

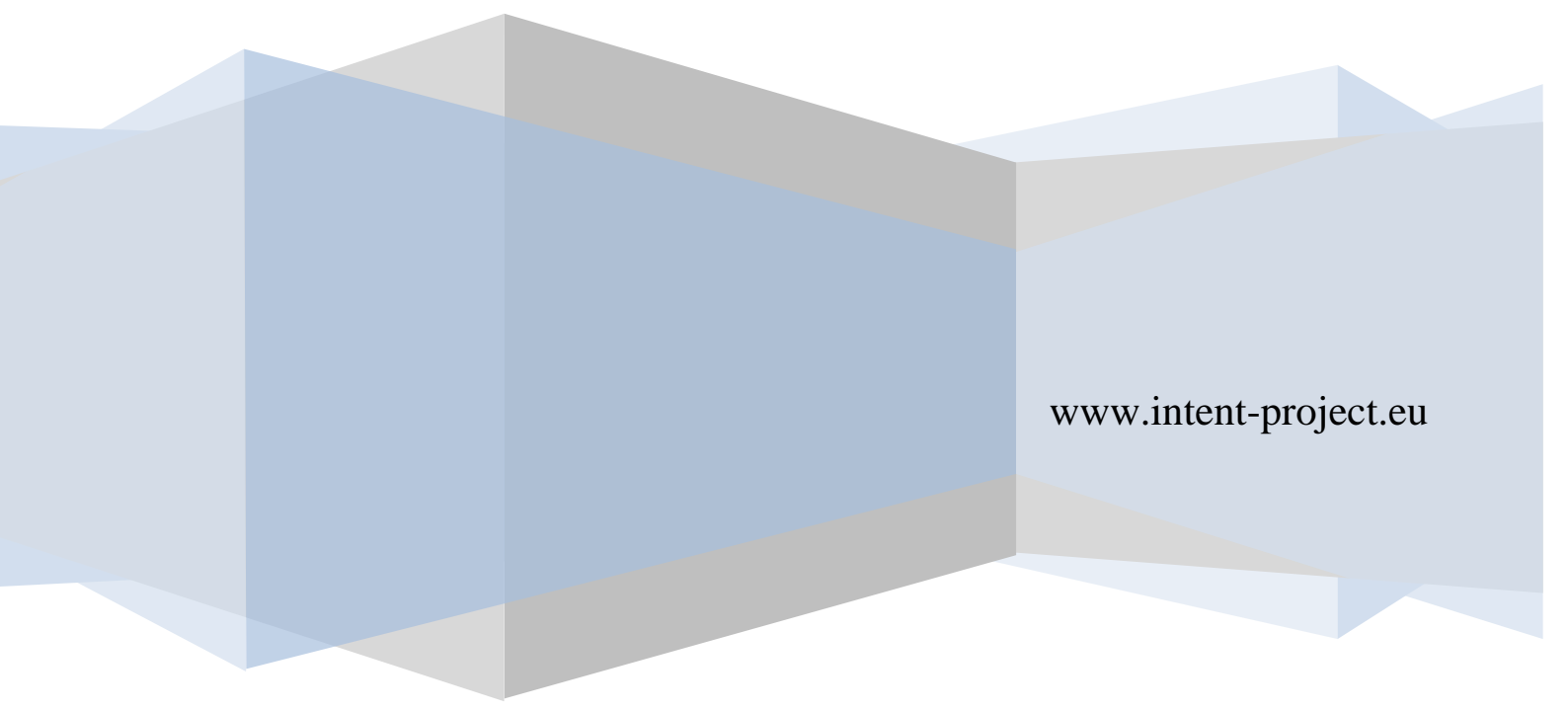
# University Classes Collaborating Together Online

**Report on the Integration of Telecollaborative Networks  
in European Universities**

## **Executive Summary**

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June 2012



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## Background to this Study

In October 2011 the INTENT group (**I**ntegrating **T**elecollaborative **N**etworks into Foreign Language Higher Education) was awarded funding by the European Commission's Lifelong Learning programme to carry out a 30-month project. The aim of the project is to raise awareness among students, educators, student mobility coordinators and (senior) managers at university level of the advantages of telecollaboration as a tool for virtual mobility in foreign language education. It also aims to achieve more effective integration of telecollaboration in university institutions in general.

Foreign language telecollaboration or *Online Intercultural Exchange* (OIE) engages groups of foreign language learners in virtual intercultural interaction and exchange with partner classes in geographically distant locations. These exchanges most often involve bilateral projects between classes in two different countries, each learning the other's language. However, they can also involve more complex, multilateral projects involving language learners from many different countries working together online using a lingua franca such as English as a means of communication.

Telecollaboration has received little support in university contexts to date, whilst primary and secondary school teachers interested in running OIE projects have been supported by major networks and virtual platforms such as ePals ([www.epals.com](http://www.epals.com)) and the European Union's Etwinning platform ([www.etwinning.net](http://www.etwinning.net)).

Our project has shown that telecollaborative projects can offer a great many advantages to a wide range of different stake holders in Higher Education. Telecollaboration offers an effective tool in the development of students' foreign language skills, as well as their intercultural competence and other transferrable skills. It is also an excellent form of preparation for physical mobility and is a viable alternative for those students who cannot participate in physical mobility programmes for personal or financial reasons.

## Structure of this Study

The INTENT project started with a survey to gain a representative overview of telecollaborative practice amongst European universities. The survey identified the characteristics of telecollaborative practices currently undertaken by European university educators and explored the barriers which practitioners encounter when organising online intercultural exchanges. The project team also gathered the views and opinions of European students with different OIE experiences, with regard to the impact that participating in online exchange has had on them. Complete responses were obtained from 210 university educators in 22 different European countries and 131 students with experience of telecollaboration.

In the second part of the study, the project team also collected various case studies of universities, partnerships and telecollaborative networks which would provide a representative, qualitative picture of the type of online intercultural exchanges which are being carried out around Europe and which have achieved a certain level of integration in their institutions' study programmes. The case studies involved exchanges taking place between universities in Ireland and Germany, Italy and the UK, Sweden and the USA, and Latvia and France, among others. The collection also

included an example of a telecollaborative network of various exchange partners working together as well as the description of an Italian university which had staff involved in multiple projects.

### **Principal Findings of the Study**

The combination of the teacher and student surveys with the collection of case studies enabled the project team to shed light on the current state of telecollaborative practices in European Institutions of Higher Education. These findings are outlined here briefly:

#### **Survey and Case Study Findings:**

- The majority of exchanges involved the use of English as a foreign language. However, a considerable number of teachers of French, German and Spanish also responded as well as teachers of less commonly taught languages. This demonstrates that OIE is an activity which can be of value to teachers and students of any language.
- Most practitioners give priority in their exchanges to the development of students' intercultural competence and foreign language skills. However, the objectives of developing students' online literacies and learner autonomy were also mentioned regularly.
- Most OIEs currently involve classes from European universities collaborating with partner classes with US universities. There are currently few exchanges between universities in European countries and there are also few connecting Europe and the so-called 'developing world' or emerging countries/economies.
- Foreign language educators rarely find telecollaborative partners through institutional partnerships such as Erasmus. Instead, most establish exchanges with colleagues from their own academic networks or from contacts made at conferences.
- OIEs are strongly believed to have the potential of supporting physical mobility by engaging learners with students in their future host institution before departure, and also by supporting learners during their period abroad. However, there are very few examples of such exchanges currently being carried out.
- OIEs are generally carried out by highly motivated educators who believe strongly in the outcomes of these exchanges. They have often had experience of OIE as part of their training and may also have a research interest in OIE. Educators who have had experience of OIE are likely to repeat the experience.
- The most frequently used tools in OIEs in Europe are email and virtual learning environments. However, there is also a considerably high use of audio/video conferencing which until recently was not so widely available. The main difficulty reported in using audio/video conferencing was organizational due to the difficulties in working with partners in very different time zones.

- Lack of time and the difficulty in organizing online exchanges are seen to be the main factors hindering the take up of these projects by other educators. In many cases the lack of institutional recognition and support was also a factor.
- Telecollaboration can have different levels of integration into study programmes. Most practitioners assess the intercultural and communicative learning outcomes of their exchanges. However participation in OIEs does not always bring students academic credit and their work is not always institutionally recognised. The more these exchanges are 'recognised' and awarded academic credit, the more likely they are to be considered of value by students and faculty members.
- Whilst there is general agreement that it is not a problem if participants disagree with one another in OIEs, practitioners do not all feel comfortable addressing potentially sensitive topics (such as religion or terrorism).
- The impact of participating in OIEs is seen by students who have participated in projects to be educationally significant. Many reported that participating in a telecollaborative exchange led them to become more open to others, accepting and understanding of difference and to realise that their own points of view are not necessarily "the best or only ones". Many students reported establishing long term friendships with their telecollaboration peers, keeping in touch once exchanges are over and some even visiting one another. OIEs are often an incentive for students to engage in mobility.
- Telecollaborative exchanges are recognised by many universities as valuable activities for internationalisation and for the development of student mobility. However, institutions are unaware of the extra time and workload which such projects require and are either unwilling or unable to provide adequate support to staff who wanted to organise such exchanges.
- Telecollaboration not only benefits students' learning but can also contribute to educators' academic careers, by establishing connections to new academic networks and engaging in staff mobility visits with other universities etc.
- Telecollaboration is seen as a useful 'first step' on the way to developing physical mobility exchanges between institutions.

### **Strategies for Integrating Telecollaboration in University Institutions**

The report also identified different strategies which have been used by practitioners around Europe to integrate telecollaborative projects more seamlessly into their institutions and classes. They are outlined briefly here:

- By maintaining the same exchange partners over long periods, telecollaborative exchanges are more likely to become integrated into an institution's activities.

- The support of department heads is vital for the successful integration of exchanges. Their support ensures that exchanges continue even when particular staff members change institutions.
- An exchange agreement or memorandum of understanding should be signed between practitioners to provide partners with a sense of security when planning exchanges and drawing up course guides for the coming academic year.
- A further key strategy for integrating OIEs is to ensure that students will receive credit for these courses.
- Prestige and importance can also be gained for exchanges by winning academic awards and holding press launches to announce the exchanges to the general public.
- Regular fluid contact between educators is one of the keys to success. In order for exchanges to be successful, teachers need to be motivated, to believe in the value of the exchange and be willing to engage in regular virtual contact with their partner teacher.

### **Recommendations based on the study**

Based on the findings of the report, the INTENT project team would make the following recommendations to decision makers working in Higher Education Institutions around Europe and to those working in the areas of education and student mobility in the institutions of the European Union.

### **Recommendations for University Senior management**

- Encourage educators to use existing Erasmus agreements to set up online intercultural exchanges. By making use of staff mobility, educators could visit each others' institutions and establish personal connections with colleagues and understand better each others' contexts and collaborate in planning the exchanges, thus overcoming some of the challenges that online exchange involves.
- Draw up models of Erasmus agreements specifically for virtual mobility programmes. These would require partners to make a commitment to the project, could initially allow for staff mobility in order to set up the exchange and/or for educators to also teach the different groups of students. Subsequently these could be expanded to include new physical mobility agreements.
- Support the establishment of OIEs for students prior to their period of physical mobility. With the training and support of international office and language centre staff exchanges, these 'pre-mobility exchanges' could improve the quality of physical mobility by promoting integration of Erasmus students in host universities.

- Integrate OIE in teacher education programs as this will encourage future educators to integrate telecollaboration into their practice. It is also vital to provide incentives and support for educators embarking on their first experience of OIE.
- Provide a technical and administrative infrastructure which will support educators in their telecollaborative activity.
- Do not consider telecollaboration as an activity only for 'pure' foreign language students but also as a valid activity for students majoring in any subject and studying or using a foreign language.

### **Recommendations for European Decision makers**

- Support the establishment of online exchanges between European countries. The European Commission should support this activity as it has supported physical mobility – most of which occurs within Europe.
- Establish European grants for virtual mobility to help cover the organizational costs. If telecollaboration is to become an established practice in European universities, it is necessary to invest in staff and infrastructure. A small contribution from the EU towards these costs, in the form of a virtual mobility grant, would assist universities in promoting virtual mobility.
- Find systems of awarding academic credits (ECTS) for students' participation in OIEs. Alternative ways of awarding credit, such as explicit mention of the activity in the European Diploma Supplement, should also be supported.

### **Conclusion**

This report has demonstrated that while the activity of OIE is proving increasingly popular and is being used and integrated in a myriad of ways around European universities, its long-term success depends on its wider recognition and greater integration in European university education as a whole. There is also a need for increased information and support for educators who may be potentially interested in taking up the activity. The remaining activities of the INTENT project will strive to achieve these aims of recognition, integration and dissemination of telecollaborative activity in European universities. Our next step will be to release an online platform ([www.uni-collaboration.eu](http://www.uni-collaboration.eu)) in autumn 2012 which will enable educators to find partners and resources for their telecollaborative activities.

Contact the INTENT project team: [intentproject@gmail.com](mailto:intentproject@gmail.com)

Visit the project website: <http://intent-project.eu/>

Join our collaboration platform and find partners and resources for your telecollaborative projects:  
<http://uni-collaboration.eu/> (launch September 2012)

### **Acknowledgements:**

**This report and its related project have been funded with support from the European Commission. This report reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.**

