher education, comparing traditional and virtual models of studying abroad. Their findings underscore how virtual learning allows for the maintenance of educational internationalization despite physical constraints, providing evidence of the flexibility and adaptability of virtual mobility programs in contemporary contexts.

Naicker et al. (2022) investigated the preparation and experiences of South African students in COIL programs, revealing that the effectiveness of virtual learning depends on prior training, the structuring of collaborative activities, and the integration of clear intercultural objectives. This study reinforces the need for pedagogical planning and institutional support in virtual mobility.

Wang & Ghasemy (2025) present a bibliometric analysis of virtual mobility, identifying emerging trends in the internationalization of education through digital tools. Their research provides a conceptual framework that contextualizes the expansion of virtual mobility globally and grounds the article in quantitative evidence regarding its growth and relevance.

In a complementary work, Mammadova & Allen (2024) explore the management of study abroad programs, both traditional and virtual, highlighting strategies for integrating hybrid experiences and improving institutional coordination. Their findings enrich the article by showing how universities can combine face-to-face and digital modalities to optimize international mobility programs.

Collins et al. (2022) document a virtual exchange project between the United States and Egypt, demonstrating that digital mobility transforms cultural perspectives and fosters collaboration in public health. This study provides a practical example of how collaborative international projects can generate a profound and tangible educational impact on the development of global competencies.

Chávez-Cárdenas et al. (2025) explore the integration of artificial intelligence and educational web tools in contemporary learning, demonstrating how technology can improve the virtual learning experience and facilitate personalized study. Their contribution to the article lies in showing the relationship between technological innovation and effective virtual mobility.

Zhu et al. (2023) present a participatory study on COIL in China during the pandemic, highlighting the importance of active participation, collaborative project design, and cultural mediation in virtual environments. This work supports the article by illustrating how COIL programs promote the internationalization of learning in a structured and meaningful way.

Roshid & Seraj (2023) analyze the response of higher education to international mobility during COVID-19, emphasizing institutional resilience and the need for rapid pedagogical adaptations. Their study provides evidence on how universities can use virtual learning to maintain the continuity of internationalization and academic collaboration.

Wang (2023) addresses the complex transitions of first-year international students in online and hybrid learning environments, highlighting the emotional and academic challenges. This source contributes to the article by underscoring the importance of designing virtual mobility experiences that consider adaptation, emotional support, and integration of students in digital international environments.

Dahlan et al. (2025) conducted a bibliometric analysis of global trends in student mobility and digitalization, highlighting patterns of inclusion and equity in international education. This study provides a global framework that supports the relevance of virtual mobility as an inclusive and sustainable internationalization strategy.

Meredith (2025) explores the combination of COIL and short study abroad experiences, demonstrating how hybrid mobility enhances intercultural communication and professional readiness. Her research provides the

article with practical evidence on the effectiveness of blended learning approaches in strengthening global competencies.

Armellini et al. (2021) analyze student perspectives in active and blended learning contexts, showing that combining face-to-face and digital modalities enhances engagement, autonomy, and collaboration. This study contributes to the article by demonstrating how hybrid pedagogical design can optimize the virtual mobility experience.

Finally, Enkhtur et al. (2024) present an effective international partnership model through virtual mobility, providing evidence of best practices in the planning and management of international collaborative programs. Their work supports the article with concrete examples of how to structure sustainable, high-impact educational strategic alliances.

Virtual mobility in higher education has proven to be a transformative tool for academic internationalization, enabling students from diverse cultural and geographical backgrounds to participate in global experiences without the need for physical relocation. These digital experiences not only facilitate access to international opportunities but also foster inclusion, equity, and diversity in learning by creating spaces for collaboration among students from different socioeconomic and academic environments.

Virtual programs and digital platforms have proven effective in strengthening intercultural competencies and key professional skills, such as communication, remote teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability in globalized contexts. Furthermore, the integration of collaborative methodologies, such as COIL projects, allows students to actively participate in the design and development of joint activities, promoting meaningful learning and a deeper understanding of diverse cultural perspectives.

The combination of hybrid learning modalities, integrating in-person and virtual experiences, has emerged as an optimal strategy for maximizing active learning and intercultural interaction. This approach allows students to experience both the dynamics of campus life and international collaboration, enhancing their autonomy, engagement, and holistic development of professional skills.

Institutional planning and faculty preparation are key factors for the success of virtual mobility. Training in digital pedagogies, the clear structuring of academic objectives, and the implementation of support strategies help students fully benefit from virtual learning opportunities. Furthermore, technological innovation, including artificial intelligence and educational web platforms, expands the possibilities for personalizing, monitoring, and adapting learning to students' individual needs.

Finally, empirical evidence suggests that virtual mobility programs generate sustainable impacts for both students and universities by strengthening international strategic alliances, fostering institutional resilience, and promoting more flexible and accessible educational models. The combination of sound pedagogical practices, adequate technological infrastructure, and inter-institutional collaboration ensures that these experiences effectively contribute to the academic, professional, and cultural development of participants.

CONCLUSIONS

Virtual mobility and collaborative international projects are becoming essential strategies for the internationalization of higher education, offering more inclusive, accessible, and sustainable global learning experiences. These modalities allow students from diverse regions and backgrounds to participate in international collaborative environments, developing intercultural competencies, communication skills, academic autonomy, and critical thinking, without the logistical limitations traditionally imposed by physical mobility.

The use of collaborative methodologies, such as COIL programs and hybrid learning experiences, demonstrates that virtual environments can generate deep and meaningful learning when combined with a structured pedagogical design, clear objectives, and institutional support. The integration of educational technology and digital tools, including collaboration platforms and artificial intelligence applications, optimizes interaction, facilitates personalized learning, and strengthens students' ability to work in global teams.

Despite its benefits, virtual mobility faces significant challenges, including the digital divide, the need for teachers to adapt their teaching methods, cultural diversity, and the need to ensure equitable and high-quality experiences. Overcoming these limitations requires institutional planning, international coordination, and the development of policies that support innovation, sustainability, and resilience in virtual mobility programs.

Borderless higher education, supported by virtual mobility and international collaborative projects, represents a strategic opportunity to train globally competent professionals, promote inclusion, and strengthen inter-institutional cooperation. Its proper implementation not only broadens the scope of educational internationalization but also transforms the learning experience, preparing students to face the challenges of a globalized and digital world.

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Conflicts of Interest:

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Author Contributions:

Esmail Sadri-Damirchi: Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, supervision, validation, visualization, original draft writing, and writing, review, and editing.

Ethical statement:

The study was based on the analysis of documentary sources and publicly available data, and therefore did not involve the direct participation of human subjects. No personally identifiable information was handled.