

## Can't We Be Friends? Designing and Delivering Virtual Exchange Program for Apparel Students in Saudi Arabia and the United States

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**Background.** Cultural intelligence is an increasingly important skill (Ruth & Netzer, 2019), especially for students preparing to enter the global textile and apparel industry, where professionals collaborate across supply chains spanning different continents (Karpova et al., 2011.) **Virtual exchange (VE)** has emerged as an effective alternative to the traditional study abroad experience (Ruther et al., 2021). VE is “an educational practice that involves the engagement of groups of learners in extended periods of online intercultural interaction and collaboration with international peers as an integrated part of their educational programs and under the guidance of educators” (Garcés & O’Dowd, 2020, p. 283). VE proliferated during the recent global pandemic, as it allows learners from dispersed geographical regions to collaborate without the need for resource-intensive travel (Vicente et al., 2021).

VE has proven to be an effective approach to diversifying curriculum and internationalizing higher education (Ruther et al., 2021). Previous research has established that in terms of student learning outcomes, VE can be as impactful as studying abroad (Alami et al., 2022). Having a global experience in the classroom is particularly impactful for students who have limited opportunities to travel due to financial, regulatory, cultural, or other reasons. Despite the expansion of VE across disciplines, the practice is not prominent in the textile and apparel education, except Karpova et al.’s study (2011), and most of the research available about VE only examines student learning and experiences, with very few studies focusing on the viewpoints of the instructors leading VEs (Weaver et al., 2022). Therefore, the **purpose of this study** was to explore the perspectives and experiences of the instructors creating and delivering a new VE program with apparel curricula to explore the implementation challenges, opportunities for professional and personal growth, and meaningful impacts that can emerge from cross-national and cross-university collaborations.

**Virtual Exchange (VE) Program Design.** The VE program was designed, planned, delivered, and evaluated by five instructors from four apparel programs housed in two Saudi Arabia universities and two US universities. The lead instructor completed COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) training to guide the team to integrate VE principles broadly in the development process (The SUNY COIL Center, n.d.). The instructors worked together to develop curriculum to test the effectiveness of an instructional platform (Padlet) that could be

accessible in both countries, utilize appropriate technologies for students to connect, and identify the potential challenges and opportunities for student collaboration and completion of assignments. The program simulated a valuable real-world industry environment where textile and apparel professionals collaborate across borders and cultures, accounting for political, economic, cultural, and religious differences. The exchange program was conducted over two semesters, bringing together 436 students (F24: N=311, 39 teams; SP24: N=125, 21 teams) who were assigned to virtual teams of 6-8 students with a diverse composition across the different universities and countries.

**Method.** Case study was selected as a research method to explore the perspectives and experiences of the instructors from Saudi Arabia and the US as they reflected on challenges and rewards of being engaged in developing, implementing, and evaluating the VE for their students. A popular qualitative research method, case study is used for an in-depth exploration of a “program, event, activity, process” through collecting “detailed information” over time (Creswell, 2014, p. 241). An instrument with fifteen open-ended questions was collaboratively developed by the five instructors (and co-authors of this study) participating in the VE. It was administered through an anonymous online survey at the end of both semesters. The instructors provided detailed responses as they reflected on their expectations as well as challenges and opportunities stemmed from their VE participation. Other questions addressed the collaborative process of designing, planning, and implementing the program; cultural and academic differences across the four universities; and the use of technology. The data were analyzed and interpreted collaboratively by the co-authors, using fundamental analytical principles such as part-to-whole comparison, categorization, abstraction, and integration (Spiggle, 1994).

**Results.** Three thematic areas emerged from the data analysis, the first being *A Lot of Balls in the Air*, which includes the perceived challenges faced by the instructors. It was a significant “learning curve” for all participants that required a lot of extra work to coordinate and schedule the program, revise the schedule of their respective courses, adjust curriculum, coordinate with partners, and plan and manage the learning experience. Implementing the VE between the four universities exposed various logistical and cultural complexities. For example, it took time to understand what assignment topics were “off limits” due to religious and societal differences between the two cultures. The unique educational systems also influenced the instructors’ need to communicate more openly and explicitly about expectations with one another. Differences in academic calendars, national holidays, and weekdays as well as accounting for time differences and technological disruptions further complicated planning.

The second thematic area, *A Better Educator*, discussed the rewards experienced during the development and delivery of the program. There was a unanimous agreement that Saudi/US cultural exchange resulted in a deep satisfaction with the overall experience. Instructors agreed that despite the substantial challenges, the VE program helped them to become better educators. While the need for flexibility throughout the program was emphasized, instructors agreed the experience enhanced their teaching expertise by introducing new technologies and creative pedagogical approaches to the classroom.

The third thematic area, *They Value Many of the Same Things*, presents the instructors' views on the value of the program. The VE provided students with meaningful intercultural encounters, encouraging connections with one another through the lens of their shared interest in fashion and its role in society. The exchange dispelled negative perceptions and biases toward the other culture, while building connections where students shared common goals and passions. An added layer to this VE was the exploration of the meanings behind typical behaviors involving dress and appearance management, making student discussions more personal and significant. Beyond that, students were challenged to look at other cultures with an eye toward examining how businesses must approach global markets and cultural differences.

**Conclusions and Implications.** This virtual exchange was a highly collaborative effort that required a significant commitment to develop a common language and understand key goals. The instructors were challenged to find common grounds when navigating institutional bureaucracy for securing approvals for the VE, negotiating appropriate topics and language for assignments, and adjusting for varied religious and cultural expectations in communications and deliverables. The results indicate that the VE experience transcended the differences in times zones, language barrier, cultural norms and expectations, and reconciling academic calendars and curriculum across the four institutions, thus supporting previous research findings (Ennis et al., 2021; Karpova et al., 2011). The experience transcended cultural differences and resulted in impactful learning outcomes, making it a recommended pedagogy for textiles and apparel curricula. With the increased confidence provided through systematic reflection on this exchange, the program is set to expand to include an apparel program from Ukraine in Fall 2024.

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