



The Capability Approach in Intercultural Virtual Exchange: Investigating Potential Capabilities and Functionings. A Case Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate whether Virtual Exchange promotes social justice globally by equipping its participants with new capabilities and opportunities. Virtual Exchange is considered here as a representative form of intercultural education, and this study constitutes the first attempt to apply the Capability Approach to assess its outcomes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten alumni from different countries to explore what new capabilities they gained through this experience, what new goals (functionings) they developed, and whether their awareness of global social justice issues increased. Thematic analysis of the collected data revealed four main themes related to capabilities: cultural awareness, connections with people met through the programme, communication skills, and personal development. An additional theme also emerged regarding the restrictions on capabilities. Three themes related to functionings were identified: further education, involvement in the organisational aspects of intercultural education programmes, and the expansion of personal horizons through applications to other projects and scholarships or considering moving abroad. Most participants reported that the Virtual Exchange experience increased their awareness of global social justice issues, however, they did not share any concrete actions taken, suggesting that the impact was largely theoretical. The study concludes that Virtual Exchange holds potential as a tool for promoting global social justice by fostering the development of capabilities and functionings. However, further research is needed to determine whether this increased awareness translates into sustained action and to address the limitations of the present study.

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Introduction

Today's world is defined by the growth in the breadth, intensity, speed, and impact of worldwide interconnectedness, a process known as globalisation (Held et al., 2000). Indeed, every region in the world now depends on another significant region for at least 25 per cent of its most valued resource flow (White, 2023). Interestingly, however, although globalisation was once centred on trade, it is now increasingly driven by the movement of knowledge, data, and people across borders – flows that are growing even faster than those of goods today (White, 2023). This transformation has made it essential for people from different cultures to interact and work together (Aririguzoh, 2022).

Given this growing necessity for cross-cultural interaction, the importance of culture has become widely acknowledged. The United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), designed to promote peace and prosperity for both people and the planet, explicitly acknowledge the pivotal role of culture in shaping sustainable futures (United Nations, n.d.-b). In particular, SDG target 4.7 on Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship commits that, by 2030, learners should gain the knowledge and skills necessary to foster sustainable development, including an 'appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development' (United Nations, n.d.-a). Building on this global recognition, UNESCO has also identified culture as a key driver of development and will convene the world's largest cultural policy conference in September 2025 under the motto 'Unleashing the power of culture to achieve sustainable development' (UNESCO, n.d.).

Scholarly research supports this recognition of culture's significance, noting that as exchanges between different cultural groups became inevitable, intercultural communication has attracted growing interest from academics (Iheanacho, 2016). Researchers emphasise that the foundation of intercultural communication lies in recognising the diversity of cultural values, as well as in the human need for meaningful exchange of cultural and educational information (Kablova et al., 2021). It has also been observed that as countries and individuals become more globalised, they increasingly adopt broader perspectives, shifting towards more global concerns –

a trend that can be beneficial for the provision of global public goods (Buchan et al., 2009).

The field of education has also been profoundly shaped by globalisation, which increasingly drives cooperation, exchange, and integration on a worldwide scale (Li, 2025). This dynamic further underscores the importance of intercultural education. Closely interconnected, the globalisation of education and intercultural education reinforce each other's development. (Li, 2025). While globalisation of education broadens access to multicultural resources and provides the foundation for intercultural learning, intercultural education in turn strengthens globalisation by cultivating global awareness and enhancing communication across cultures (Li, 2025).

Intercultural education plays a crucial role in promoting tolerance, peace, and respect, fostering cultural pluralism, and affirming the inherent value of every person regardless of ethnic background (Bećirović & Polz, 2024). Importantly, it moves beyond the simple recognition of cultural differences to actively pursue social justice, challenge cultural dominance, and address power imbalances (Tochon & Karaman, 2009; Zachos, 2024). Through its theoretical frameworks and practical applications, intercultural education seeks to dismantle structural barriers that perpetuate inequality, thereby contributing to a more just and inclusive global society (Zachos, 2024).

Learners gain deeper intercultural knowledge and more positive attitudes when they study culture in authentic contexts and exchange information with representatives of the target culture (Shadiev et al., 2024). For this reason, one of the most effective means of intercultural education is international mobility (El-Asri & El Karfa, 2024; Sobkowiak, 2019; Tarchi & Surian, 2022). Universities have been promoting studyabroad programmes for decades (Tarchi & Surian, 2022), and governments have likewise invested in mobility initiatives. For instance, over 15 million people have participated in Erasmus+ Learning Mobility projects over the past 37 years (Erasmus +, 2024), including university exchanges and non-formal educational programmes. However, a key issue with such programmes is that they remain inaccessible for the vast majority of students. On average, less than 2% of students worldwide take part in

an exchange abroad (Chia et al., 2008). The main barriers include high programme costs, which are beyond the means of most students, as well as language obstacles and safety concerns (Chia et al., 2008; Wanger et al., 2020). Visa restrictions are also a significant deterrent for many who consider studying abroad (Gutema et al., 2024).

The situation, however, varies significantly across different parts of the world – a reality the author experienced firsthand as a representative of a developing country while volunteering with an international organisation in Europe, where the differences became especially evident. In the EU, where Erasmus+ supports mobility and visas are not required, the proportion of students participating in international mobility is five times higher than the global average (Eurostat, 2024). Moreover, there are substantially more intercultural programmes available to citizens of developed countries. For instance, of the 1,355 European Solidarity Corps projects, 933 are accessible to participants from Belgium, while only 161 are open to those from Armenia and 65 to those from Russia (European Union, n.d.-b).

Virtual Exchange (VE) has been promoted as one way to reduce these barriers and provide opportunities for learners worldwide (Chia et al., 2008). VE is a pedagogical approach in which students engage in extended, facilitated online intercultural collaboration with peers from other cultural contexts (O'Dowd, 2020). Research has shown it to be effective in equipping students with intercultural competence, including the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for meaningful engagement across cultures (Commander et al., 2022; Heymans et al., 2024).

Despite the growing body of scholarship on VE (Alami et al., 2022; Hauck, 2023; Kelly & Medeiros, 2021), the discourse on social justice within this field remains in its early stages. The concept of Critical Virtual Exchange (Hauck, 2023) was introduced to address issues of accessibility and equity, yet little research has examined the extent to which VE contributes to global social justice by equipping participants with new capabilities that support their future opportunities and well-being.

The aim of this research is to bridge this gap by examining whether VE expands participants' capabilities, opens up new opportunities, and fosters greater awareness of social justice issues.

To achieve this goal, the study adopts the Capability Approach as its guiding theoretical framework (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). Although not originally conceived for educational contexts, the Capability Approach has since been widely applied in the educational field (Saito, 2003). It conceptualises education both as a goal in itself and as a means to achieving other valuable outcomes (Robeyns, 2006a; Saito, 2003). Within the context of VE, this perspective frames intercultural learning not merely as the acquisition of skills but as the expansion of personal capabilities and the pursuit of new functionings.

To investigate whether participants acquire new capabilities and functionings through VE, interviews were conducted with ten alumni from diverse programmes. The interviewees were invited to reflect on how the experience of VE had influenced their lives. A thematic analysis of the interviews revealed four core capabilities and three principal functionings gained by participants. The analysis also highlighted factors that may hinder the development of these capabilities and functionings, alongside insights into how participants' perceptions of social justice evolved through their VE experiences.

This research is significant for several reasons. Academically, it is the first study to apply the Capability Approach to the study of Virtual Exchange, allowing an assessment not only of the accessibility of such programmes but also of their contribution to global social justice through the provision of new capabilities and opportunities (functionings). It also illuminates the extent to which participants develop greater awareness of social justice issues – an essential step in fostering global citizenship. Practically, if VE is demonstrated to be effective, it has the potential to attract greater attention from institutions currently focused exclusively on offline programmes, encouraging them to expand their offerings. While identifying suitable programmes for this study, the researcher observed considerable interest among organisations in the outcomes, suggesting strong potential for wider adoption. Finally, the findings may help to engage policymakers, leading to increased financial support for VE and thereby enabling more people to benefit from what participants themselves described as a 'lifechanging' experience.

The structure of this dissertation is as follows. Chapter 1 (Literature Review) examines the foundational and multifaceted concepts of 'culture' and 'intercultural education,' situating Virtual Exchange within the broader landscape of intercultural education programmes. It also reviews applications of the Capability Approach in other educational contexts to clarify its relevance and concludes by presenting the research questions that guide this study. Chapter 2 (Research Design and Methodology) presents the research design, beginning with the underlying paradigm and its influence on the methodological approach, and then detailing the procedures and techniques applied. Chapter 3 (Findings and Discussion) addresses each research question through evidence drawn from participants, supported by direct quotations, and relates the findings to existing scholarship. Finally, Conclusion synthesises the overall research endeavour and provides recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

Human history is increasingly a race between intercultural education and disaster.

(Coulby, 2006, p. 245),

This literature review begins by examining the concept of culture and its evolution as a key element of intercultural education. It then explains what intercultural education is, its different forms, and how it aims to achieve intercultural competence. The review goes on to focus more specifically on Virtual Exchange as one of the formats of intercultural education, as well as on social justice issues related to it. Although social justice in intercultural education is an emerging topic with some initial research primarily addressing accessibility to the exchanges themselves, there remains a significant gap in understanding how Virtual Exchange promotes the practice of social justice by enhancing the capabilities of participating students. The researcher believes that gaining such insights would be highly valuable for developing future Virtual Exchange programmes. Therefore, the Capability Approach framework is proposed as a lens to examine the outcomes of Virtual Exchange, specifically to identify any new capabilities and functionings gained by students, as well as any shifts in their perspectives on social justice following their participation.

The Concept of Culture

The rapid advancement of technology has significantly accelerated global interconnectedness and the exchange of knowledge, services, and goods, positioning the XXI century as the era of globalisation (C.R., 2013). Recent research suggests that globalisation is not only an enduring phenomenon but is also evolving in form, marked by the increasing dominance of knowledge flows, international services, and student mobility over the trade of physical goods (White, 2023). Importantly, globalisation does not imply homogenisation but instead highlights the need to foster open and respectful intercultural dialogue and promote deeper intercultural understanding

(Rapanta & Trovão, 2021). In this context, the ability to recognise cultural differences and expand one's own cultural awareness has become crucial in today's interconnected world (Shadiev et al., 2024).

Intercultural education is a relatively young and evolving discipline, with the term first formally introduced in Europe in 1983 (Rapanta & Trovão, 2021). It has emerged in response to the large-scale migration brought about by globalisation (Lourenço, 2018) at the intersection of education, psychology, anthropology, and other fields that engage with the concept of culture (Jumaev, 2020). Owing to its interdisciplinary nature and its engagement with continually evolving concepts, the field encompasses a rich diversity of perspectives and interpretations. This diversity, while enriching, can present challenges for researchers, particularly in defining core concepts and developing shared theoretical frameworks. At the centre of these complexities lies the concept of culture itself: fundamental to the field yet frequently contested and interpreted in multiple ways.

The term has long been subject to scholarly scrutiny. For example, a critical review conducted in the mid-20th century identified 164 definitions of culture (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952), illustrating the breadth and complexity of the concept. Since then, the understanding of culture has continued to evolve, shaped both by historical developments and disciplinary paradigms.

One of the earliest and most enduring definitions of culture, which can still be encountered in educational literature (Naomi Kipuri, 2011), was articulated by the anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1871). According to him, 'Culture ... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society' (Tylor, 1871, p. 1). In contrast, a more recent definition, offered by the American Psychological Association (2023), defines culture as the transmission of 'values, beliefs, language, rituals, traditions and other behaviors ... from one generation to another within any social group'. A significant distinction between these definitions lies in the conceptual shift from culture as an individual attribute, as implied in Tylor's formulation, to a collective construct in the APA's definition.

This transformation reflects a broader trend in contemporary scholarship, which increasingly frames culture as a collective phenomenon (Hofstede, 2011; Jumaev, 2020). Furthermore, scholars argue that the more classical understanding of culture as national or ethnic concept yields to another, more dynamic definition (Jumaev, 2020). In this reconceptualisation, culture is not confined to ethnic boundaries but is instead applicable to a wide range of social groups (Jumaev, 2020), including organisations, gender identities, and even occupational affiliations (Conti, 2025; Hofstede, 2011). In this context, societal cultures may be defined as ‘...broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over the others’ (Hofstede, 2011, p. 3). At the same time, certain types of culture, such as national or societal, root much deeper when the others, as they are acquired from childhood and thus shape fundamental patterns of thought and behaviour (Hofstede, 2011).

Some researchers also distinguish approaches to culture at the epistemological level (Conti, 2025). The perspective that views culture as dynamic and shaped by individuals and their interactions aligns with constructivism, while the essentialist view considers culture as fixed, possessing stable and inherent characteristics (Conti, 2025). This study adopts a constructivist approach, emphasising that for those engaged in active intercultural communication and cooperation, it is essential to recognise culture not as a fixed entity but as a dynamic and continuously evolving phenomenon, shaped by the lived experiences and interactions of diverse individuals.

Therefore, this research embraces the notion of culture as a social construct, understood as ‘historical, local, national, regional, diasporic and global processes that work back and forth, and dynamically, in human society to create complex understandings of culture more generally’ (Holmes et al., 2015, p. 18). Building on this complex definition, the study now addresses the concept of intercultural education.

Intercultural Education

According to the Council of Europe (2018, p. 27), intercultural education today refers to

‘a pedagogy – aims, content, learning processes, teaching methods, syllabus and materials, and assessment – of which one purpose is to develop intercultural competence in learners of all ages in all types of education as a foundation for dialogue and living together’. Unsurprisingly, there is no unified view on intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). In fact, there is not even a unified term, as it is sometimes referred to as cross-cultural competence, global competence, or global citizenship (Deardorff, 2006).

A broader conceptualisation defines intercultural competence as ‘how understanding one’s own and other cultures can lead to more effective action across cultures’ (Bennett & Castiglioni, 2004, p. 251). A more specific definition is the ‘awareness, valuing, and understanding of cultural differences; experiencing other cultures; and self-awareness of one own’s culture’ and ‘ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situation’ based on it’ (Deardorff, 2006, p. 247).

Some researchers do not address intercultural competence at all and instead present the outcome of intercultural education as a list of goals such as: ‘gain greater selfawareness (main goal); provide cultural, ethnic, and language alternatives; acquire skills, attitudes and knowledge; reduce pain and discrimination; help students to acquire the reading, writing, and math skills needed to function in a global technological world; promote global citizenship’ (Banks, 2014). Others highlight the importance of ‘feeling’ both one’s own and other cultures in both physical and metaphorical ways to overcome ethnocentrism in favour of cultural awareness (Bennett & Castiglioni, 2004).

Scholars agree on one thing: the outcome of intercultural education is too complex, and narrowing it down to only one component, for example knowledge, is not enough for gaining intercultural competence (Bennett & Castiglioni, 2004; Deardorff, 2006; Shadiev et al., 2024). Acquiring intercultural competence is a progressive and iterative process that comprises two key components: cross-cultural learning, which involves gaining knowledge, developing relevant skills, and shifting attitudes, and cross-cultural communication, where this learning is translated into practice through intercultural interaction (Council of Europe, 2018; Shadiev et al., 2024).

Intercultural competence can be developed in various ways and through different educational forms. In informal education, it is cultivated through both deliberate and incidental interactions with parents, peers, journalists, and others (Council of Europe, 2018). Non-formal intercultural education typically takes the form of pedagogical trainings and programmes offered by NGOs, local communities, or adult education providers (Council of Europe, 2018). In formal education, the intercultural component is integrated into either the explicit curriculum or the 'hidden' curriculum (Council of Europe, 2018).

Like many other educational initiatives, intercultural education has expanded into the online format (Kumi-Yeboah, 2019), where it is delivered through a variety of formats. For example, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which primarily focus on the business sector (National University of Singapore, n.d.; The London School of Economics and Political Science, n.d.) often engage thousands of students. Some intercultural programmes are implemented using social media (Xiangping Cui et al., 2024), while others include VR experience and AI-based technologies as part of the online learning (Shadiev et al., 2024). However, one of the most popular formats of online intercultural education is Virtual Exchange.

Virtual Exchange

One of the comprehensive definitions of Virtual Exchange (VE) describes it as a 'pedagogical approach which involves the engagement of groups of learners in extended periods of online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programmes and under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators' (O'Dowd, 2020, p. 478).

A closer examination of this definition reveals several essential features of VE. Firstly, it is always a deliberate educational activity, taking place within either formal or nonformal learning environments. That means, that it has defined learning objectives, a structured programme, and is facilitated by trained educators or professionals.

Secondly, it is inherently collaborative and group-based, involving participants from at least two different geographic locations, typically different countries. Thirdly, VE is not a one-off interaction, but a time-extended process. Finally, VE is conducted entirely online, making it fully remote.

According to the European Union (n.d.-a), several key characteristics distinguish VE from other forms of online education. Most importantly, the emphasis shifts from content delivery to meaningful people-to-people interaction (European Union, n.d.-a). Programmes are learner-led, meaning participants are encouraged to co-construct knowledge through shared experiences (European Union, n.d.-a). Moreover, educational goals include soft skills, which are not usually formalised, such as intercultural awareness or team work (European Union, n.d.-a). Finally, VE is grounded in the understanding that intercultural understanding does not develop automatically through contact between different cultures, that is why virtual exchange programmes explicitly foster intercultural awareness and engagement with cultural difference (European Union, n.d.-a).

Research mainly proves VE to be effective. Scholars demonstrate positive attitude changes towards people from different cultures (Chia et al., 2008), greater understanding of cultural diversity and tolerance (Leh et al., 2015; Swartz & Shrivastava, 2022; Ullah & Murad, 2016), improved self-awareness (Syahrin et al., 2023; Ullah & Murad, 2016) and, probably most importantly, deepening connection and the desire for further intercultural communication (Chia et al., 2008; Leh et al., 2015).

However, researchers also report a number of difficulties. For example, one study found that interaction confidence and engagement actually decreased by the end of the exchange (Swartz & Shrivastava, 2022). The researchers attribute this to the fact that students tend to overrate their intercultural competencies before they actually experience life simulation exercises (Swartz & Shrivastava, 2022). They can then discover their limitations in knowledge and skills and experience frustration (Swartz & Shrivastava, 2022).

Other reported difficulties include, for example, different time zones and schedules, language barriers, technical issues, differing expectations, and a lack of commitment (Swartz et al., 2020). It can be concluded that while the online format facilitates easier connection between participants across distances, it still lacks the spontaneity and relational depth that often characterise face-to-face intercultural interactions. These limitations highlight the need for carefully designed pedagogical support to foster meaningful engagement and overcome barriers in Virtual Exchange settings.

Virtual Exchange and Social Justice

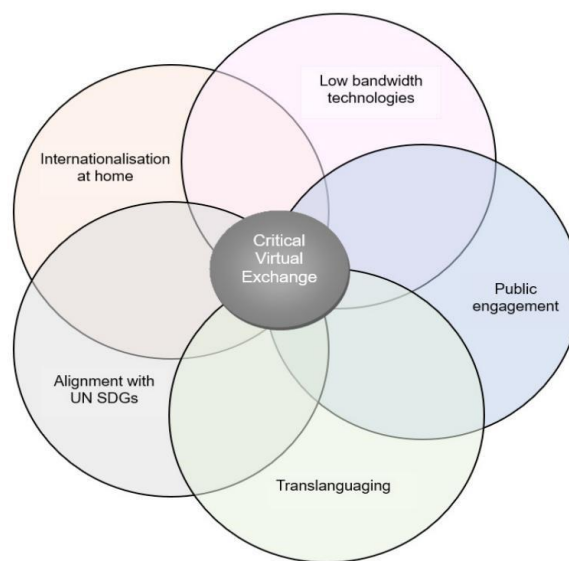
Since 2021, conversations around social justice and equity in Virtual Exchange have started to receive attention. Early work in this field primarily framed VE as a tool to make intercultural education more accessible to a broader audience. For example, researchers have noted that while only a small minority of students can afford to participate in physical exchange programmes, VE is widely considered as a means to achieve more equitable and inclusive education (Alami et al., 2022).

However, scholars caution that VE is not inherently inclusive, and many VE practices remain accessible only to certain groups of students (Alami et al., 2022; Hauck, 2023; Kelly & Medeiros, 2021). Various barriers are identified, including unequal levels of digital literacy and semiotic competence (Kelly & Medeiros, 2021), unequal access to technology in general (Alami et al., 2022) and English language hegemony, which can marginalise non-native speakers (Alami et al., 2022; Hauck, 2023). Moreover, facilitators are often trained within Western pedagogical frameworks, which may reinforce dominant ideologies (Alami et al., 2022). Researchers have also raised concerns about broader systemic biases related to gender, race, socio-economic status, and geopolitical inequality, all of which can impact participation in the VE (Hauck, 2023).

To address these challenges, scholars advocate for greater awareness of the limitations of VE and call for facilitator training with an explicit focus on equity and inclusion

(Alami et al., 2022). Some authors argue that VE holds the potential to be a safe space for learners to explore identity and meaning-making in digital contexts (Kelly & Medeiros, 2021). Through this process, students can become more aware of online power dynamics and develop the ability to support others in finding their voice and presence online (Kelly & Medeiros, 2021).

One of the most recent and comprehensive frameworks aimed at addressing these concerns is Critical Virtual Exchange (CVE), developed by Dr. Mirjam Hauck (2023). CVE integrates fragmented discussions on equity in VE into a cohesive model grounded in Critical Digital Literacy (CDL), which promotes the use of digital tools for social transformation, and Critical Global Citizenship Education (CGCE), which encourages students to critically examine relationships and power dynamics between social groups and practices (Hauck, 2023).



(Hauck, 2023, p. 9)

According to the CVE framework, there are five key characteristics that distinguish it from traditional VE and support the transition toward a more equitable model (Hauck, 2023). Firstly, the use of low-bandwidth technologies is encouraged to reduce barriers to participation, making the exchange more accessible to learners with limited digital infrastructure and digital literacy (Hauck, 2023). Secondly, the exchange should prioritise the inclusion of minority students, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, in order to ensure more equitable participation (Hauck,

2023). Thirdly, the content of the exchange should be rooted in topics aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), providing a global and socially relevant context (Hauck, 2023). In addition, public engagement is emphasised by involving local students in collaborative activities with businesses, non-profit organisations, and charities, thereby supporting the development of practical life and work skills (Hauck, 2023). Finally, CVE calls for the systematic implementation of translanguaging practices, enabling students to fully develop their multimodal communication abilities (Hauck, 2023).

Although the researcher finds this model quite comprehensive, it does not, nor do other studies, explore how virtual exchange fosters the exercise of social justice by expanding the capabilities of participating students. Does virtual exchange enhance the capabilities of its participants? Are they more aware of social justice issues and better equipped to pursue their goals? To explore these questions, this study proposes examining virtual exchange through the lens of the Capability Approach.

Capabilities Approach and Education

The Capabilities Approach is a theoretical framework used to assess relative well-being and examine the foundations of social justice (Nussbaum, 2011). Over the last quarter of the century, it has been successfully applied in both empirical and theoretical research across diverse fields such as global public health, environmental sustainability, and technological design (Robeyns, 2017). The framework has also been actively explored within educational contexts, where it has been employed in various ways – from building an alternative theoretical model to the utilitarian economic theory (Rajapakse, 2016) and reconceptualising e-learning (Tait, 2013) to evaluating existing educational policies from a justice-oriented perspective (Gale & Molla, 2015).

The Capabilities Approach was initially introduced by an Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen in the 1980s as an alternative to traditional frameworks for measuring human welfare and promoting social justice. In his book *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen (1999) critiques three other popular frameworks: Dinu's

income-egalitarian case, Bishanno's classical utilitarian case, and Rogini's quality-of-life case. According to the book, each of them '...has serious flaws, if substantive individual freedoms are taken to be important' (Sen, 1999, p. 56). Utilitarianism is indifferent to rights and freedoms, liberties theory, on the contrary, has no interest in people's happiness and a real income approach does not take into account that even with the same income, different people have different opportunities and standards of living (Sen, 1999).

To address these issues, Sen introduces the Capability Approach, which focuses on 'functionings' and 'capability sets' (Sen, 1999). According to Sen, functionings are '... various things a person may value doing or being', while a capability set refers to a combination of functions that the person is able to achieve (Sen, 1999, p. 75). In other words, functioning is an achievement, while capability is the ability to achieve (Sen, 1987). The approach does not consider functioning's achievement as a social justice measurement (Robeyns, 2011). Instead, it values the capability or freedom to achieve different functionings and the ability to make real choices, even if it is not exercised (Sen, 1999).

Predictably, the Capabilities Approach has itself been subject to criticism. A key concern is that it can be overly individualistic, treating well-being as a personal matter without adequately recognising individuals as embedded in social relationships (Robeyns, 2017; Stewart, 2005). To address this issue, some scholars have proposed the concept of 'collective capabilities' — capabilities that can only be realised through collective action (Leßmann, 2022; Stewart, 2005). Others argue that it is important to distinguish between normative individualism, which asserts that evaluations of justice should be conducted at the level of individuals, and ontological individualism, which holds that only individuals and their properties truly exist, with all social phenomena reducible to them (Robeyns, 2011). Robeyns (2011) claims that the Capabilities Approach aligns with the former view, and thus does not conflict with perspectives that emphasise human interdependence and social embeddedness. This study adopts that position, treating capabilities as individual yet socially informed, recognising that the development of capabilities can occur through interaction and cooperation with others.

Another critique is that the Capabilities Approach lacks precise criteria for evaluating social justice (Pogge, 2010). As will be explored further in the educational context, this problem is addressed and partly resolved through the application of the Capability Approach in specific fields.

Although the Capabilities Approach was not initially focused on education (Saito, 2003), many researchers contributed to its adaptation to educational matters. Some of them suggest that education has its intrinsic value, or, in other words, can be considered one of the goals worth achieving for its own sake (Hart, 2012; Robeyns, 2006a; Saito, 2003; Vaughan, 2007). This study, however, will focus on another perspective, which considers education not as an end but as a powerful mean to expand other capabilities and realise diverse functionings (Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2006a; Saito, 2003; Walker, 2008).

There are differing views on whether a universal set of capabilities can be established. Sen, as a founder of the Capabilities Approach, refuses to introduce a specific list of capabilities, a decision that became an issue of much dispute (Robeyns, 2011). For example, Sugden (1993) raises concerns about the practical applicability of the approach, noting that the wide range of potentially relevant functionings, coupled with unresolved issues around evaluating capability sets, poses challenges for operationalisation. Another problem with lacking a unified capability set list is potential biases that can infiltrate in the process of capabilities selection (Saito, 2003). Researcher's worldviews, values and social status might influence which capabilities and functionings will be included and which will not (Saito, 2003).

The most prominent and influential follower of Sen's capability approach is philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who, unlike Sen's economically oriented perspective, approaches the framework from a moral-legal-political philosophical standpoint (Robeyns, 2011). She argues for the creation of universal 'central human capabilities', which can be laid under political principles worldwide (Robeyns, 2011). In her book, she formulates a list of ten such capabilities which she considers essential for a life of human dignity: 1. Life; 2. Bodily health; 3. Bodily integrity; 4. Senses, imagination and thought; 5. Emotions; 6. Practical reason; 7. Affiliation; 8. Other species; 9. Play; 10.

Control over one's environment (Nussbaum, 2000).

Despite Nussbaum's admittance that the capability list is open to revision some scholars still critique it for rigidity and question who has the authority for revision (Robeyns, 2011). However, the researcher believes such a list is useful as a starting point for looking at practical points of application capabilities approach in education. This list is an attempt to create a 'universal theory of the good' worldwide and can be adjusted for the local context (Robeyns, 2011, p. 36).

Nussbaum highlights (2000, p. 82) that among these capabilities Practical reason and Affiliation are of special importance as they 'organise and suffuse all the others'.

Practical Reason. *Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience.)*

Affiliation. A. *Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another and to have compassion for that situation; to have the capability for both justice and friendship. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech.)*

B. *Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails, at a minimum, protections against discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, caste, ethnicity, or national origin. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.*

(M. C. Nussbaum, 2000, pp. 79–80)

These two capabilities are, in the researcher's view, the ones that have the closest connection to education. But how can education expand capabilities? Being welleducated can be instrumentally important for such an expansion (Robeyns, 2006a).

Firstly, it can expand one's abilities by acquiring new knowledge and skills (Saito, 2003).

Secondly, it can expand the range of opportunities a person can have due to acquiring this new abilities (Saito, 2003).

Another crucial role of education is in the transferring values (Saito, 2003). There is an open question of if all the capabilities are equally good. Sen answers that question in the affirmative (Nussbaum, 2003; Saito, 2003). Nussbaum (2003, p. 46), however, critiques this view and argues that capabilities are 'neutral in themselves, possibly bad in use'. That is where education can play a vital role in teaching values and assess the consequences of the use of one or the other capability (Saito, 2003).

Finally, education helps disadvantaged groups to organise politically as without it they will not have access to power centres (Unterhalter, 2009). In general, education has an interpersonal impact as people can use its benefits to help both others and themselves, and thus contribute to democratic freedoms and the common good of society (Unterhalter, 2009).

To sum up, although the Capability Approach was not originally designed to address educational issues, it offers a powerful framework for evaluating how specific educational practices can expand individuals' capability sets and shape their functionings.

Research Questions

The above literature review outlines current research on intercultural education, with particular emphasis on Virtual Exchange as one of its practical applications. While the discourse on social justice within Virtual Exchange has begun to emerge, it has yet to fully explore how such initiatives may contribute to social justice through the expansion of individual capabilities. Therefore, drawing on Nussbaum's interpretation of the Capability Approach, specifically the capabilities of Practical Reason and Affiliation, this study seeks to explore whether participation in Virtual Exchange enriches participants' functionings, shifts their perspectives on social justice, and equips them with capabilities related to intercultural understanding and practical intercultural communication skills.

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

- Does participation in Virtual Exchange lead to the development of new capabilities among students, and how can these capabilities be characterised?
- What new functionings, both potential and achieved, do students gain after participating in Virtual Exchange?
- Does participation in Virtual Exchange increase students' awareness of social justice issues, and in what ways?

Research Design and Methodology

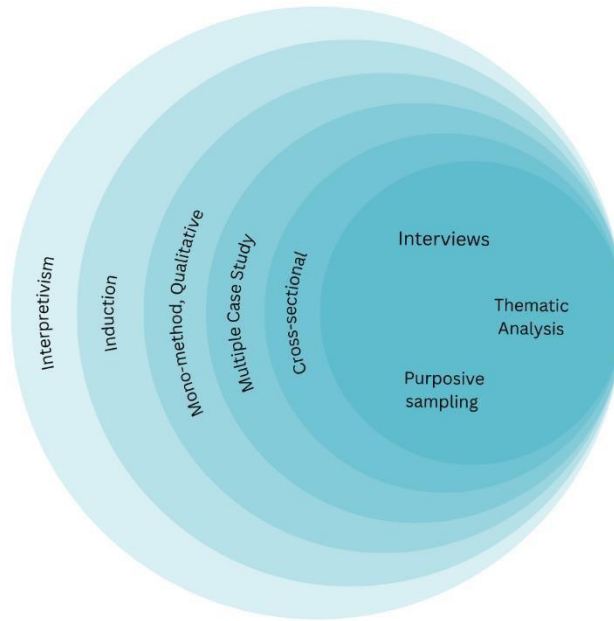
This chapter outlines the research design and methodological decisions that guided the study. It begins by presenting the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions that underpin the research, and the subsequent methodological choices informed by these philosophical positions. The researcher's positionality is also considered, with attention to how personal perspectives, values, and experiences may have influenced the research process.

Next, the chapter details the sampling strategy, including clearly defined inclusion criteria, and addresses the ethical considerations that shaped both the recruitment process and the interaction with participants throughout the study. This is followed by a critical discussion of interviews as the primary data collection method, highlighting both their strengths and limitations, as well as how they were applied in this specific context.

The chapter then turns to thematic analysis as the chosen data analysis method, explaining the rationale for its use and outlining the analytic procedures followed. Finally, the chapter concludes with a reflection on the research limitations, identifying the key constraints and boundaries that should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Philosophical Perspectives and Research Design

To explain the research design framework adopted in this study, a visual scheme was developed based on the 'research onion' model introduced by Saunders et al. (2023, p. 131). This model was chosen because it clearly illustrates how philosophical assumptions influence methodological choices and research strategies.



Overall, the research design is informed by the interpretivist research paradigm, which is articulated through the dimensions of ontology, epistemology, and axiology (Pretorius, 2024). The author adopts a relativist ontological position, which assumes that reality is not fixed but socially constructed (Al-Ababneh, 2020; Pretorius, 2024). In other words, reality is shaped by personal experiences, cultural contexts, and social interactions. As for the epistemological stance, the researcher adopts a constructivist view, which assumes that knowledge emerges through individuals' interpretations and lived experiences (Al-Ababneh, 2020). Finally, the study is grounded in a value-laden axiological perspective, acknowledging that the researcher's beliefs, values, and positionality inevitably influence the research process (Pretorius, 2024; Saunders et al., 2023), as further discussed in the Researcher Positionality section.

Based on the interpretivist research paradigm, an inductive approach to theory development was adopted, as it prioritises the development of understanding through human interpretation (Saunders et al., 2023). The research examines international Virtual Exchanges from the perspective of their participants to determine whether these exchanges contribute to expanding capabilities, opening new opportunities, and fostering greater awareness and engagement with social justice issues. The Capability Approach was chosen as the theoretical framework through which the data were

examined, but no hypotheses were proposed, and the results remained fully open to interpretation.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative methods were selected as they are particularly effective for exploring human experiences in depth, offering an 'interpretive, naturalistic approach' (Denzin et al., 2024). This means they aim to explore social phenomena in natural rather than experimental settings, seeking to understand personal experiences, individual perceptions, and the meanings people assign to them (Agius, 2013).

Qualitative research has been subject to criticism for being subjective and lacking generalisability (Cope, 2014). However, since qualitative and quantitative research are grounded in different paradigms and use distinct methods, it is essential to apply different criteria for assessing their rigor (Cope, 2014). Lincoln and Guba (1985) were the pioneers of a framework for evaluating qualitative research, which they referred to as trustworthiness. This framework remains widely used today (Cope, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017; Stahl & King, 2020) and comprises four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An examination of how this study satisfies these four criteria is presented below.

Credibility, refers to the accuracy and truthfulness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Two strategies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stahl & King, 2020) were used to enhance credibility in this study. First, environmental triangulation was employed by selecting participants from a range of different Virtual Exchange programmes. This helped to confirm that observed patterns were consistent across various contexts (Stahl & King, 2020). Additionally, member checking was employed, as it is considered one of the most essential strategies for establishing credibility in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A summary of the findings was shared with participants via email. Half of them responded, and all who did, confirmed the accuracy of the interpretations.

Transferability relates to the applicability of findings to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While qualitative research does not aim for generalisability in the same way that quantitative research does, rich and detailed descriptions allow others to determine whether findings are transferable to their settings (Stahl & King, 2020). To support this, the present study provides transparent and comprehensive descriptions of the research design, participant recruitment, interview process, and data analysis.

Dependability involves ensuring that findings are consistent, can be replicated in similar conditions and are accessible for external audit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the present study, dependability was reinforced through ongoing supervision, with the academic supervisor acting as an external auditor who reviewed and provided feedback on each stage of the research process.

Confirmability addresses whether findings are shaped by the participants' responses rather than researcher bias or assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the current research, two strategies were used to meet this criterion. First, the reasoning behind all theoretical, methodological, and practical decisions has been made explicit (Nowell et al., 2017). Second, rich, illustrative quotations from participants were included to support the interpretations and conclusions drawn (Cope, 2014). Overall, this study adheres to all four criteria of trustworthiness, enhancing its credibility, applicability, consistency, and neutrality.

A multiple case study design was adopted for this research (Baxter & Jack, 2015), as it involved several distinct cases that shared the common characteristic – participation in a Virtual Exchange programme. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of each case while enabling comparison across diverse experiences (Crowe et al., 2011).

It has been noted that case studies may lead to the rapid accumulation of large volumes of data, which can, in turn, limit the depth of analysis (Crowe et al., 2011). To avoid this, the number of participants was carefully managed (see Sample Design section), and sufficient time was allocated for data collection and analysis. In addition, case studies are sometimes criticised for lacking scientific rigour and providing little basis for generalisation, however, the same trustworthiness criteria are applicable here as in qualitative research in general (Crowe et al., 2011).

The research employed a cross-sectional design due to time constraints but holds potential for a future longitudinal study, which could provide further insight into the long-term outcomes (functionings) of Virtual Exchange participation. A longitudinal perspective may reveal additional developments not observable in a single time-point study (Levin, 2006).

Finally, the selection of specific procedures and techniques from the final layer of the 'onion' model will be discussed in more detail in the sections dedicated to them.

Researcher Positionality

As stated in the previous section, the author follows a value-laden axiological stance and therefore considers it important to explicitly position herself within the research.

Positionality is regarded by many researchers as a crucial practice that enables reflection on personal biases and assumptions, thereby enhancing the transparency and robustness of the research process (Gurr et al., 2024; Holmes & Gary, 2020). It typically involves outlining the researcher's perspectives, potential influences on the study, and the chosen or contextually determined position in relation to participants, as well as considering how this positioning may shape the research outcomes (Holmes & Gary, 2020). The researcher's positionality in this study will be examined in greater detail using the three steps proposed by Holmes and Gary (2020), as these are considered by the researcher to comprehensively address all relevant dimensions.

The first step involves acknowledging personal positions that may influence the research. In the context of this research, this step is considered in two parts. First, the researcher is a master's student, and as this is her first full-scale research project, the outcomes may have differed from those of a more experienced scholar. Nevertheless, consistent supervision throughout all stages of the project ensured that the core methodological procedures were carried out with due integrity. While the researcher's student status may have led some participants to view her with less seriousness, the association with Oxford University likely counterbalanced this by encouraging participation: the institution's reputation attracted a greater number of respondents

and facilitated organisational cooperation, while also generating certain expectations among participants. On balance, it can be argued that the prestige of Oxford mitigated the potential drawbacks of inexperience, with no indication that participants treated the study less seriously or with undue apprehension.

The second part of this step concerns the researcher's previous active involvement in intercultural activities for over twelve years. This included a year-long engagement with an international youth organisation, which made evident the unequal access to exchange opportunities between participants from developed and developing countries and sparked an interest in exploring virtual exchange as an alternative. As a result, the researcher brought insider knowledge and a strong positive orientation towards international exchanges in general. However, this bias did not extend to Virtual Exchange, on the contrary, the researcher initially approached it with some scepticism. While every effort was made to maintain impartiality, it is acknowledged that this background may have unintentionally influenced several aspects of the study, including the choice of topic, the selection of organisations contacted, the phrasing of interview questions, and the interpretation of participants' responses. This leads to the second step: situating the researcher in relation to the participants, that is, considering the insider/outsider position

One of the key debates in research positionality concerns whether the insider, a member of a specific group or a holder of a particular social status that provides familiarity and a prior knowledge of the group being studied (Holmes & Gary, 2020), has advantages in conducting research over the outsider, who lacks this background (Kusow, 2003; Merriam et al., 2001; Yip, 2024). Researchers identify several benefits of an insider position, including easier access to the culture being studied, reduced or absent culture shock, and greater trust among participants (Holmes & Gary, 2020). It also allows for asking more insightful questions, producing more authentic and detailed descriptions, and a better understanding of participants' language, including colloquial expressions and non-verbal cues (Holmes & Gary, 2020). However, this position also has drawbacks, including inherent bias, the inability to ask provocative or seemingly 'naive' questions, difficulty in offering an external perspective, and the risk

that participants may be reluctant to share sensitive information or may assume certain knowledge is obvious when it is not (Holmes & Gary, 2020).

Another layer of complexity lies in whether it is possible to clearly distinguish between insider and outsider positions in the first place. Some scholars argue that researchers may simultaneously occupy aspects of both positions (Holmes & Gary, 2020), while others contend that a researcher's status is not predetermined but constantly shifting and negotiated through interactions with participants (Kusow, 2003; Merriam et al., 2001)

As the current research is not longitudinal but rather a snapshot of reality, the position adopted for it is that of the researcher being simultaneously an insider and an outsider, which is considered to have benefited the study. As an alumna of intercultural projects, the researcher occupied an insider position, and it is likely that participants recognised her genuine interest in the subject. This facilitated the establishment of rapport, enabled the asking of more insightful questions, and allowed for a clearer understanding of what participants meant. This final point, however, is not without controversy, as prior experience may also have shaped assumptions about the meanings participants intended to convey.

At the same time, as someone who had never personally taken part in a Virtual Exchange, the researcher brought no prior bias and was able to pose basic questions and contribute an external perspective. It is also considered that the previous intercultural experience of both the researcher and the participants helped, as far as possible, to minimise the influence of cultural biases on their communication. It must be noted, however, that this remains the researcher's interpretation, and the perceptions of the participants themselves may have differed.

The final step is acknowledging that research is necessarily influenced both by the researcher and by the research context. This point has already been addressed in the discussion of the study's axiology, so it will not be elaborated further here.

To conclude, it is considered that the researcher's positionality was balanced at each step, with strengths compensating for potential weaknesses.

Sample Design

Approach to Sampling

As the goal of qualitative research is to gain a deep understanding of a phenomenon, purposive sampling is commonly employed to select information-rich cases relevant to the study's purpose (Bouncken et al., 2025). A non-probability purposive sampling strategy was adopted for this research to invite participants who had previously engaged in international Virtual Exchange programmes.

To ensure the validity of purposive sampling, it is important for the researcher to minimise outcome biases and avoid overinterpretation of the findings (Stratton, 2024). These considerations have been addressed in the Limitations of the Research section.

To recruit participants, the researcher initially contacted several VE organisations, requesting that they distribute a call for participation among their alumni. Five organisations agreed to share the invitation, and participants ultimately responded from three of them:

- AFS Intercultural Programs – an international, voluntary, non-governmental, non-profit organisation offering both online and in-person international learning opportunities (AFS, n.d.-a). The participants in this study were alumni of the 'Global Up for Individuals' programme, a blended online course combining self-paced learning with live dialogue sessions (AFS, n.d.-b).
- Oxford University Department for Continuing Education – one of the departments at the University of Oxford which delivering flexible online and inperson educational programmes for adult learners (Oxford University Department for Continuing Education, n.d.-b). Participants were recruited from the 'Inter-culturally Speaking' course, which offers theoretical insights into culture and facilitates intercultural communication through forum-based discussions (Oxford University Department for Continuing Education, n.d.-a).
- International Virtual Exchange Project (IVEP) – a virtual exchange that brings together school or university students via a virtual learning platform and live online sessions (IVEProject, n.d.).

Additionally, some participants shared the call for participation further, including on social media, resulting in an unintentional use of a snowball sampling method. Through this route, one participant who had taken part in an Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange (Erasmus+, n.d.) has been also recruited. While some researchers caution (Stratton, 2024) against snowball sampling due to the risk of participants recruiting like-minded individuals, which can lead to bias, this was not the case. The participant was not directly invited by any other respondent but came across the invitation independently on social media and contacted the researcher directly. Moreover, their virtual exchange experience was notably different from that of the other participants, which supports the inclusion of their perspective in the study.

It is worth noting that this research attracted unexpected interest, with over 50 applications received from participants across different parts of the world. Although not all of them met the inclusion criteria outlined below, this nonetheless indicates that the topic is in high demand.

In total, ten participants were finally included in the research. The number of participants was determined based on the principle of inductive thematic saturation, and more specifically, code saturation (Bouncken et al., 2025). After analysing the ninth and tenth interviews, it was observed that no new codes emerged, indicating that additional data collection was unlikely to yield further thematic insights. Therefore, the recruitment process was concluded.

Inclusion Criteria

To ensure a broad and diverse range of perspectives, the only criterion for inclusion in the research was prior involvement in a VE as a participant, rather than an organiser or facilitator only. No restrictions were placed on the type of VE, participants' gender, age, nationality, or other demographic characteristics. As a result, a notably diverse group was recruited.

Among the ten participants, seven are female and three are male. The group includes individuals ranging in age from one recent school graduate to one retiree, with the remainder representing various stages in between. Participants came from eight

different countries, from various regions of the world: the United Kingdom, Indonesia, Turkey, Russia, Ghana, Bulgaria, Mexico, and Egypt.

While some participants had prior experience with in-person intercultural programmes, for the majority, VE became their first experience of intercultural education.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher followed ethical guidelines provided by the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2024). Full ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Education Department's Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) of Oxford University under the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference number EDUC_1591745 (Appendix A). No revisions were made to the original application, except for a change in the study's title from 'Can Intercultural Education be Effective in an Online Setting? A

Case Study' to 'The Capability Approach in Intercultural Virtual Exchange: Investigating Potential Capabilities and Functionings. A Case Study' in the final stages of the research.

Each participant received a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix B) outlining the nature and purpose of the research, along with any potential risks associated with participation. Formal Written Consent (Appendix C) was obtained from all the participants prior to data collection, and additional verbal confirmation to record the interview was obtained at the beginning of each session. To protect participant confidentiality, all names were replaced with pseudonyms, and any identifiable information, such as the names of exchange programmes, was anonymised in this study.

Data Collection

Qualitative interviewing is one of the most widely used research methods (Kabaji & Mukanzi, 2018; McLachlan & Garcia, 2015; Minhat, 2015), applied across the entire philosophical spectrum, from positivism to constructionism (McLachlan & Garcia, 2015). However, the structure and purpose of interviews vary depending on the underlying paradigm. In positivist research, interviews are typically standardised and used to elicit objective facts, whereas constructionism views interviews as interactive and reflexive (McLachlan & Garcia, 2015). The role of the interviewer also shifts accordingly. As described in 'Doing Interviews' (Kvale, 2007), the interviewer may adopt the role of either a 'miner', who extracts pre-existing knowledge, or a 'traveller', who co-constructs knowledge with participants, placing emphasis on the narrative creation.

This study adopts a more balanced approach aligned with the interpretivist research paradigm (Kabaji & Mukanzi, 2018). A semi-structured interview format was selected, as it provides the flexibility needed to explore participants' experiences and beliefs, including sensitive topics, while offering enough structure to facilitate analysis (Gill et al., 2008; Kabaji & Mukanzi, 2018). Thus, semi-structured interviews overcome the limitations of both structured interviews, which may restrict depth, and unstructured ones, which may lack focus (Gill et al., 2008).

Semi-structured interviews are usually guided by pre-determined themes drawn from existing literature or theoretical frameworks (Busetto et al., 2020). Given that this study is grounded in the Capability Approach, key thematic areas were identified in advance to help guide the conversation. This structure supported both participant comfort and analytical manageability. However, flexibility remained central: questions were adapted, rearranged and new ones introduced based on the unique dynamics of each interview, which is another key benefit of this format (Busetto et al., 2020)

Throughout the interviewing process, the researcher maintained a balanced role, neither fully adopting the 'miner' model nor the 'traveller' one. This aligns with the role of a 'conductor' (Buetow, 2013) — engaging actively with participants while

allowing them to shape the conversation, with the aim of collaboratively constructing a narrative that reflects their lived experience.

Following established best practices for research interviews (Gill et al., 2008), the questions in this study were open-ended and designed to encourage reflection. Each interview began with greetings and general questions about Virtual Exchange before progressing to more complex and sensitive topics related to social justice. The preliminary questions prepared for the interviews were roughly distributed across the three main research questions, as well as the introduction and conclusion of the interview (Appendix D).

Nine of the ten interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams due to the geographical distance of the participants. Fortuitously, one participant was in Oxford at the time, allowing for an in-person interview, which was also recorded using Microsoft Teams. All interviews were automatically transcribed by the Microsoft Teams software and subsequently checked and corrected manually against the original recordings to ensure accuracy.

The main critique of interviews as a research method is that the researcher's agenda inevitably influences the interview process (Hofisi et al., 2014; Mwita, 2022; Scherr & Wittmann, 2002). Scholars note that the researcher's own interpretations may shape how they understand respondents' answers and, in turn, guide the direction of the interview (Scherr & Wittmann, 2002). Some argue that researchers may even hear what they expect or want to hear, which raises concerns about the validity of the data collected (Hofisi et al., 2014). Moreover, the interviewer becomes part of the 'interviewing picture' by posing questions and, at times, sharing personal experiences with participants (Hofisi et al., 2014). Finally, the researcher may develop sympathy toward participants, which could also affect how findings are reported (Mwita, 2022).

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, this study rests on the assumption that the researcher inevitably influences the research, a consideration that is equally relevant to the interview process. However, being aware of these potential issues, the researcher sought to remain as positively neutral as possible, maintaining the flow of conversation without imposing personal views. In addition, all interviews were

reviewed a second time to ensure that the transcripts accurately reflected participants' words and that no distortions occurred during the transcription process.

Conducting interviews online, while offering the advantage of reaching participants from diverse geographical locations, also presents several challenges. Researchers note that the main issues include unsuitable physical settings, for example, large rooms with poor sound quality (Hicks et al., 2021), as well as a range of potential technical difficulties, such as dropped sessions, audio disruptions, or video freezing (Flaherty & Sadler, 2023; Hicks et al., 2021). Additionally, one study highlighted that the online format may increase the risk of fraudulent participation (Owens, 2022).

Minor technical difficulties are almost impossible to predict, even with thorough preparation by the researcher, and the present study was no exception. For example, during the very first interview a connection issue occurred due to an electricity shortage. Fortunately, this occurred before the interview began, which allowed to reschedule it slightly. This experience reinforced the importance of always having a backup plan. However, no further difficulties were encountered. All interviews were conducted in small, private rooms to ensure the absence of distractions. Regarding the risk of fraudulent participation, because all but one participants were recruited through established organisations and no payment or other compensation was involved, there is no reason to believe that any participant would have provided false information to take part in the study.

Cultural differences presented another layer of difficulty during the interviews.

Crosscultural communication is often perceived as difference-based, which can result in power imbalances (Sands et al., 2007) and miscommunication (Shah, 2004). Shah (2004) identifies five potential barriers to understanding: assumption of similarities, language difference, nonverbal misinterpretations, preconceptions and stereotypes, tendency to evaluate and high anxiety.

As it has been previously discussed, although the researcher occupied an outsider position in cultural terms for all but one participant, a shared background in intercultural education positioned the researcher as an insider in this respect and facilitated the rapid establishment of rapport. The background in intercultural

education also fostered an initially open attitude, reducing the likelihood of stereotypes or judgment as far as possible.

When something was not fully clear to the researcher, additional questions were posed. In cases where language barriers arose or participants expressed uncertainty, the questions were reformulated and simplified until it was ensured that they were completely understood. Non-verbal communication was minimal due to the online format. Finally, to break the ice, each interview began with a friendly and informal conversation before starting the recording. Overall, the interviews were conducted in a warm and amicable atmosphere, as noted by the participants themselves. Several of them remarked that the interaction did not feel like an interview, but rather like a pleasant conversation.

Data Analysis

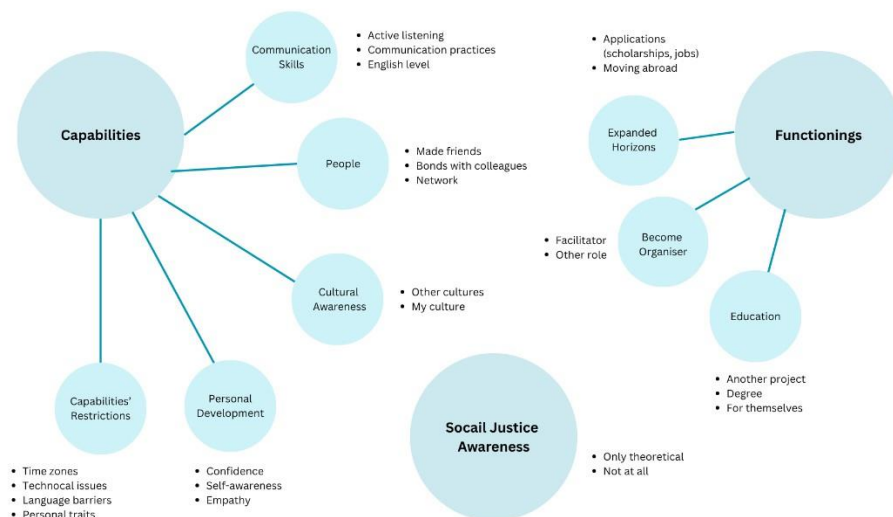
Thematic analysis was chosen as the method for analysing the interviews. It is a widely used approach for identifying, analysing and reporting themes within the data, allowing findings to be described in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is also widely used across a range of epistemological positions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017), including the constructivist paradigm (Naeem et al., 2023).

An integration of inductive and deductive approaches to data analysis was implemented, a practice that can also be found in the literature (Xu & Zammit, 2020). Three overarching themes were identified based on the Capabilities Approach framework and shaped by the research questions, forming the deductive or 'top down' component of the analysis. Within these broad themes, other themes were data driven, emerging from participants' responses, which corresponds to the inductive or 'bottom up' approach.

The analysis was conducted by following the six steps outlined in one of the foundational articles, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology' by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, as described above, the data have been transcribed and read thoroughly.

Initial codes, or labels that assign symbolic meaning to segments of data (Saldaña, 2009), have been then generated across the entire dataset. Based on these codes, an initial list of themes and subthemes was identified, after which a recursive process of reviewing and refining themes began. A semantic approach has been employed, meaning that themes have been identified within the explicit meaning of what had been said by the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytic process moved from the description and organisation of the data toward interpretation, aiming to understand their broader significance within the chosen theoretical framework. This required moving back and forth across all levels, text, codes, and initial themes, in order to refine the final thematic structure.

A thematic map (Braun & Clarke, 2006) has been used as a supporting tool in the final stages of the analysis, and its final version is presented below:



As can be observed, the map reflects not only the themes themselves but also the key points to be addressed within each theme. This ensured that all issues emerging during the interviews were covered, which aligns with the subsequent step of the analysis

(Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final step, report writing, is presented in the next chapter.

Nevertheless, researchers note that one of the disadvantages of thematic analysis is the limited amount of literature on the topic, which makes it challenging for novice

researchers to master (Nowell et al., 2017). Moreover, the issue of researcher influence on the data arises, specifically in relation to the impact exerted at all steps (Hofisi et al., 2014). This again refers back to the axiology underpinning the study. Finally, while working with interview data – selecting, interpreting, describing, and analysing it – the flexibility of thematic analysis can also lead to inconsistency and a lack of coherence (Holloway & Todres, 2003; Nowell et al., 2017). To avoid this, it is important to consciously strive for consistency across all elements of the research: research goals, research questions, data collection methods, modes of analysis, and the presentation of results (Holloway & Todres, 2003).

Data Analysis Software

NVivo 15, a qualitative data analysis software, was used for processing the data. The software facilitated the organisation of the material and the visual representation of the coding structure (Lumivero, n.d.), which substantially accelerated and simplified the coding process. However, some researchers caution against excessive reliance on computer aided analysis packages, noting the risk of overemphasising individual parts at the expense of viewing the data as a coherent whole (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Another warning is that coding should not become an end in itself, but rather remain a means of achieving theoretical depth (Mortelmans, 2024). Finally, it has been argued that the use of such software can distance the researcher from the data, as the coding process may become detached from the original text (Mortelmans, 2024).

NVivo 15 partly addresses some of these concerns. For instance, the software allows simultaneous access to multiple transcripts and codes by displaying them in adjacent windows. This makes it possible to view both the codes and the corresponding text, ensuring close engagement with the data and continuous reference to the original text throughout codes development. The remaining challenges, the researcher believes, pertain not only to the use of software but to the coding process in general. With this in mind, NVivo was used solely for generating codes, after which more in-depth interpretive work was undertaken, including the development of mind maps and continual reference to the transcripts.

Limitations of the Research

Although some limitations and barriers have already been discussed in earlier sections of this chapter, a few additional points require attention.

The participants in this study responded voluntarily to the call distributed by VE organisations, which suggests that they were already motivated and likely to hold positive attitudes towards intercultural education. This may have influenced both their willingness to participate and the nature of their responses. Furthermore, the findings rely primarily on self-reported data, which, while suitable for the aim of exploring which capabilities and functionings participants themselves believe they gained through VE, may still carry a degree of bias (Davis et al., 2023; Pekrun, 2020). Future research could therefore benefit from complementing self-reports with more formal assessments of intercultural competence, both in terms of knowledge and practical skills.

In addition, the sample, though deliberately diverse, remained limited in size due to the time constraints of this project. A larger and broader sample would allow for richer data and more nuanced insights. Finally, the cross-sectional design of the present study provides only a snapshot of participants' experiences. A longitudinal study would make it possible to investigate which of the reported functionings are ultimately realised over time.

Findings and Discussion

I think before any kind of Global Competence training, I was very indifferent about a lot of things happening in the world. (Catherine)

Based on the three research questions, this chapter is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on capabilities, or the aspects participants reported gaining through Virtual Exchange and perceiving as valuable. Four primary themes of capabilities emerged from the thematic analysis of the interviews: cultural awareness, interpersonal relationships, communication skills, and personal development. In addition, participants identified various factors that limited their experience, which are grouped under the Restrictions on Capability Acquisition theme.

The second section explores the functionings — the goals or achievements that participants either accomplished or considered attainable as a result of their VE experience. These functionings were categorised into three main topics: further educational engagement, including participation in additional virtual or in-person intercultural initiatives or formal and informal study, progression from participant to organiser within VE contexts, and broader aspirations such as applying for new opportunities or pursuing international mobility.

The final section addresses whether and how VE participation influenced participants' awareness of social justice issues.

Capabilities and Virtual Exchange

Cultural Awareness

As expected, one of the most common capabilities participants reported gaining through the VE was cultural awareness. Nine participants indicated that they have learned a lot about different cultures. They also shared acquired insights into cultural differences, for example:

'In my culture specifically, our communication is usually non-verbal. We leave subtext for you to interpret. And I noticed in the US ... people were more direct with their conversations and communications. And back home it is termed disrespectful to do that.' (Catherine)

'It's interesting to find out how different countries, for example, Middle East, they're very tight to, you know, religion, to their families. They have these cultures when every weekend they would go and visit their grandparents. And more or less in Europe, it's in Eastern Europe as well, it's like... we don't have it as much. Like when we grow like eighteen, we kind of separate from the family' (Mark)

Interviewees reported that the knowledge gained during the exchange enhanced their ability to understand others:

'I think this exchange opened up my opportunity to understand other countries'

(Emma), and enriched their lives by offering new perspectives and

experiences:

'So, you get to meet these new people, you get to understand their ways, their food, their culture and how they go about things. And that alone makes life exciting' (William).

Several participants also reflected that they wished they had acquired this knowledge earlier in life. For example, Elizabeth noted:

'I worked with people from cultures for years, and years, and years. I hadn't clicked that it was all about (high context culture) really... If I were to manage people again ... I would know how to manage them better.'

However, the participants did not only gain knowledge about other countries. All but one reported in the interviews that the exchange also prompted them to discover new aspects of their own cultural background. As William reflected:

'...Maybe I might have been aware of it (my culture), but I've not really talked about it that much and it was a session that made me think more about it, to understand the thinking behind it.'

Participants described how the experience encouraged them to reflect on their place in the world, view their own culture from a new perspective, and develop a renewed sense of appreciation for it.

'It's interesting experience, because on this platform they would discuss, let's say, a Western culture, which is more open, people are not shy to talk about themselves: their sexuality, gender, and whatever. And then they would talk about Eastern or Muslim culture, where it's a taboo to discuss, especially in public. And I was sitting there and thinking ... am I more to the West or am I more to the East? And I realised that I'm caught somewhere in between' (Harry)

'It is not just me to participate in the (VE) because a whole ... my major... joined VE. So, even in our campus we have diverse culture. So, when they post it one by one, not just I saw the posting of the other student from other country but also from my people to. I feel like, oh my God, we have this culture? Oh, I can't believe, oh, they're so unique! ... It's open my mind to see all of the uniqueness, all of the beautiful thing that they share. It's so amazing.' (Jane)

The significance participants attributed to the knowledge gained about both their own and other cultures is well justified and aligns closely with Affiliation Capability from Nussbaum's framework, which was discussed in detail in the literature review. This capability refers to living with and caring for others, being able to understand their situations, showing compassion, and treating everyone with equal respect (Nussbaum, 2000), which closely reflects what participants said they gained from taking part in the VE.

Nussbaum also places considerable emphasis on cultural diversity (Nussbaum, 2013). In her work 'Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach', she dedicates an entire chapter to this subject, emphasising that although the capabilities list that she proposes is intended to be cross-cultural, its implementation can and should vary depending on local cultural contexts (Nussbaum, 2013).

Similarly, Binder (2009) argues that culture influences capabilities on at least three levels: the definition of what constitutes a 'commodity', the characteristics of those commodities, and the value attributed to particular functionings. This again highlights the importance of considering cultural awareness as one of the capabilities.

People

Another prominent theme mentioned by all the participants was the significance of the bonds they formed during the exchange. Some expressed how exciting it was to connect with a like-minded community:

'They just want to know as much as I do. And it's fantastic!' (Elizabeth)

or described the joy of communicating with people from other countries:

'I never experienced it before, and even though it's online and only by chatting, I feel... excited. I feel joy when I able to communicate and they reply to my message and that is a really... a great thing to experience.' (Emma).

The majority of participants shared that the connections formed during the programme developed into lasting friendships that extended beyond the VE itself:

'I made a best friend even ... And we're still in touch.' (Catherine)

'It's really enjoyable because I got a friend that actually understands something that I like. So, it's so exciting.' (Jane)

'I have friends from various cultures: Indian friends, Brazilian friends, many, many friends.' (Cadence)

Additionally, Mary mentioned that the exchange provided an opportunity to strengthen an existing friendship with her fellow group members, who also took part in the exchange:

'After this lesson, we tried to ask how (we are doing)? And then we started to talk about these topics, and it is really nice'.

Several participants shared that the networks they established during the exchange had already supported them in accessing new opportunities. For example, Lily described how a friend she met during the programme introduced her to additional projects and volunteer activities:

'I met this girl and after I did this first programme, she introduced me to other programmes and other opportunities and, like, volunteer opportunities, and we even, for a little while, we worked on a project together for, like, a competition.'

Similarly, William explained that the wide-reaching connections he made during the exchange enabled him to pursue international research:

'I realised that I know people in all these places, and it was possible for me, to do something on that scale.'

Such an outcome is consistent with existing scholarship. Some researchers define social capital as an 'endowment' or 'a set of means to achieve a life people reason to value' (Bertin & Sirven, 2006, p. 16). Within the framework of the Capability Approach, this allows social capital to be interpreted as a capability in itself. Others argue that an individual's capability set cannot be meaningfully expanded without considering the surrounding social structures and networks, which may either enable or constrain the realisation of these capabilities (Smith & Seward, 2009).

A further perspective views social capital as encompassing both capabilities and functionings (Migheli, 2011). The argument they present is that social capital can be seen as both intrinsically valuable, for example, the companionship of friends, and instrumental in achieving functionings, such as through useful social contacts (Migheli, 2011).

Communication skills

A theme of communication skills emerged in the interviews with nine of the participants. Many described specific intercultural communication strategies that they learned and developed during their VE experience.

A key insight shared by several participants was the importance of active listening. For some, this was considered one of the most meaningful takeaways from the exchange, particularly in enhancing their intercultural communication skills:

'The most important thing I learned was active listening, which is basically listening to understand and not to respond. And the techniques that I learned, like, about active listening definitely help me understand different cultures.' (Lily)

'So, the most important thing that I've learned from this personally was: you have to listen to understand, not listen, to respond. And that was something that I had struggled with ... So, I've noticed now that I'm able to form communications very easy with anybody at all.' (Catherine)

Other participants pointed to specific communication practices they began to apply. For example, Harry noted that he became more skilled at initiating conversations, particularly across cultural contexts:

I think I've become better in ice-breaking conversation. I know if a person comes from a Latin community, like, "Oh, that would be a good thing to talk about." If he or she is African, "Oh, we can talk about football." That's a safe option, cause they love football.

Mary mentioned that she gained practical tools for building relationships:

'We have also not just information about the intercultural differences but also some strategies that we can use in order to have better relationships'.

Similarly, Elizabeth shared that she now feels more confident in guiding conversations:

'I understand what questions to ask people.'

These findings, once again, are supported by existing literature. For example, communication skills have been recognised as capabilities in their own right. Some researchers argue that communication is a capability of key importance, because it enables human agency (Jacobson & Chang, 2019), and allows individuals to access other important functionings, such as the right to communicate, including freedom of speech, access to information, and using communication to become a part of the community (Schejter, 2022).

Other researchers discuss competence, such as communicative competence, as a key link in the relationship between capabilities and functionings. They propose a freedoms (capabilities) – competence – achievements (functionings) chain, where each component is interdependent and impossible to achieve without the others (Hart & Brando, 2018). According to them, the optimal condition is when capabilities slightly exceed competence, leaving room for the realisation and growth of new competences (Hart & Brando, 2018).

Another theme that arose during the interviews was increased confidence in using English as a foreign language. Several participants expressed that VE had contributed to improving both their communication skills and their comfort level with speaking English:

'I got many tips from others how to improve my English, improve my speaking and my listening skills ... and I've been practising it and well, yeah, it improved my English.' (Emma)

'I think it still helps me improve my English because I get to know how to communicate. What, what do we say, like... politely. Not, like, to, you know, insult other people. Like, we have to choose the word wisely, so that we can still build communication with them.' (Jane)

Language learning plays a critical role in intercultural awareness and communication (Crosbie, 2014). Scholars presents foreign language proficiency as a capability-indevelopment, noting that unlike some other capabilities, language skills evolve over time (Mackenzie, 2022). From this perspective, language can act either as a resource that enables individuals to achieve important functionings or as a barrier that hinders their realisation (Mackenzie, 2022).

Personal Development

Another theme closely linked to the previous one is personal transformation, mentioned by seven participants. The most frequently noted change was increased self-awareness. Participants shared that taking part in a VE prompted them to reflect on themselves, their cultural background, and how others perceive them:

'You really start questioning yourself and your culture, where you come from.' (Harry)

'Ultimately made me self-aware a lot more, self-aware as a person and I feel like that's a really powerful thing.' (Lily)

'First, the exchange really made me think about how I express myself and how other perceive what I say.' (Mark)

'I can clearly say that this kind of things – invaluable opportunities for people. To be aware of themselves better, be aware of the world' (Cadence).

Another common development reported by participants was an increase in confidence:

'I became, like, a more confident person. A person who's willing to, like, take steps towards change and take initiative and so on.' (Lily)

'... they assure me that they still can understand me. It really enhance my, what say, my confident. So, I'd be, like: "Oh, I should try to speak more to native speakers. So, they're fun to talk to, not like my people."' (Jane)

Finally, one participant spoke about developing greater empathy. Catherine shared that she became aware of a lack of empathy in her communication and actively worked on it:

I realised I was more sympathetic towards people and less empathetic... which is something I had to work on. I was always like: "Oh no, I'm so sorry!" Instead of, like, actually trying to put myself in their shoes and trying to understand how they feel, so I can relate better with them. And it's been amazing, honesty, even in my personal relations with my friends, like I'm able to offer better advice to them because I'm like: "Ok, if I was in this position, what would I like to hear?"'

This theme of personal growth resonates strongly with what Nussbaum (2000) identifies as the Capability for Practical Reason. This capability is concerned with the ability to form a conception of the good and to critically reflect on one's life (Nussbaum, 2000). The changes described by participants, such as increased selfawareness, confidence, and empathy, are the kinds of developments that reflect this capability.

There is also a view that the functionings a person chooses to pursue are shaped by their character (Kramm, 2019). From this perspective, personal development can influence which functionings individuals come to value and strive for — a relationship that becomes evident later in the Functionings and Virtual Exchange section.

Research also supports the idea that personal change is positively associated with a feeling of authenticity and overall well-being (Sutton, 2024) and even suggests that changes in personality can impact life satisfaction as much as economic conditions (Boyce et al., 2013). From a Capability Approach perspective, this suggests that personal transformation plays a crucial role in enabling individuals to pursue and achieve valued functionings, thereby expanding their real freedoms.

Restrictions of Capabilities Acquiring

Several participants also mentioned challenges they faced during the VE. Although such responses were relatively few, they were grouped into a separate category, as they highlight important limitations that can affect the learning experience.

The first issue relates directly to one of the previously discussed capabilities – language proficiency. The topic of poor English language skills was raised by several participants, and Jane shared that she could not simply understand her peers:

‘Students from the Ireland say something so quick and so fast that I didn't get a single thing what they said.’

As previously mentioned, language proficiency can both facilitate and hinder the achievement of functionings (Mackenzie, 2022), which highlights the importance of ensuring that all participants can engage at a language level they are comfortable with, so they can fully develop other capabilities and achieve functionings. This is not a new problem, prior research on VE has shown that language barriers can negatively impact participants’ sense of community and result in shallow or ineffective communication (Ala-Kortesmaa & Muñoz, 2023; O’Dowd, 2025; Stevens Initiative, 2019).

Another problem that was mentioned relates specifically to the virtual nature of the programme — time zone differences. If not properly considered during the planning phase, time differences can significantly reduce participants’ engagement and exclude them from live interactions. Several participants from distant time zones faced this challenge:

‘But mostly I don't enjoy the online meeting because they put the time when it actually kind of midnight in our country, so it's kinda inconvenient for me’ (Jane).

‘We have time differences, like when I at this time, this morning in my country, and in others it's night. So, our text to... our chatting is not real time. Like, I text in the morning and then I get the answer four or maybe six hour later, and it's kind of boring to for the answer’ (Emma)

Another technical barrier raised by participants was poor internet connectivity. Jane, for example, said she was only able to join one group call because of recurring connection problems:

'Yeah ... actually, it's more than once (zoom calls), but when the other time is I unable to enter the call because of due to connection, it's much.'

Both these challenges are also supported by existing scholarship on VE. Studies have shown that time differences can hinder timely task completion (Ala-Kortesmaa & Muñoz, 2023), and generally limit participation (Whatley et al., 2022). One proposed solution is to design more flexible programmes that accommodate time constraints and allow varied timeframes for task completion (Stevens Initiative, 2019). As for the connectivity problem, this remains one of the most frequently cited technological barriers to participation (Stevens Initiative, 2019) and can result in the exclusion of certain individuals or even entire groups (Whatley et al., 2022). Incorporating multiple communication modes, including asynchronous tools like WhatsApp groups or forums, has been suggested to help maintain participant engagement (Stevens Initiative, 2019). Lastly, personal barriers can also prevent full participation. Elizabeth described her discomfort with participating in forum discussions:

'I've found the forums quite difficult. ... I was afraid to make a fool of mine on the forum. So, I found it quite off-putting.'

Anxiety related to online written communication is also acknowledged in the literature and can be addressed at different levels. For example, research suggests that students who engage in online learning with a focus on personal growth rather than task completion tend to experience lower levels of anxiety, indicating that shifting the emphasis towards learning rather than performance can be a beneficial practice (Cinar et al., 2024). On a practical level, more active facilitation and tutor presence on discussion forums has been shown to foster a safer and more welcoming environment, encouraging broader participation (Griffin & Roy, 2022).

Overall, based on the interviews with participants, it can be concluded that participation in Virtual Exchange contributes to the development of new capabilities, which aligns with existing scholarship. Participants reported increased awareness of cultural differences and improved communication skills, which enabled them to interact more effectively with people from diverse backgrounds. Many also established friendships and built useful international networks. Additionally, they

described personal growth, including greater self-awareness and enhanced empathy — skills that benefitted them in other areas of life. However, challenges such as limited English proficiency, time zone differences, connectivity issues, and personal barriers, if unaddressed, can hinder participants from fully developing these capabilities.

Functionings and Virtual Exchange

Further Educational Opportunities

This theme identified by participants is quite broad and includes several directions, such as engaging in further virtual or in-person exchange programmes and pursuing the study of intercultural cooperation, either through formal education or out of personal interest.

Seven out of ten participants mentioned that their Virtual Exchange experience inspired them to take part in further projects. Some returned to the same VE multiple times. For example, Catherine participated in the same VE three times:

‘I personally have taken it three times for different reasons. And every single time I learned something that I missed in the previous one.’

Cadence engaged even more frequently:

‘Then I became aware of ... the benefits of it. The good sides, you know, getting... having experiences, meeting new people. All these made me like that: “Here is good! I can participate here again, and again, and again.” And this is the eighth time at the end.’

Others explored new virtual intercultural activities. For instance, Elizabeth saw her VE as a valuable foundation for a subsequent online course on migration:

‘I think it is going to be really helpful, because we are going to do this migration course ... and I think knowing about different cultures is a good basis for it.’

Importantly, participants were not limited to online formats. Some of them expressed interest in in-person projects as well. While Emma was still looking forward to such opportunities:

'Oh well, after experiencing this online virtual exchange, I will be very glad if I can experience the real exchange',

several other participants had already participated in face-to-face initiatives and described them as transformative experiences:

'When I went to the Youth Assembly, it was also a life changing experience' (Lily)

'When I participated in the virtual exchange, and when I was in my internship, it was with one of the people who founded uni collaboration ... so we wrote the project, and we also went to the project. We had a motivation to go and actually experience this, not this just, you know, writing it and having the funding, but also going there and actually doing the work, which was amazing. It was really cool. We were there for three months.' (Mark)

Moving on to other educational opportunities, several participants shared how VE experiences influenced their academic paths. William said that the exchange inspired his decision to pursue a degree focused on intercultural communication:

'I'm going to do a thesis, and what's informed my topic is the experience I gained from the exchange programme.'

For Mary, who was already engaged in the topic, the VE provided valuable content for her research:

'I find (it) really, really interesting and especially useful. A lot of information also for my investigation, my dissertation ... Right now, I'm studying for my doctoral degree, and my topic is about intercultural items.'

Mark, on the other hand, shared that the VE experience sparked a new interest:

'After that, I got interested in going deeper into the topic of dialogue and facilitation.'

As discussed in the Literature Review chapter, education can be conceptualised both as a capability and as a functioning itself. Since functionings are shaped by personal values and aspirations, the list of potential functionings is endless (Walker, 2006), that is why scholars primarily focus on education as a key capability, which enables

individuals to pursue other valued functionings (Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2006a; Saito, 2003; Walker, 2008).

Nevertheless, while education is often framed as a capability, being educated is regarded by some researchers as a functioning in its own right (Robeyns, 2006b; Walker, 2006). They argue that education, particularly in terms of acquired knowledge and skills, is an outcome of exercised capability and serves as a means of enhancing participatory freedom (Unterhalter, 2003). In this view, education does not simply merge into the broader notion of human capabilities but stands as a distinct and valued outcome.

This study considers the educational opportunities taken up by participants as functionings per se, given the intrinsic value they assigned to these experiences. However, in the context of a longitudinal study, the same functionings might be reframed as capabilities that enable the achievement of further long-term functionings.

A move to organisational side

Almost half of the participants mentioned that VE inspired them to become part of an organisational team of the intercultural exchanges. Three of them became or are planning to become facilitators. For example, Mark found a scholarship and learned to become a professional facilitator:

‘So, there was a stipend ... they funded people to become facilitators and host and facilitate dialogues for other’

While Cadence only plan to become a facilitator in the next exchange, Lily has already been able to become a facilitator at the same organisation she participated in VE with:

‘It also gave me the opportunity to become a facilitator. Like, when I did my first programme, after we finish, you can become something called a mentor. A mentor it's basically someone who helps the facilitator in their session, and a facilitator is, like, the teacher of, like, the programme ... And so, when I finished the programme, I became a

mentor and then I became a facilitator. So definitely that programme was the reason as to why I became a facilitator.'

Finally, Jane was invited to join the team to work on future exchanges and promote them among the potential participants:

'Oh, because of this exchange, since, you know, I got a top awardee ... my lecturer asked me to give some speech so that they can join this too. And I help them with the programme ... I think, so, I can actually, you know, become... What if... what I can give motivation to them? So, I feel so honoured for that'.

Although there is no scholarship specifically identifying the role of a facilitator in VE as a functioning, the broader topic of career within the Capability Approach has been examined by several researchers, particularly in the context of career guidance. Some scholars argue that a career can be understood as a functioning when individuals are able to choose professional paths aligned with their values and successfully implement their desired lifestyles (Robertson & Egdell, 2018). Others distinguish between intrinsic career functionings, such as engaging in meaningful work, and instrumental ones, such as achieving broader life fulfilment through employment (Stephens, 2023). Another strand of research focuses on career-related capabilities, which support transitions from current career states to more desirable future functionings (Robertson, 2015).

While these studies differ in emphasis, they broadly agree that pursuing and achieving a desired career can be considered a functioning. Based on this, this study suggests that the aspiration to move from participant to organisational roles within international exchange initiatives may similarly be interpreted as a functioning.

Expanded Horizons

The final theme encompasses a diverse set of functionings and can be interpreted both literally and metaphorically. In a metaphorical sense, VE expanded participants' horizons, shaping their aspirations and opening new possibilities. In this way, VE served simultaneously as a capability and a functioning. Not only did the exchange encourage participants to explore various opportunities, but it also helped them

succeed in doing so. Several participants reported that VE guided them toward other programmes and enhanced their applications:

'And then when you finish, you just get a certificate, like an E-diploma. And it was very useful for me, by the way, because I attached it when I applied for my scholarship ... And they valued it and appreciated it. So that was, like, one more brick to my future success with this fellowship ... So, having this interdisciplinary course would definitely be quite valuable for my CV and resume. And even if I apply for scholarships or fellowships in the future ... I think they would really appreciate me having that course.' (Harry)

'It kind of looks good on, like, every application that you will apply to anything. And I did get accepted into multiple programmes other than this one. And I feel like me doing the online exchange ... really did open up these opportunities, and it was a factor in me getting accepted. It also gives me something to talk about, you know, people value someone with these skills, like, the fact that I met different cultures and I understand different cultures.' (Lily)

'And then I would say it has also benefited me when it comes to, like, job applications. Because most people look out for things other than, like, your job experience. Like, what else do you bring to the table? And usually, I've noticed when I mentioned that they're, like: "Oh, that's impressive!"' (Catherine)

Given the general nature of this category, and the fact that many participants still view these functionings as prospective, it is challenging to identify specific literature that directly addresses them. However, the researcher believes that relevant scholarship can be found in studies related to educational and career aspirations, which aligns with the themes discussed in the earlier sections of this analysis.

In a more literal sense, two participants described how VE prompted them to consider physical mobility. Elizabeth shared that the exchange gave her a *'certain urge to travel a bit more'* while Cadence reflected on the possibility of moving abroad after her studies:

'Before the international things, I didn't think going abroad after PhD. But now I am thinking that after completing my PhD, I move... I want to move abroad. This was, how can I say, this idea came up to my mind through this ... project.'

This idea aligns with Sen's broader view on the intrinsic, wellbeing-enhancing value of freedom. Following this reasoning, mobility, defined as the freedom to choose one's place of residence, can be considered a fundamental human capability (De Haas, 2021;

UNDP, 2009). Migration, to the act of changing one's place, is associated functioning (De Haas, 2021; UNDP, 2009).

To sum up, a variety of desirable aims, or functionings, have opened up to participants following their involvement in the Virtual Exchange. Most participants did not limit themselves to a single intercultural activity, instead, they either engaged in or expressed a strong interest in further opportunities, both virtual and in-person. Some participants went even further, choosing to pursue formal education related to the intercultural cooperation field or transitioning into organiser roles within exchange programmes. Finally, participants became motivated to consider moving abroad or applying for a variety of other international projects and scholarships.

Social Justice and Virtual Exchange

The final research question sought to explore whether participation in VE increases students' awareness of social justice issues, and if so, in what ways. It is important to note that none of the VE programmes analysed in this study addressed social justice topics directly, so any awareness gained by participants occurred as a by-product.

Despite this, findings suggest that six of the ten participants reported a greater awareness of social justice issues following their VE experience. Several participants described becoming more conscious of global inequalities:

'When you're talking to a person in the online room, and... she comes from Afghanistan, let's say. And she's like: "Oh, you know, I have to be a bit quiet because girls are banned from education in my country. And I'm doing this secretly or whatever in my bathroom." ... I would like more people to get opportunity I get.' (Harry)

'Indian students see education as a source of saving their lives. SAVING their lives – this is the keyword here. But Japanese students can say that: "After completing my education, I want to ... see different countries."' (Cadence)

Catherine shared how the exchange experience shaped her into an advocate for equal opportunities:

'And now I think absolutely, like, it's so unfair to hear that people of a certain colour, a certain race are being, like, discriminated against and not given equal opportunities

simply because of their colours, simply because of where they're from. And so now I'm, like, a strong activist for equal opportunities for everyone.'

Some participants also reported a shift in perspective about their own country. They recognised that their own situation might not be as disadvantaged as they previously believed:

'I felt like I was someone who didn't have that many opportunities just because I was a girl in a country where people, you know, feel like girls just should stay at home and get married and not have a job and all that. But I really saw girls who were in much worse situations, and they were so passionate and very smart... it's it doesn't just happen in my country and there, like, higher severities of this happening in other places' (Lily)

'Oftentimes the narrative out there is that, like, Africa is a terrible country, and in the global steam of things, we are the continent that is behind. But taking this course ... (makes you) understand the peculiar challenges and most of them are actually similar ... So, it gives you that perspective and contest that you need to better understand and process global issues.' (William)

These findings are supported by previous research. Studies have shown that VE can deepen students' understanding of global social justice issues (Gokcora & Oenbring, 2021; Lenkaitis et al., 2019) and make them aware of the role they have in promoting global well-being (Jansen Van Vuuren et al., 2025).

However, as discussed earlier in this study, barriers to full participation may influence the outcomes of VE. For example, Emma, who faced time zone as well as connection challenges and could not join live sessions, shared:

I can't really get the differences between the rich or poor country ... Because in the online it's all seem the same to me' (Emma)

This suggests that participation constraints may affect the development of social justice awareness. However, this remains a hypothesis requiring further investigation.

Finally, Mary was the one who spotted injustice within the VE programme itself:

'We had just two languages that was Spanish and English, and our partners ... speak very well Spanish. So, we think that it would be a good idea if some of the lessons were mandatory in Spanish. Because in this way we could think that these cultures are at the same level.'

Her concern aligns with observations from other scholars who argue that using only English as lingua franca in VE programmes establish a Western-centric dynamic straight from the beginning (Stevens Initiative, 2019).

It can be concluded that Virtual Exchange generally, but not universally, raises participants' awareness of global social justice issues. However, while many participants in this study reported increased awareness, none provided specific examples of actions taken or projects joined as a result. Therefore, it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions about the practical impact of this awareness based on the current data, and this area requires further investigation. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that VE can itself become a source of injustice if not designed with social justice considerations in mind.

In conclusion, the researcher would like to offer a brief reassurance of the findings discussed in this chapter. During the interviews, participants were asked to reflect on what they considered the most important outcome of their Virtual Exchange experience. Their responses were then compiled into a word cloud.



This visual representation appears to be well aligned with the thematic findings outlined above. As can be seen, the most frequently mentioned aspects were intercultural awareness and intercultural communication, though participants also referred to other capabilities discussed earlier in the chapter. It provides additional confirmation of the conclusions drawn and highlights the potential contribution of Virtual Exchange initiatives toward fostering a more socially just world.

Conclusion

This research explored Virtual Exchange intercultural programmes as potential providers of new capabilities and opportunities for participants, which may contribute to the advancement of social justice globally.

A review of the literature revealed that VE is a valuable instrument of intercultural education that supports the development of intercultural competence (Chia et al., 2008; Leh et al., 2015; Swartz & Shrivastava, 2022; Ullah & Murad, 2016). Owing to its online nature, it is also more accessible to many participants from developing countries, who might otherwise face financial or bureaucratic barriers (Alami et al., 2022). However, the research identified a gap in the scholarship concerning VE and social justice. Despite the initial steps taken to integrate VE with social justice through the creation of the Critical Virtual Exchange framework (Hauck, 2023), the focus has remained primarily on the accessibility of VE itself rather than on how it might contribute to promoting social justice by expanding participants' capabilities and opening up new opportunities.

Grounded in the Capability Approach theoretical framework, this research explores VE alumni's accounts of how their experiences shaped their views on social justice, the capabilities they gained, and the new functionings they felt able to achieve. The study is situated within an interpretivist research paradigm and employs qualitative methods to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives. Ten former participants from eight different countries who had taken part in several Virtual Exchanges were included in the research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to comprehensively explore their perspectives, and thematic analysis was then applied to identify the most prominent themes in line with the research questions:

1. Does participation in Virtual Exchange lead to the development of new capabilities among students, and how can these capabilities be characterised?

According to this study, participation in VE equips individuals with four main types of capabilities. First, it fosters awareness of both one's own and other cultures, enabling

participants to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and others. Second, VE provides opportunities to meet like-minded people and develop meaningful friendships, as well as to build valuable networks. Third, participants enhance their communicative skills, including active listening, specific communication strategies, and improvements in their level of English. Finally, VE supports personal development, increasing participants' self-awareness, confidence, and empathy.

These findings align with academic scholarship on the Capability Approach. Culture occupies a significant place in Capability Approach research, particularly in the work of Nussbaum (2013). Social capital is considered both a capability in itself (Bertin & Sirven, 2006) and a supporting means for achieving other capabilities and functionings (Migheli, 2011). Communication has been identified as a capability of key importance, since it enables human agency (Jacobson & Chang, 2019). Similarly, language learning plays a critical role in fostering intercultural awareness and communication (Crosbie, 2014). Moreover, personal development is regarded as essential in enabling individuals to pursue and attain valued functionings, thereby broadening the range of real freedoms available to them (Boyce et al., 2013; Sutton, 2024).

At the same time, both the literature (Ala-Kortesmaa & Muñoz, 2023; Stevens Initiative, 2019) and the participants themselves note that challenges such as time differences, connectivity issues, and language barriers can limit participants' ability to gain new capabilities, and therefore should be carefully considered in the design of Virtual Exchange programmes.

2. What new functionings, both potential and achieved, do students gain after participating in Virtual Exchange?

This study identified three main types of functionings gained by participants through their engagement in VE. For most participants, their VE served as a first step that opened up further educational opportunities, both formal and non-formal. Some subsequently took part in additional online or in-person exchanges, while others pursued degree programmes related to intercultural education or chose to study the topic in greater depth. Nearly half of the participants also transitioned into organisational roles within VE, becoming facilitators and organisers themselves.

Finally, participants reported that VE expanded a diverse set of functionings: with this background, they were able to apply successfully for various programmes and scholarships, and some even began considering moving abroad.

These findings once again align with existing scholarship. Education is widely recognised as a functioning of great importance (Robeyns, 2006b; Walker, 2006) and serves as a means of enhancing participatory freedom (Unterhalter, 2003). Another key functioning is a valuable and meaningful career (Robertson & Egdell, 2018), or one that enables individuals to achieve life fulfilment through employment (Stephens, 2023). Migration, understood as the act of changing one's place of residence, has also been recognised as a fundamental human freedom by both researchers and international institutions (De Haas, 2021; UNDP, 2009).

3. Does participation in Virtual Exchange increase students' awareness of social justice issues, and in what ways?

Previous studies have shown that VE can broaden students' perspectives on global social justice issues (Gokcora & Oenbring, 2021; Lenkaitis et al., 2019) and help them recognise the role they play in advancing global wellbeing (Jansen Van Vuuren et al., 2025). Participants in the current study also supported this idea, with six reporting increased awareness of global inequalities. However, none had taken concrete steps toward advancing social justice, indicating that the findings of this study reflect theoretical awareness rather than practical action.

Therefore, this study constitutes the first attempt to examine VE as a potential driver of social justice by equipping its participants with new capabilities and opportunities. It has also been the first effort to apply the Capability Approach framework to VE outcomes, demonstrating that it can serve as a useful tool for measuring them. The findings suggest that VE not only broadens participants' capabilities and functionings but also fosters greater awareness of global social justice issues. It is hoped that international organisations currently focused on in-person opportunities will take these results into account and expand their programmes to include VE, and that governments will provide funding to make such initiatives even more widely accessible.

It must be acknowledged that this study has certain limitations. As all participants were self-selected volunteers, they were likely predisposed to report generally positive experiences with VE. The study also relied on participants' self-reports of capabilities gained rather than on independent evaluation. In addition, time constraints restricted the scale of the research, resulting in a relatively small though maximally diverse sample, while its cross-sectional design limited the ability to examine the long-term development of achieved functionings.

Suggestions for Future Research

Subsequent studies may address these limitations. To begin with, they could benefit from a broader pool of participants. Involving a greater number of organisations, as well as participants from multiple cohorts across different VE programmes, would provide a wider spectrum of feedback and reduce the likelihood of capturing only generally positive opinions. In addition, expanding the geographical scope to include more diverse regions, such as Central Asia or Australia, could offer richer insights.

Future research might also strengthen validity by triangulating self-reported data with independent assessments of capabilities. Finally, longitudinal studies would be especially valuable in determining which functionings participants are able to achieve in practice and whether they actively engage with social justice issues over time. By pursuing these directions, future scholarship could achieve an even deeper understanding of the role of Virtual Exchange in advancing social justice globally.

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Appendix A. Letter of the Research Ethical Approval



Education (Educ) DREC

15 Norham Gardens, Oxford, OX2 6PY

Applicant: *****

Principal Investigator: *****

Department: Education

Study title: Can Intercultural Education Be Effective in an Online Setting? A Case Study

(Version: 1.0)

Ethics reference: Education (Educ) DREC - 1591745

Dear *****,

On behalf of the Committee, I confirm that the above research study described in the application and other supporting documentation submitted to the committee has been carefully considered on behalf of the Education (Educ) DREC in accordance with the University's regulations and policy for ethics approval of research involving human participants, human tissue and/or personal data. The opinion is as follows:

Opinion of Research Ethics Committee: Favourable Opinion

Subject to the following conditions:

Decision Date: 9 May 2025, 01:52 **Opinion**

End Date: 9 Nov 2026

If favourable, insurance-provided indemnity arrangements will be in place between the decision date and opinion end date and you may now commence your study activities. Should you plan to continue the research beyond the end date above, it is your responsibility to ensure that you request, and receive, an extension (via amendment) from the committee for indemnity to remain in place. You may be required to provide a justification.

Please note the following:

Amendments: Should there be any subsequent changes to the reviewed study, applications for amendments can be made via the Oxford Ethics Application System (Worktribe Ethics).

Reports: Studies considered by OxTREC are expected to submit an *annual progress report* on each anniversary of study approval, until the study is completed. An end of study report is also required.

Audit: This study may be selected for audit at the discretion of the Research Governance, Ethics and Assurance Team.

Data safety: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all data collected during the course of the study is stored and transferred safely and securely in accordance with University requirements. Further guidance and advice are available from the [Research Data Team](#). Additional information is available at <https://researchsupport.web.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics>

Yours Sincerely

Education Ethics Officer

Appendix B. Participant Information Sheet

Department of Education
University of Oxford
15 Norham Gardens
Oxford
OX2 6PY



Can Intercultural Education be Effective in an Online Setting? A Case Study

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: EDUC_1591745

Introductory paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

Why is this research being conducted?

Globalisation has made intercultural communication essential in today's world. While some individuals have ample opportunities for in-person cultural exchange, others face visa and bureaucratic barriers that limit such interactions. This raises the question of whether intercultural education can be effectively delivered online, providing equal learning opportunities regardless of geographical or political constraints. This research seeks to explore the potential and challenges of online intercultural education in fostering meaningful engagement and skill development.

The aims of this research are to:

- evaluate whether the course enhances participants' cultural awareness, both of their own and other cultures;
- explore how the course fosters intercultural cooperation, both during the course and in the long term;
- assess the extent to which the course promotes critical thinking;
- examine the effectiveness of the online format in engaging participants and fostering a sense of connection through digital communication tools.

Why have I been invited to take part?

Participants have been invited to take part in this research because they have either previously participated in or are currently participating in the online course. Potential participants were identified with the assistance of the course leaders, who helped select individuals with relevant experiences and insights.

The study aims to recruit a diverse group of participants, including both course participants and course creators, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the course's effectiveness. There are no strict exclusion criteria, but participants must be over the age of 18. The total number of participants is expected to be around 15.

Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether to take part. You can withdraw yourself from the research, without giving a reason, by advising us of this decision. The deadline by which you can withdraw any information you have contributed to the research is 30 June 2025.

If you decide to withdraw from the study, your data will be removed from the research results. Additionally, all raw data associated with you will be permanently deleted.

What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

Prior to the interview, you will be asked to read, sign, and return an informed consent form outlining the details of the study. This will ensure that you fully understand the research and your role in it.

The research will take the form of an interview, which will primarily take place online. However, if you are based in Oxford, UK, and are willing, in-person interviews may be arranged. For online interview, you will receive a meeting link in advance. If attending in person, details of the location and what to expect on arrival will be provided beforehand.

The interview will be semi-structured, meaning there will be a set of core questions, but it will heavily focus on your personal experience. This allows for more flexibility and deeper exploration of your thoughts and insights.

Duration and Activities:

1. At the start of the interview, key information about the study and consent will be verbally repeated. You will also have the opportunity to ask any questions you may have about the study.
2. Then you will take part in a single interview lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. The interview will explore your experience with the course, focusing on two key areas:
 - Course Content – whether it helped you achieve the intended learning outcomes, such as cultural awareness, critical thinking, and intercultural communication skills.
 - Engagement & Application – how effectively you were able to engage with course materials, apply your learning immediately during the course, and interact with both the course mentor and other participants using online communication tools.

With your consent, the interview will be audio-recorded, or video-recorded if conducted online, to ensure an accurate record of your responses. This recording will only be used for research purposes and securely stored.

You are free to pause or stop the interview at any time and do not have to answer any questions you are uncomfortable with. For longer discussions, short breaks can be taken if needed.

No follow-up sessions are planned, but you may be contacted for clarification if necessary.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

While the research is designed to be as comfortable and low-risk as possible, there are some reasonably foreseeable discomforts and risks that you should be aware of:

- **Emotional Discomfort:** Discussing your personal experiences related to the course or cultural topics may trigger some emotional discomfort. You may find it challenging to reflect on certain aspects of your learning or intercultural interactions. If this occurs, you are **free to pause or stop the interview at any time**, and you can choose **not to answer any questions** you feel uncomfortable with.
- **Anonymity and Confidentiality:** Although the data collected will be anonymised to protect your identity, there is always a slight risk that identifiable details could be inferred from your responses, especially in a small research sample. Every effort will be made to ensure that you are not identifiable in any research outputs or publications. All identifiable data will be removed or altered before analysis and dissemination.
- **Recording Risks:** Audio/video recording is used to ensure an accurate record of the conversation. However, this presents certain risks, such as potential technical issues (e.g., poor sound quality, incomplete recordings) and concerns about secure file storage. To mitigate this, recordings will be made using reliable equipment, monitored during the session where possible, and securely stored. Access to recordings will be strictly limited and used solely for the purposes of this study.

To address these risks, all data will be stored securely, and you can withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Are there any benefits in taking part?

While there are no immediate personal benefits for you as a participant in this research, it is hoped that the findings will contribute to the broader understanding of online intercultural education. If the research demonstrates that such programs are effective, it could potentially lead to the expansion and improvement of cultural online educational programmes in the future.

What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?

As part of this research, we will collect data through interviews, which will focus on your experiences with the course. The data collected will primarily consist of audio/video recordings of the interviews, along with any relevant notes made during the interview process.

This will help us understand how the course facilitated intercultural communication, cultural awareness, and engagement, directly contributing to answering the research question of whether intercultural education can be effectively taught online.

The data collected will be used exclusively for research purposes, including analysis and reporting. Any direct quotes used in the research findings will be anonymised to protect your identity. If the data is used for further studies, any personal identifiers will be removed wherever possible.

Types of Data Collected:

- Audio/video recordings of your interview responses.
- Notes from the interview, which may contain observations or reflections.
- There will be no special category data (e.g., sensitive personal data like health or ethnic background) collected unless shared voluntarily during the interview.

Data Storage:

- Identifiable data, including consent forms, will be securely stored in password-protected digital files on a secure University of Oxford server 365 Microsoft for Business One Drive for a period of 3 years after the completion of the research.
- The interview data (audio/video recordings, notes and interview transcripts) will be stored separately from identifiable data and will also be kept for the same time duration. Only authorised individuals (such as the researcher, and potentially the supervisor) will have access to the data.

Data Usage:

- The collected data will be used to answer the research question and may be shared with other researchers for further academic studies, provided all identifiable information is removed to ensure anonymity.
- Research findings may be published in academic journals or used in future academic studies.

Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?

The findings from the research will be written up in a dissertation for a Master's degree at the University of Oxford. The results may also be shared in academic publications or presentations at conferences. In the research outputs, participants will not be identifiable by name, and their privacy will be maintained through anonymisation. However, if participants wish, they can choose to be identifiable in the outputs. Participants may also be quoted directly, with their consent, and their names will not be attributed to these quotes unless specifically agreed upon.

A copy of the dissertation will be deposited online in the [Oxford University Research Archive](#) where it will be publicly available to facilitate its use in future research.

Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance website at <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights>.

Who has reviewed this research?

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: EDUC_1591745).

Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this research, please contact:

- ***** **or**
- *****, and we will do our best to answer your query. We will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the University of Oxford Research Governance, Ethics & Assurance (RGEA) team at rgea.complaints@admin.ox.ac.uk or on +44 (0)1865 616480.

Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

***** **or**

Department of Education
University of Oxford
15 Norham Gardens
Oxford
OX2 6PY

Appendix C. Formal Written Consent

Department of Education
University of Oxford
15 Norham Gardens
Oxford
OX2 6PY



Consent to take part in the research: Can Intercultural Education be Effective in an Online Setting? A Case Study

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference: EDUC_1591745

The aims of this research are to:

- evaluate whether the course enhances participants' cultural awareness, both of their own and other cultures;
- explore how the course fosters intercultural cooperation, both during the course and in the long term;
- assess the extent to which the course promotes critical thinking;
- examine the effectiveness of the online format in engaging participants and fostering a sense of connection through digital communication tools.

**Please initial
each box if you**

**agree with the
statement**

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 20 March 2025 for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered

satisfactorily.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point until **30 June 2025**, without giving any reason.

I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.

I understand that I will not be identifiable from any publications or papers.

☐

I consent to being audio/video recorded.

☐

Use of quotations: Please indicate your preference (select *one* option):

☐

a) I do not wish to be quoted. **or**

b) I agree to the use of quotations in research outputs if I am not identifiable.

☐

I give permission for you to contact me again to clarify information.

☐

I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.

☐

I agree to take part.

☐

Name of participant

dd / mm / yyyy

Date

Signature

Name of person taking
consent

dd / mm / yyyy

Date

Signature

Appendix D. Preliminary Interview Questions

Introduction

- Can you share a bit about your motivation to take part in the exchange? Have you had any previous experience with intercultural education or communication?
- How diverse was the group of participants in terms of cultural backgrounds and did you feel like part of an intercultural group? Why or why not?

Does participation in Virtual Exchange lead to the development of new capabilities among students, and how are these capabilities can be characterised?

- Did you have opportunities to get to know each other better and build some bonds? Did you communicate outside of the exchange? Have you met anyone in real life?
- How did the exchange influence your understanding of both your own culture and other cultures? Can you give specific examples?
- Did the exchange help you develop skills for interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds? If so, how? Were you able to apply these skills in your interactions within the exchange?
- Were you able to apply any of the concepts or skills from the exchange in reallife situations? Can you think of a situation where you used what you learned in a real-life context?
- Did you make any changes in how you communicate with others, online or offline, after the exchange?
- Were there any challenges during the exchange that you've faced?

What new functionings, both potential and achieved, do students gain after participating in Virtual Exchange?

- Overall, what kinds of new opportunities, big or small, do you think the exchange opened up for you?
- Are there things you now feel more able to pursue (e.g., studies, work, relationships) because of this experience? Did the exchange inspire you to take on any new roles, projects, or learning activities or maybe influenced any decisions you've made in your education, career, or personal relationships?

Does participation in Virtual Exchange increase students' awareness of social justice issues, and in what ways?

- Did the exchange change how you think about fairness or justice in society more broadly?

Conclusion

- What was the main take away from you personally from the exchange?