

Broadening access to global learning: the transformative potential of virtual mobility

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Abstract This article explores the transformative potential of virtual mobility in widening participation in global learning within higher education. Traditionally centred on physical travel, academic mobility has long excluded students facing financial, caregiving, legal and disability-related barriers. Virtual mobility (defined as cross-border academic engagement via digital technologies) offers a scalable and more equitable alternative. Drawing on examples such as an international week embedded in an MA programme, the authors illustrate how virtual formats can foster inclusion, build intercultural competence, and enhance employability through structured and collaborative experiences. However, the paper also highlights persistent challenges, including digital inequities, engagement issues and the limited immersive quality of online interactions. To unlock virtual mobility's full potential, institutions must embed it into curricula, provide digital access support and employ intentional pedagogical design. The authors argue for a reimagined model of internationalisation, one that prioritises equity, flexibility and real-world relevance in an increasingly digital and interconnected world.

Key words virtual mobility; widening participation; internationalisation; digital inclusion

Introduction

Academic mobility has long stood as a hallmark of 'global' higher education, traditionally imagined through the lens of physical relocation. The image is familiar: the student crossing national borders to study or train, immersed in a new cultural and academic environment. This model continues to be valorised in policy and practice for its potential to foster global competencies, enhance employability, and cultivate cross-cultural understanding (De Wit and Altbach, 2020).

However, the globalisation of higher education isn't neutral or universally agreed upon. Different perspectives offer competing views on what it means and who it serves. World culture theory

argues that universities are becoming more alike, shaped by global rankings, quality standards, and policy borrowing (Silova and Brehm, 2015). Neoliberal approaches see internationalisation as part of a market shift in which students are treated as customers and mobility is sold to boost competition and income (Saunders, 2010). Human capital theory supports this by framing global learning as a personal investment in skills and career prospects (Becker, 1993). Critical views, particularly from Marxist and political economy traditions, point out that these processes can deepen existing inequalities, favouring those with greater resources while leaving others behind (Wu, 2022).

Taken together, these perspectives show that internationalisation is not inherently fair. It is shaped by wider structures that can both expand and limit access to global opportunities. This raises an important question for universities: how can we make global mobility more equitable?

The digital turn: virtual mobility emerges as an alternative

Virtual mobility, defined as cross-border educational experiences facilitated through information and communication technology (UNESCO, 2023), presents a compelling counterpoint to traditional conceptions of academic mobility. It enables students to participate in meaningful intercultural exchange and global learning without physical relocation. The pivot to digital learning necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic has further normalised and legitimised such approaches within mainstream academic practice (Zhou *et al.*, 2022; Wang and Ghasemy, 2025). In doing so, virtual mobility has the potential not only to mitigate long-standing barriers but to reimagine equitable internationalisation.

Take, for instance, financial constraints. Travel, accommodation and subsistence costs associated with studying abroad are prohibitive for many and grants often fail to fully cover these expenses (Universities UK International, 2017). Virtual mobility, by contrast, significantly reduces financial overheads, and creates opportunities for students otherwise locked out of global learning experiences due to income disparities (López-Duarte, Maley and Vidal-Suárez, 2021). This shift away from

socially selective participation aligns with growing calls to democratise international opportunities through hybrid or blended approaches (Gherheş *et al.*, 2021).

Students with caring responsibilities or complex work schedules often find it impossible to engage in overseas programmes that require prolonged absence, rigid timetables and substantial financial outlay (Runacres *et al.*, 2021). Virtual mobility introduces flexibility, allowing asynchronous engagement and remote collaboration. This would create space for these students to access global learning in a format that acknowledges, rather than erases, their lived realities (Knoch, 2022).

Visa and travel restrictions, exacerbated by both geopolitical instability and public health emergencies, further underscore the fragility of physical mobility (Girard, Vanston and Faïd, 2021; Mok *et al.*, 2021). Virtual alternatives sidestep these legal and logistical hurdles entirely. This can be transformative for students whose freedom of movement is curtailed (due to immigration status, political context or personal security).

Likewise, for students with disabilities, the physical and infrastructural demands of international mobility present a significant challenge, even when institutions provide tailored support (Querin and De Sousa, 2021). Virtual formats can offer a more accessible route to global engagement, reducing the friction created by inaccessible environments and uneven support systems (van Dorp, 2008).

A key issue remains the unequal access to information about international opportunities. Widening participation (WP) students are often less aware of these opportunities, or less confident in pursuing them, due to institutional opacity and limited social capital (Universities UK International, 2017; Johnson, Bowden and Alonso, 2020). This gap restricts participation and reinforces structural inequalities. Embedding virtual mobility into the curriculum (with transparent communication, inclusive design and academic credit) can help normalise global experiences and reduce the gatekeeping that often defines international engagement (European Commission, 2023).

Curriculum integration and structural implications

To be truly effective, virtual mobility must be more than an optional add-on. It needs to be embedded meaningfully into course structures. This includes ensuring academic credit, institutional recognition, and cross-departmental coordination involving international offices, WP teams and careers services.

Integration also demands that institutions take seriously the pedagogical dimensions of virtual mobility, not just as a delivery mechanism but as a site of intercultural learning in its own right (Regan, 2022; Wang and Ghasemy, 2025). While employability discourses often draw on human capital theory by positioning education and international experiences as private investments that boost individual market value (Becker, 1993), our WP lens stresses the social and redistributive potential of virtual mobility when it is publicly supported, credit-bearing and structurally embedded (McGrath, 2010).

A useful example of embedded virtual mobility aimed at widening participation is the integration of an international week within a postgraduate programme. During this designated week, regular teaching is suspended to create space for a collaborative business challenge and virtual sessions led by international guest speakers, involving students from multiple institutions. Pausing standard academic activity avoids overburdening students by layering virtual mobility onto an already dense workload (De Wit and Altbach, 2020) and signals that international engagement is a core academic priority. What works particularly well is the focused structure, cross-institutional collaboration and clarity of purpose.

Comparable 'internationalisation at home' initiatives demonstrate that virtual and blended formats can systematically extend global learning to geographically non-mobile students when these approaches are embedded in the curriculum and aligned with assessment (European Commission, 2023). For instance, virtual collaborative projects connecting students across institutions can enhance participants' intercultural competence and related academic skills while they remain at their home university (EVOLVE Project, 2020). Pan-regional virtual exchange schemes, that link universities across Europe and beyond, similarly illustrate how curriculum-embedded online collaboration can broaden access to cross-border teamwork and global

citizenship education for students who might never travel physically (EAIE, 2020; Hauck, 2023).

The inclusivity benefits of such an approach are manifold. First, the virtual setting removes many barriers: students do not need to travel, pay for accommodation or secure visas. Second, removing competing timetable demands ensures students can participate, regardless of their outside obligations. Third, the collaborative nature of the student challenge enables peer-to-peer exchange across borders, not simply through content but through co-created knowledge. This is a model of mobility that is not only accessible but pedagogically rich.

Beyond access: belonging and employability

Still, enhancing accessibility alone is insufficient. The goal is not just to include more students in international experiences but to ensure those experiences are meaningful. A persistent risk with virtual formats is the erosion of belonging. Without the informal social connections that come with physical presence, students may feel peripheral, or worse, tokenised (López-Duarte *et al.*, 2021).

Here, design matters. Structured opportunities for interaction (both academic and social) are vital. Coordinated meeting times, facilitated group work and shared sessions can help foster the kind of belonging that sustains learning communities (Savin-Baden and Tombs, 2017).

Employability is another critical dimension. The global labour market increasingly demands cross-cultural competence, digital fluency and the ability to collaborate across time zones and platforms (Crawford, 2021). In an increasingly competitive and unequal global higher education landscape, these digitally mediated, intercultural collaborations can help WP students access internationally oriented learning opportunities and skills that are often associated with physical mobility, thereby strengthening their preparation for internationalised graduate labour markets (De Wit and Altbach, 2020). Virtual mobility, particularly when aligned with real-world problem-solving, develops precisely these skills. Moreover, it can open doors to industries and professional networks that are otherwise

geographically or socially out of reach for students (López-Duarte *et al.*, 2021).

Importantly, virtual internships and collaborative projects often simulate the very conditions students will encounter in the modern workplace (such as remote teams, intercultural communication and digital project management). Embedding these experiences into the curriculum ensures students do not merely consume knowledge but actively develop transferable capabilities that enhance their career prospects (Wang and Ghasemy, 2025).

The success of virtual mobility can be meaningfully assessed through a range of outcomes. These include retention and completion rates compared to non-WP peers and self-reported gains in digital communication and intercultural competence (e.g. via tools like the Intercultural Development Inventory). They can also be measured in terms of a reported sense of belonging in intercultural teams, as captured through pre- and post-programme surveys. Career-related indicators – such as referencing virtual experiences in job applications or interviews, and structured student feedback on accessibility, digital infrastructure and program relevance – also offer valuable insight into impact and inclusion.

Challenges and preconditions for equitable virtual mobility

While virtual mobility offers promising avenues for broadening participation in global learning, its implementation is not without critical challenges. These issues are often overlooked in optimistic portrayals but must be addressed if virtual mobility is to achieve its full transformative potential.

One of the most pressing challenges is the persistence of digital inequities. The assumption that all students can easily engage in virtual exchanges ignores the reality that many lack reliable internet access, up-to-date devices, or private spaces conducive to study (Zhou, Fang and Rajaram, 2025; Gherheş *et al.*, 2021). These gaps are also evident across borders, where there may be notable disparities (Ng and Fang, 2023). To counter this, universities must commit to providing practical support through loanable technology, subsidised internet

access, and dedicated digital support hubs. Institutional strategies should include regular audits of digital access and budget allocations that prioritise technological inclusion.

Engagement and motivation in virtual learning spaces also present obstacles. Online formats often lack the spontaneous and informal interactions that make in-person exchanges socially and academically enriching. Students with competing responsibilities (such as employment or caregiving) may find it difficult to prioritise virtual activities, especially when these are not clearly integrated into the core curriculum (Dziuban *et al.*, 2022). Maintaining engagement in such settings requires deliberate pedagogical strategies, including gamified intercultural tasks, collaborative group work, and facilitated discussions that promote sustained interaction and a sense of social presence.

Moreover, virtual environments face inherent limitations when it comes to developing intercultural competence. While they enable cross-border communication, they often fall short of replicating the immersive and nuanced experiences of physical mobility. Elements such as non-verbal communication, navigating unfamiliar environments, and extended exposure to cultural practices are difficult to simulate online (López-Duarte *et al.*, 2021). To address this, virtual mobility curricula should incorporate reflective practices (such as journaling and debriefing sessions), as well as intercultural mentoring that supports deeper and more meaningful learning beyond surface-level exchanges.

These challenges do not negate the value of virtual mobility, but they do underscore the need for careful design and institutional support to ensure that its benefits are equitably distributed and pedagogically robust.

Conclusion: towards a new paradigm of internationalisation

The traditional model of academic mobility is overdue for re-evaluation. While it remains a valuable pathway, it cannot be the singular (or even the default) route to global learning. For students from widening participation backgrounds, the barriers may be simply too great. Virtual mobility offers a credible, scalable, and equitable alternative that aligns with contemporary

realities and the evolving needs of both learners and labour markets.

However, realising this potential demands more than technological infrastructure. It requires institutional will, curricular integration and a commitment to designing inclusive, intentional and pedagogically robust experiences. There is also a need to tackle persistent digital inequities that affect many WP students who may lack high-speed internet, up-to-date devices and/or conducive study environments. Without direct institutional support – through subsidised technology, digital access schemes and targeted investment – virtual mobility risks reinforcing the very exclusions it seeks to remedy.

Engagement also cannot be taken for granted. The lack of informal, spontaneous interaction in virtual spaces can reduce student motivation and weaken intercultural learning, especially for those balancing work, caregiving and academic demands. Deliberate learning design such as collaborative group projects, gamified tasks and well-facilitated discussions is essential to foster a sense of presence and participation.

Moreover, while virtual settings allow for global connection, they do not fully replicate the depth of cultural immersion found in physical mobility (López-Duarte *et al.*, 2021). Reflective practices, debriefings and intercultural mentoring can help enrich these digital exchanges, and push learning beyond surface-level encounters.

Embedding an international week to a programme stands as an example of what this could look like in practice: a model where global learning is not peripheral, but central; not exclusive, but inclusive; and not passive, but participatory. As higher education continues to confront questions of access, equity and relevance, virtual mobility should not be viewed as a temporary workaround or second-best substitute for physical travel. Rather, when designed with widening participation at its core, it can form part of a reimagined model of internationalisation that challenges the socially selective tendencies of human capital-driven mobility, and the homogenising effects identified by world culture theory (Silova and Brehm, 2015; McGrath, 2010). It is a site of opportunity in its own right, capable of transforming how we

conceive of internationalisation in a post-pandemic, digital landscape.

But to fulfil this promise, institutions must pair optimism with realism, and vision with action. Virtual mobility offers a pathway to broaden participation while reimagining how global learning is delivered, making international engagement more accessible, flexible and aligned with the realities of an interconnected world.

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