

## Book Review

O'Dowd, R. (2023). *Internationalising higher education and the role of virtual exchange*. Routledge. 164 pp. \$40.45 (paperback/ebook), \$144.00 (hardback) ISBN 9781032419213.

**This article was not written with the assistance of any Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, including ChatGPT or other support technologies.**

In *Internationalising Higher Education and the Role of Virtual Exchange*, Robert O'Dowd presents an introduction and overview of virtual exchange (VE) and some of the ways in which it is being implemented in various contexts. O'Dowd's core arguments center around how to conceptualize VE and the ways in which it can be applied to broader internationalization efforts. He presents strong backing for most of his arguments and meaningfully contributes to the ongoing discussions surrounding how VE and internationalization relate in theory and practice. The volume is written "with a rather wide range of readers in mind" (p. 5), and we feel that it would be of significant interest to faculty, administrators, and researchers engaged in virtual exchange work. While a majority of the examples mentioned are centered in Europe, we feel that the book would be equally relevant in other contexts. Though prior knowledge of virtual exchange would certainly benefit readers in understanding O'Dowd's core propositions, the book could feasibly serve as an acceptable, if somewhat advanced, introduction to virtual exchange.

**Chapter 1** situates the book within the current global context of the post-pandemic period. O'Dowd pays specific attention to the changing sentiment regarding online initiatives as meaningful contributions to comprehensive internationalization. He follows by highlighting the intended audience and lays out the structure of the book. This book is written with a broad audience in mind, but those who have prior experience working with VE or familiarity with global education scholarship will find it most accessible.

**Chapter 2** tackles the subject of defining terms. As many readers will know, a "huge range of terminology... is used to talk about online international education" (p. 8). O'Dowd presents a sampling of the various terminologies used and highlights the further complication of siloed academic disciplines (p. 9). After acknowledging the criticisms of the term "virtual exchange" from Colpaert (2020) and others, the author defends the term, elevating VE as "the most appropriate term to use in this area" when comparing it with the multitudinous list of alternatives (p. 10). O'Dowd proposes his own definition of VE and proceeds to ground the definition in theory, contrasting it with other terms, and concludes the chapter by exploring the theoretical rationale for the appropriateness of the term.

**Chapter 3** zooms out from the terminology discussion to explore how VE can be understood as having a meaningful role within internationalization. The chapter is a greatest-hits of advocacy for VE, including how VE complements physical mobility, enhances internationalization at Home (IaH) initiatives, and supports global citizenship education. A significant portion of the chapter is spent examining global citizenship, a subject of previous works by the author (pp. 48-64).

**Chapter 4** attempts to parse order from chaos, directly addressing the confusion of terminology by moving beyond O'Dowd's earlier VE definition and proposing a framework by which to categorize the various approaches, methods, pedagogies, etc. The author proposes a number of broad *configurations* of virtual exchange under which many *models* may

exist (p. 69). The chapter continues by exploring each of the *configurations* and some of their component *models*, ending with a rationale for the framework.

**Chapter 5** shifts from the discussion of VE's place within internationalization and moves toward exploring the impact of VE, specifically through learning outcomes. The author addresses the common misconception that there is little evidence of VE's impact on learning outcomes, drawing on several publications as examples. Evidence is used to defend claims made regarding VE's strong contribution to learning. The chapter concludes with a short section on the limitations of current VE research as it pertains to learning outcomes.

**Chapter 6** "outlines the key practices in VE methodology" (p. 117), beginning with ways of integrating VE into other models and concluding this with suggestions linked to various pedagogical considerations. This chapter focuses on instructional approaches more than administrative structures.

The penultimate **Chapter 7** fills the gap from the previous chapter and explores how international offices engage in VE through administrative efforts. This is presented primarily as support of faculty, and O'Dowd identifies key factors which influence the success of institutionalizing VE for and through alignment with the internationalization strategy (p. 131). The second half of the chapter discusses these factors, and the approaches administrators can take to make VE more influential at their institutions.

Finally, **Chapter 8** looks toward the future of VE, proposing an understanding of VE into the next decade (p. 146). A "framework for Virtual Exchange within higher education" is presented (p. 141), followed by a short discussion on some of VE's limitations. O'Dowd ends by proposing topics for future research and highlighting some of the key arguments from earlier in the book.

The book is an important continuation of the scholarly discussions around VE, and O'Dowd once again demonstrates his vast experience as both a researcher and practitioner. He clearly states his arguments and backs them up with strong sources, proposes new ideas, and looks optimistically into the future.

## Terminology

O'Dowd's proposed definition and classification scheme are core pieces of the book and will undoubtedly be points of discussion among researchers and practitioners alike. Though some may argue that terminology is of less importance than the work itself, the ways in which the field speaks about and understands VE will surely drive its ongoing development, and so it is worthy of vigorous scholarly examination and discussion. Early in the book, O'Dowd proposes the following definition:

Virtual exchange is an umbrella term which refers to the numerous online learning initiatives and methodologies which engage learners in sustained online collaborative learning and interaction with partners from different cultural backgrounds as part of their study programs and under the guidance of teachers or trained facilitators (p. 11).

This proposed definition moves away from the use of "technology" in favor of "online," an essential revision of currently-used definitions, as nearly all education is facilitated at some level by technology, while the use of "online" critically seats VE as a distance-learning approach. Perhaps in an attempt to validate VE as an umbrella term, O'Dowd adds the phrase "collaborative learning", which is notably absent from the other definitions cited. This muddies the distinction between "exchange" and "collaboration", which goes beyond simple semantics, as certainly, there are forms of exchange that are not collaborative. Overall, O'Dowd's proposed definition of VE is a notable step forward in understanding some of the commonalities across the many approaches, pedagogies, and models. It is not likely to be the end of the discussion, and future researchers may argue for a further honed expression of VE as an umbrella term.

Following the definition proposal, O'Dowd moves on to propose a classification scheme in which the many *models* of VE are organized within a smaller number of *configurations*. As anyone even fleetingly familiar with VE will know, there is a great deal of confusion around terms, even within individual institutions actively engaging in VE. Unfortunately, O'Dowd's proposed classification scheme introduces a host of new terms that will be unfamiliar to anyone outside of readers of this book, which significantly reduces the scheme's likelihood of widespread impact. Beyond the new terms, the ways in which the many *configurations* and *models* are organized leave room for confusion, as it is unclear how individual programs or courses should be categorized if they span multiple *configurations* or *models*. For example, a major number of

*configurations* are disciplinary. When an engineering Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) course is run, is it COIL, situated under the “Class to Class VE” *configuration*, or is it a part of the “Virtual Exchange in STEM” *configuration*? Some of these distinctions may admittedly only be frustrating for researchers and less so in day-to-day practice, but when taken as a whole, they indicate an opportunity for significant revision of the core concept.

### **Blended Mobility**

This volume draws attention to an emerging and under-researched area of higher education internationalization referred to as “blended mobility,” which “combine[s] activities of both VE and VM with physical mobility” (p. 18). O’Dowd’s careful survey of this area brings to light the few sources that refer to such practices. While he is optimistic about the possibilities for blended mobility, two of his critiques of such programs highlight the “short-term” nature of international travel. This may lead one to wonder whether it is the duration of the period abroad more so than the blended mode of learning with which he has concerns. He writes that, “... the learning outcomes of short-term physical mobility need further exploration” and that, “It is also necessary to consider the negative climate impact of short-term international travel” (p. 19). He later compares VE to semester or year-long study abroad and writes “Those of us who have benefited from an extended (six–nine month) period of study abroad will be very aware of the rich learning experience provided by studying and living in a foreign culture...The suggestion that 25-40 hours of online collaboration can hope to achieve the same impact is simply not realistic” (p. 45). He also writes that discussions of whether VE can replace study abroad programs is a “false debate” (p. 46). Further research would be welcome to understand better how students perceive the value of these programs. Some students may be making such comparisons and calculations. It would be easy to imagine, however, that students considering a blended mobility program (as part of a short-term study abroad program) would be comparing it not to a semester abroad but to another short-term study abroad program. Therefore, it may be more useful to compare the outcomes of blended mobility programs to the outcomes of short-term study abroad programs or VE (the two components which typically make up a blended program) rather than comparing them to semester-length study abroad programs. While O’Dowd argues convincingly that VE on its own should not be viewed as comparable to physical mobility, it may be useful to compare blended programs to short-term programs that lack VE so that educators can understand what value may be added to joining the two experiences.

Another key facet of O’Dowd’s discussion of blended programs is to underscore the necessity of providing academic recognition to students who participate in such programs in a way that includes both the students who travel and the ones who remain in-country after the virtual exchange. He writes that “this recognition should be for *all students* who participate in the blended programme—including those who are studying in the ‘receiving institution’ and not only those who travel from abroad to take part in the physical stage of the programme” (p. 140, added emphasis). More attention to how this can factor into program design would have been welcome.

### **Critiques of VE**

#### ***Technological Access***

The book neglects to cover the many critiques of VE and the associated approaches with the depth that one might hope for. While some concerns and limitations are noted throughout, O’Dowd mentions them almost dismissively in some places. For instance, VE approaches are often lauded as excellent interventions for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). However, O’Dowd spends little time addressing the DEI barriers present within virtual models, such as access to technology, which is a fundamental and inescapable requirement for participation. VE is an exciting approach to global learning, but an honest acknowledgment of its shortcomings and challenges is essential for its ongoing development and refinement.

#### ***Other Access Issues***

O’Dowd highlights other potential areas that could affect access in relation to VE. He cites Bali and Meier (2014), who recommend caution around the exclusive use of synchronous video interactions because of issues with time zones, holidays, family obligations, and language, which advantage native speakers in live discussions. Asynchronous communication can allow for flexibility in timing and has the advantage of allowing students to confer with others, to develop their ideas, and time to review spelling and grammar. It is also suitable for students with limited internet bandwidth. In addition, O’Dowd cautions those engaging in VE to be cognizant of the language in which it is conducted. O’Dowd

draws attention to the ways in which VE carries cultural assumptions and educational goals that may not translate into all global academic settings. He cites his previous work with Beelen (2021), in which they observe that "...VE is based on the principles of collaborative learning which may not be suited to all students and which teachers may not be familiar with" (p. 142). Issues of access in VE are increasingly evidenced in research, such as in Huang's (2022) findings with Chinese and American students engaged in COIL. In that case, access was a primary concern when deciding on which digital tools to utilize (p.16).

### ***Decolonizing Higher Education Internationalization***

O'Dowd's focus on technological, linguistic, and socio-cultural access are a key contribution of this volume. One would wish to see these themes drawn out further and used as a foundation for exploring ways in which VE and blended mobility can be truly integral in the next stages of the internationalization of higher education. Jones (2022) writes that "Equality, diversity and inclusion, social justice, decolonization, global power relations and geopolitics, human rights, anti-racism, gender identity and equality, ethics, multiculturalism, and sustainability are just some of the related elements which all have a role to play in broadening our understanding of internationalization" (2022, p. ii). O'Dowd's attention to the technological, linguistic, and socio-cultural needs of all students is important, as is his declaration that students on both sides of the exchange deserve recognition. How to go about understanding and assessing those needs is paramount. Further, how do educators move beyond meeting basic requirements to develop programs that will engage students on both sides of the exchange in terms of their goals, whether related to academics, language learning, cultural skills, or professional knowledge? An excellent example of an approach to these questions is Wofford College's utilization of the Digital Humanities participatory pedagogy (Dorroll et. al., 2019).

### **Contributions to the Field of Comparative and International Higher Education**

O'Dowd's volume makes several contributions to the field of comparative and international higher education. It brings together a wide array of terminology and provides definitions and structure to foster usage of such terms going forward. His work to provide models and configurations is a step toward elucidating the wide range of VE practices. O'Dowd's decision to use "online" rather than "technology" is another pivot that helps to reframe the way we understand the field by shifting the focus from the tools we use to the environment in which the encounters occur. The book also brings together key sources and highlights gaps in the literature.

### **Conclusion**

This book skillfully synthesizes a wide array of literature encompassing VE and the many related areas. O'Dowd's command of the history and research in VE is a significant strength of the book. This volume will prove helpful to novices and experienced researchers and practitioners alike. Newcomers will find clearly defined terms, models to draw upon, and summaries of good practices. Those with more experience will benefit from reading comprehensive and carefully articulated syntheses of research on VE and adjacent fields.

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