

## **A Step-by-Step Approach to Professional Communication and Career Exploration Through Virtual Exchange**

### **Introduction**

Virtual Exchange (VE) has been implemented at educational institutions around the world for over three decades and has become increasingly popular in the post-pandemic era (O’Dowd, 2018; O’Dowd, 2021). The most traditional VE educational approach involves two or more cohorts of students in different geographical locations who participate in online discussions and collaboration as part of their studies, with guidance from their instructors (O’Dowd, 2018). VE empowers students to engage with peers both inside and outside the classroom, transcending geographical and physical mobility constraints, while allowing for collaboration and resource sharing among partner institutions (Martins et al. 2024). VE has already become a powerful, versatile, economical and feasible educational practice that can be applicable across all disciplines and levels to support young people in building essential communication and collaboration skills while promoting a globally informed outlook. Providing international learning experiences to all students by supporting equity in global education, VE supports skill-building in areas such as global perspective-taking, intercultural competence, and digital literacy (Garcés & O’Dowd, 2020).

One of VE’s strengths is its ability to broaden access and allow for diverse forms of participation in global learning. VE formats vary, depending on goals, audience, technical capabilities and access, and subject matter. VE can be as informal as asynchronous discussions through a messaging app or as structured as online meetings on a platform like Zoom. In particular, virtual interviews offer an effective way for students to engage with professionals from different countries, providing valuable networking and learning opportunities.

This study explores the use of virtual interviews between student groups and pre-selected professionals from plant science backgrounds. We provided students with guidelines and methods for organizing virtual interviews to maximize educational value. Further, we implemented a structured VE approach to help students explore potential career paths in a specific field, compare international challenges and solutions, and practice professional communication.

### **Procedure**

#### **Participant Grouping and Preparation**

During class, students were divided into groups of four and instructed to read the biographies of pre-selected international researchers/professors in plant science who had agreed to participate in an interview. Each group selected a preferred researcher/professor to interview. In the case of multiple groups choosing the same researcher, a random drawing (e.g., using popsicle sticks or papers) was conducted to assign the groups an interviewee. Roles such as interviewer, note-taker, timekeeper, class reporter, email communicator, etc., within each group were assigned. The assignment requirements and deadlines were also explained (e.g., via a PowerPoint presentation).

### **Setting Up Interviews**

Asynchronously, student groups drafted and sent their own outreach emails to the assigned international researchers/professors, introducing themselves and specifying the purpose of the interview. Guidelines were provided to help students manage email communication effectively, focusing on follow-up practices, politeness, and the appropriate way to address researchers or professors. Students were instructed to schedule the interview on a specific date within a two-week timeframe, account for time zone differences, and include the instructor and group members in the email correspondence. Once the interview date was set, students scheduled the meeting on Zoom or Microsoft Teams and ensured they understood the necessary technology functions (e.g., muting, recording, etc.).

### **Conducting the Interviews**

During the interview, students introduced themselves and had the option to greet the researcher in his or her native language (if applicable). The interview questions that students were asked to create and use were on the following topics:

- The researcher's favorite plant, as an icebreaker question.
- Personal motivations of the researcher/professor for their career.
- Current or past plant-related projects and their significance.
- Challenges and findings from these projects.

Students managed the interview time (approximately 15 min) and actively listened, asking follow-up questions for clarity.

### **Assessment**

- **Group Report:** Each group presented a 5-min report to the class summarizing their interview experience, questions asked, and challenges faced.
- **Individual Reflection:** Students completed a pre-survey during class immediately after forming groups and a post-interview survey. The surveys assessed their confidence in professional communication, challenges faced during communication, teamwork efforts, the difficulty of formulating questions, and overall learning from the assignment (Table 1). The reflection also assessed their understanding of career options in plant pathology.

**Table 1. Pre- and Post-Virtual Exchange Survey Questions**

Question number	Questions for the pre- and post-surveys
1	How confident do you feel speaking with professional plant science contacts, such as the international researcher/professor you will be interviewing, on a scale of 1 to 5? 1=scared; 2; 3=not scared or confident; 4; 5=confident
2	If you answered 2 or less to the previous question, explain in a few words why?
3	Are there any aspects of this assignment that you are apprehensive about?
4	How excited are you to complete this assignment, on a scale of 1 to 5? 1=not excited at all; 2; 3=neutral; 4; 5=excited
5	If you answered 2 or less to the previous question, explain in a few words why?
6	What kinds of strategies do you think you could use to help the interview go smoothly?
7	Do you have any previous experience using these strategies?
8	Any other thoughts?

### **Take-away**

This assignment provided students with a unique opportunity to explore career paths in plant pathology on an international scale, enhancing their understanding of global agricultural challenges and solutions. By guiding students from the basics such as forming interview questions and structuring outreach emails up to conducting the interview and reporting their feedback, this assignment built essential skills step-by-step. Through structured virtual interviews with professionals, students developed critical communication skills, built confidence in professional interactions, and gained insights into the diverse roles and research areas within plant science.

Some of the challenges we faced during this first trial of the VE were:

- One of the seven groups had trouble meeting with the international partner, even though the instructor had previously communicated with all the international partners and received their consent to participate in the study. To overcome this challenge the instructor of the course had arranged for some back-up international partners, and

because the instructor set up the project timeline with some flexibility, there was enough time for that group of students to contact the back-up international partner.

- Another challenge was setting up meeting times due to the difference in time zones. For example, some partners and/or student groups had to meet at night.
- Another minor challenge was some miscommunications due to language differences, which students solved with some follow-up questions during their interviews.

## References

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