Designing a collaborative and virtual exchange-embedded virtual summer school

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Abstract

This practice report describes the design and implementation of a collaborative and virtual exchange-embedded virtual summer school for postgraduate students in the context of European Higher Education. The two-week virtual summer school on multilingualism and intercultural learning brought together 40 students who collaborated to produce ten video-case studies based on their experiences as educators in a number of contexts. We share our experiences as organisers and participants and offer insights from the process of planning for, engaging with and evaluating the summer school. Our paper draws on quantitative and qualitative data, i.e., a pre and post summer school survey, a qualitative evaluation questionnaire and a student-participant account to evidence how the experience benefitted participants. Our findings demonstrate the effectiveness of the model presented here: participants' understanding of key concepts of interculturality and multilingualism increased, there was a statistically significant difference in perceived development of digital competences and presentation skills, and more than 90% of the participants were very satisfied with their training and international collaboration opportunities. In conclusion, we propose a set of learning points that may support others to design and deliver a collaborative model of summer school and the use of 'skills passports' in alternative to accreditation.

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Keywords: intercultural communication, virtual summer school, international partnership, collaborative model

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1. Introduction

This report describes the design and implementation of a collaborative virtual summer school for postgraduate university students with focus on multilingualism and interculturality.[5] Virtual summer schools are perceived as one method of virtual mobility, which involves "registering for one or more online courses from a host university in another country and receiving academic recognition for the credits acquired" (Rubin, 2022, p. 14). Virtual mobility does not require direct learners' engagement (O'Dowd, 2020) in intercultural interaction, collaboration, and dialogue between students from different countries (van Hove, 2021).

Virtual exchanges can be embedded in in-person teaching, in blended teaching, as part of distance or online teaching, or for pre-mobility tasks (Batardière et al., 2019; O'Reilly, 2021). Here, we explore how virtual exchange (VE) can be embedded in virtual mobility. While both VE and virtual mobility offer more environmentally sustainable, accessible, and equitable experiences, virtual mobility on its own may not offer meaningful intercultural and multinational experiences (Helm & Beaven, 2020) without a purposefully designed VE component.

The phrase 'Virtual Summer School' (VSS) was coined by Eisenstadt et al. (1996) in 1994. This initial implementation aimed to cater for distance education learners of the same institution, and particularly for those unable to participate in campus-based summer schools (Issroff & Eisenstadt, 1997). The VSS emulated aspects of a conventional residential summer school with online lectures, virtual meetings and live video links between students to encourage collaboration (Eisenstadt et al., 1996). While positive learner experiences were reported, challenges included high costs due to provision of high staff support for work-related but also technical and social needs, as well as lack of a framework of collaboration to enhance a sense of group identity.

Another early example of a VSS is reported by Ritonija et al. (2016) as a form of virtual mobility first introduced in 2009. Similar to Eisenstadt et al. (1996), this VSS was also offered by an established

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5. More information about the VSS discussed in this paper can be found here: Resources – BAAL Multilingualism SIG (home.blog)

distance education institution, but it was open to students from all over the world. It aimed to enhance students' international experiences by implementing a framework for multicultural and multinational group work. Outcomes were highly positive with 85% of the participants reporting increased international communication and teamwork skills.

A more recent implementation of a week-long VSS to increase student-student collaboration was organised for doctoral students to alleviate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cullinane et al., 2022). Described as a Virtual Doctoral Network, the VSS was predominantly led by learner-learner activity, thus a low-cost model, and organised by a single higher education provider open to international participants. Recommendations for future VSSs included a blend of synchronous and asynchronous interaction as well as bringing together learners from different institutions to develop a learning community.

Yet not all VSSs aim for the highly connected models, and there are recent examples of more traditional lecture style models with some student presentations at the end, such as the 2021 implementation of an international VSS in South Korea. Alternatively, VSSs can offer a dense programme over a short time involving not only pedagogical, but also cultural, professional, and social exchanges offered by a single institution to international groups of students with accreditation through ECTS credits (Köster, et al., 2022). The authors report two example VSSs with more immersive learning experiences where online lectures are accompanied by engaging group assignments, virtual tour of a business setting, an international team challenge for an international company culminating in a final graded project or a final exam.

So far, regardless of learner-learner collaboration or intercultural dialogue, all these VSSs are designed and delivered by a single institution. We were able to identify only one VSS which involved co-operation among four partner institutions in Mexico, Italy and the UK (Hidalgo-Bastida et al., 2022). This international summer school aimed to develop international participants' technical and multicultural skills studying biomedical sciences, biotech, and bioengineering. The model involves two thirds of scientific lectures, and one thirds cultural experiences of virtual tours, exploration of varied languages, sharing of recorded cultural activities, and live food sessions. Learner evaluations indicated high levels of satisfaction and positive change in attitudes towards multiculturality and multilingualism. With each partner institution leading one component of the summer school, this was more of a co-operative model (as opposed to collaborative organisation and involvement), and the authors concluded that there is a need to assist group work and student interaction to complement high-quality engagement in content and rich cultural exchange of facts and information.

Overall, this review of VSSs suggests that they are predominantly designed, organised and offered by a single institution to students from different international backgrounds. They comprise varying levels of emphasis on social, intercultural, and collaborative elements, which are characteristics of VE but not necessarily fully aligned with VE principles (O'Dowd, 2020; Rubin, 2022). Here, we present a VSS model which embeds 'virtual exchange' organically as part of VSS design. This is accomplished through incorporation of a group project as a core component of the design (rather than a summative summer school assessment or presentation) along with concomitant online lectures and social activities. The VE is also embedded in the design and delivery of the VSS with close collaboration and coordination between partner institutions not only in planning and delivering the content, but also in providing guidance and assistance to international student groups during their teamwork on their product-oriented projects. As such, the model involves co-teaching at staff-staff level of the exchange, and teamwork in international groups at learner-learner level of exchange. Due to the nature of the partnership, it was not possible to offer accreditation and recognition as part of students' own degree programmes. This was compensated by the offer of a 'skills passport' that can evidence employability skills as part of a career portfolio.

2.   Context

The VSS ran in the summer of 2021, at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic where the majority of HE students in Europe were still largely being taught remotely. Partner A, where the authors of this report are based, is a Russel Group university located in the UK. Partner B is a large private university located in Southern Europe. English is used as a medium of instruction at both institutions although Partner B also offers courses in Greek.

2.1.   The partnership

The partnership was developed through a previously existing professional relationship between staff members. As part of a shared common commitment to inclusive education, the partnership focused on recruiting learners that are less likely to have access to in-person mobility programmes, for example, because of caring duties and work commitments (Issroff & Eisenstadt, 1997).

2.2.   Overview of participants

The summer school brought together 40 students: 22 from University A and 18 from University B. The majority were female (82.5%) and either teachers or trainee-teachers (72.5%). All University B

students were pursuing education-related MA programmes. Students at University A were attending postgraduate programmes in applied linguistics and education, (68.18% at masters' level and 31.82% at doctoral level). All students were attending courses in English but only three students considered themselves first language speakers. Students enrolled into the summer school because they wanted to improve their understanding of how multilingualism and interculturality are conceptualised and applied into research and workplace practice.

2.3.   Staff

Ganassin and Satar were both organisers and facilitators. In collaboration with two colleagues at Partner B, they selected the topics, created the activities, and designed the evaluation tools. Ngoc Thinh Pham was a student-facilitator who supported recruitment, access to the platform, analysed the survey data, and contributed to the final report. Staff offered technical (creation of video materials) and social (group work management) support to students (see Issroff & Eisenstad, 1997).

3.   Objectives of the VSS

The VSS had four main aims: [6] (1) To bring together students from a diverse range of backgrounds to develop intercultural and multilingual awareness, enhance collaborative skills and employability skills; (2) To foster synergies between the partner-institutions and thus to contribute to their internationalisation strategies; (3) To propose a replicable model of virtual learning and intercultural exchange; (4) To create guidelines for best practice to equip other students with the intercultural communicative skills needed for employability and global engagement.

The ability to have effective interactions with others from diverse cultural groups is a key employability skill (Watkins & Smith, 2018). Previous literature on VSSs has valued cultural diversity in the programme in that participants can engage in intercultural dialogues and develop collaborative thinking (Pina Stranger et al., 2022; Verouden et al., 2018).

Intercultural skills are competences that involve awareness of the self and the other, awareness of our own culture and other people's cultures and the attitudes and strategies that allow us to build bridges between communities (Byram, 2012). Taking into account the increased mobility and

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6.   Available at:Resources – BAAL Multilingualism SIG (home.blog)

technological advancements, we understand global knowledge as the awareness of the dominance of English language worldwide, the hegemony of ICT skills and the need for developing collaborative approaches in solving real world problems (Pennycook & Makoni, 2020). Drawing on these two concepts, the overall aim of the VSS was to develop students' intercultural communication and multilingual skills that attend to the workplace. Furthermore, organisers saw it as an opportunity to foster synergies between the partner institutions and thus contribute to their internationalisation strategies.

In this practice paper, we present quantitative and qualitative feedback provided by facilitators and a student-participant (Regan) to evaluate the implementation of the VSS model proposed here.

4.   Project design

The summer school was an externally funded extra-curricular activity that was optional and non-credit-bearing. A detailed workplan (Appendix A) was designed by the partnership as part of the funding application to include creation of activities, recruitment, delivery, and evaluation.

The summer school was unique from previous summer schools in that it incorporated both co-teaching and student collaboration focused on the production of video projects (VE). The video task is presented in Appendix B. Also, although it was not accredited there was a formal way of acknowledging students' achievements through a 'skills-passport', modelled on the learning outcomes of the project, detailing the skills students gained and demonstrated (Appendix C).

The focus and contents of the VSS were based on the partnership's extensive experience of developing research and teaching and learning contents in the areas of intercultural communication, VE and technologies for language learning and multilingualism. The VSS ran over two weeks (Monday to Friday) in July 2021. Each institution managed their student recruitment and enrolment processes. This helped to distribute the workload and manage students' expectations locally.

Following Cullinane et al. (2022), the VSS included a set of asynchronous and synchronous sessions. We proposed a mix of social (e.g., team building games and virtual city tours using pre-existing video resources created by the two institutions) and pedagogical activities. The pedagogical contents of the two-hour synchronous sessions, delivered in the evening, included: introduction to interculturality, multilingualism in the classroom, critical visual literacy and video making skills. The contents were modelled on postgraduate level modules taught at the two institutions. For example, students were

offered an introduction to multilingualism with focus on theoretical debates and recent empirical research. During the asynchronous sessions, students were asked to engage in moderated discussion tasks on Moodle. Students were also asked to allocate additional time to work on their group projects.

Draft Programme

The summer school includes a series of synchronous (2 hrs per session, 4.00-6.00 pm BST) and asynchronous activities (Table 1).

Table 1. Draft programme

Week 1: Monday 28 June-Friday 2 July				
Day 1(28/06)	**Day 2**(29/06)	**Day 3**(30/06)	**Day 4**(01/07)	**Day 5**(02/07)
Introduction (sync)	Introducing key terms (async)	Multilingualism in educational settings (sync)	Story circles and didactical videos (async)	Getting started with the group projects (sync)
Week 2: Monday 05 July-Friday 9 July				
Day 1(05/07)	**Day 2**(06/07)	**Day 3**(07/07)	**Day 4**(08/07)	**Day 5**(09/07)
Planning the videos projects (sync)	Independent group work(async)	Good practice in multicultural educational contexts (sync)	Finalising the video projects(async)	Presentations and closing ceremony (sync)

Participants worked in mixed teams created by the instructors to produce ten video-case studies. The pedagogical approach of the VSS encouraged students to explore and reflect critically on the experiences of groups of learners in different formal and informal education settings relevant to their experiences as teachers and/or teacher trainers. The activities included, for example, Story Circles and didactical videos from the VirtuLApp. These resources were used as prompts for case studies to encourage critical thinking and the development of multilingual awareness and intercultural competences that support students to identify and reflect on inclusive practices in teaching contexts where vulnerable, displaced and minority groups are involved.

5.   Evaluating the VSS

The VSS was evaluated using a two self-evaluation surveys (Appendix D) delivered via Microsoft Forms. Learners' participation was monitored through their activity on Moodle and their attendance on Zoom. Participants and staff also completed a final evaluation survey where they were asked to

share feedback about their experience (e.g., structure and contents) and to identify areas for improvements.

The responses to the summer school pre- and post-evaluation questionnaires were both valid for analysis. The items compared respondents' self-evaluation of their intercultural skills, global knowledge as well as digital competences and presentation skills before and after the summer school. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were conducted. A total of 25 students completed the questionnaires, the majority of them were female (84%) and non-native speakers of English (92%). Students were asked to complete the questionnaire offline, and this may have impacted on the response rate. Participation could have been improved by building the survey into the core summer school synchronous programme.

The outcomes of the survey show that there was an increase in students' understanding of key concepts of interculturality and multilingualism. A statistically significant difference in the respondents' self-evaluation of digital competences and presentation skills was found ($Z = -3.21$, $p = .001$), indicating that the participants witnessed some improvements in navigating between online learning platforms, using video editing software and visual aids for presentations.

An anonymous final survey was used to evaluate the satisfaction and skill development of staff and students. The survey consisted of six closed-ended items and one open-ended item. The first two closed-ended items measured the level of satisfaction about the training and international collaboration opportunities, whilst the other four items focus on respondents' perceptions of their development of transversal, team working, research and field-specific skills. In total, there were 24 valid responses for the two items on overall satisfaction and 23 valid responses for the four items on skill development.

As shown in Figure 1, all the valid responses fell into the two highest scales measuring satisfaction: 22 out of 24 respondents (91.67%) were very satisfied with the training experience school, whilst 23 out of 24 respondents (95.83%) were very satisfied with the international collaboration opportunities that they received.

Figure 1. Staff and student satisfaction with the training and international collaboration opportunities offered by the summer school

Figure 2. Staff and student evaluation of skill development
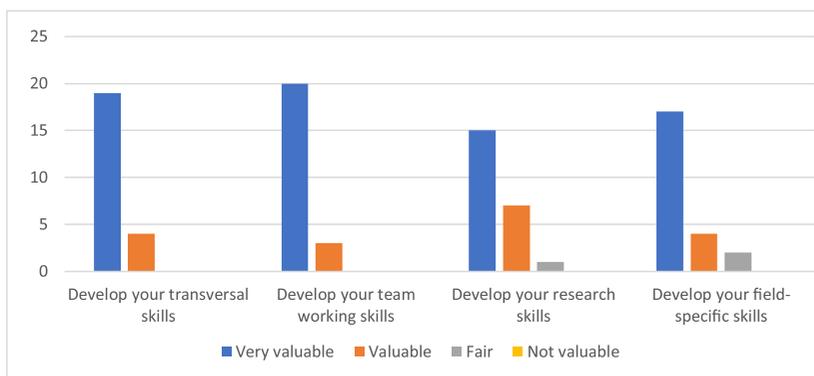
The overall staff and student evaluation of skill development also appeared highly positive i.e., 82.60% and 86.95% of the respondents agreed that they had received valuable opportunities to develop transversal and team working skills (Figure 2).

Such evidence demonstrates that the summer school fully met the expectations of participants to work collaboratively with peers from different countries and to increase their abilities of thinking critically, solving problems, making logical decisions and developing discipline-specific skills. Moreover, 65.22% and 73.91% of the respondents highly valued the opportunity to develop research and discipline-specific skills.

The benefits of the VSS model that we proposed are further evidenced by the student-participant account included in the next section.

5.1. Student-participant account

The benefits of the VSS model that we proposed are further evidenced by Regan's student-participant account. It draws on a post on their LinkedIn page about the summer school and its benefits.

> There were three main reasons that I decided to take part in the summer school. Firstly, as a Languages, Communication and Politics student, I have always been interested in language learning and teaching, so the topic of the summer school aligned well with my interests. Secondly, I appreciate opportunities to interact with people who have different lived experiences. In the context of Covid-19, the overall concept seemed to provide a great opportunity to have an international experience, without travelling. Finally, the summer school was also advertised as an opportunity to work on new digital skills, such as video making. Whilst I have strong basic IT competencies, I was excited about working on new digital skills in which I lacked confidence.

> I had never taken part in a VSS before, however, I had taken part in online exchange programmes, and my expectations were that it would be similar: heavily structured group work, intense staff coordination, easy communication and organisation, and cross-institutional teaching and guidance. However, my actual experience was different. For example, whilst there were mediated opportunities for us to discuss and exchange in large groups, these were not too structured, nor did they feel 'unnatural'. Additionally, we were given the freedom to plan and produce in whatever way we wished during our allocated group work time and the asynchronous sessions. This was a great opportunity for us to work on soft skills in addition to the subject-focussed and digital hard skills.

These soft skills were primarily developed through overcoming the challenges we experienced. For example, given that we were working in an intercultural and unfamiliar group there were some key considerations: language, organisation and timelines. We worked in a group of three and used English as a Lingua Franca. To assign tasks, we decided to first write out all necessary tasks and then assigned tasks based on individual strengths. This exercise allowed us to find out more about each other and maximise learning opportunities. Additionally, although the time difference was only 2 hours, it meant that we often struggled to find a time that was not too early or late outside of normal teaching hours to meet. However, we navigated this by working asynchronously setting strict deadlines to ensure we were able to progress with our project.

At the end of the summer school, we presented our videos to all participants and facilitators and were given a 'Skills Passport' which outlined some of the key skills we had gained including intercultural communicative skills and digital competencies. I was proud to share this on my LinkedIn, as I believed this demonstrated I possessed many skills that are essential in the modern-day workplace and would be attractive to employers.

Overall, the summer school exceeded my expectations, allowing me to develop both soft and hard (subject-focussed) skills. The VSS provided an opportunity to work with students in other parts of the world at a time where student mobility was greatly restricted and emphasised how I could use VE in the future to enhance my international experience sustainably and consistently.

7.   Conclusions

This practice report demonstrated the effectiveness of a model of VSS that embedded some features of VE. Our experience confirms that online summer schools can represent positive and inclusive learning experiences for those who, for reasons that include childcare or causes of force majeure such as the Covid-19 pandemic, cannot travel internationally. VSSs allow learners to achieve discipline-specific and employability-related learning outcomes whilst reducing financial outlay (Cullinane et al. 2022). Institutional constraints prevented us from including the summer school in a pre-existing credit-bearing module or from offering extra credits to participants. However, as demonstrated by the survey data and by the student-participant account, the 'skills passports' were beneficial to

acknowledge attendance and learning. As demonstrated in section 6, it is also useful to evidence learning experiences to future employers. The skills passports reflected the objective of the training, and no formal evaluation was conducted. In context where a formal evaluation is possible, trainers may want to list only the skills that participants actually developed and to what extent. Student motivation and course length should be carefully considered in such an approach.

Here we include a summary of key learning points which could be used for the implementation of similar VSSs in other institutions:

- **Collaborative model:** Theme(s) and focus of the VSS should reflect the expertise present within the partnership as well as the interests of their learners. We advise designing a tailored workplan of activities that allows organisers to consolidate with the tasks.
- **Teamwork and collective learning production:** Teamwork across the different partner-institutions is a challenging but also invaluable intercultural learning experience. It is important to set clear and manageable tasks and goals (e.g., creation of a video project) and to encourage open communication and mutual accountability to solve problems and make decisions.
- **Use of learning platforms:** If multiple platforms are used, learners should be given both the opportunity to use at least one platform they are familiar with and, at the same time, they should be supported to develop digital skills through the use of a new platform.
- **Skill-based certificate of attendance:** Especially if the VSS is not accredited, it is important to provide evidence of participation and of the skills that learners gained. We suggest creating certificates of attendance (e.g., 'skills passports') with a detailed a set of skills based on the learning outcomes of the VSS.

Finally, as a key step to create a sustainable partnership beyond the life of the VSS, organisers and learners discussed areas for improvement as well as future initiatives such as the creation of a structured VE as a part of a joint credit-bearing module.

8.   Acknowledgements

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Project Workplan

	April 2021	May 2021	June 2021	July 2021	August 2021	Sept 2021	October 2021
Phase 1: Project Planning							
1st online project planning meeting (task distribution, finalising schedule and contents of the Summer School)	■	■					
Publicity, recruitment, preparation of consent forms		■					
Summer School Preparation Creation of Moodle contents (Partners 1-2), Zoom links (Partner 1), Enrolment (Partner 2 on Moodle)		■					
Phase 2: Online Summer School							
Online Summer School with certificates of attendance made available			■	■			
Phase 3: Project Evaluation							
Partnership meeting online, evaluation of pre- and post-Summer School questionnaires, project outputs (summary of key learning points and multilingual set of guidelines for good practice) finalised					■	■	
Final report submitted; group video projects completed by students made available online						■	■

Skills Passport

This is to certify that:

[Name of Participant] participated in the Summer School [title] organised by [Partner A] and [Partner B]. The Summer School is funded by the Association of Commonwealth Universities. The Summer School took place from [date] to [date]

The participant:

1. Gained and demonstrated the English language and intercultural communicative skills.
2. Gained and demonstrated digital competencies (use of Youcut video editor, navigate between online learning platforms).
3. Gained an academic understanding about 'multilingualism' and 'intercultural communication' concepts.
4. Demonstrated the ability to analyse a series of critical incidents and case studies and assign reasons to them beyond easy attributions to cultural differences.
5. Demonstrated willingness to engage with others in a professional context and to co-produce learning outputs.
6. Demonstrated presentation skills including using visual aids effectively, organising a well-structured and coherent presentation.

Date   Organisers

Pre-Summer School Survey

This survey is part of the Summer School 'Sharing Good Practice in Multilingual and Intercultural Virtual Learning Space's funded by the Association of Commonwealth Universities. The purpose of this survey is for the organisers to evaluate the Summer School. You will receive **two questionnaire surveys**: at the beginning and at the end of the Virtual Summer School. Your participation in this questionnaire survey is **voluntary**. Your responses will be kept **confidential**, and the survey will not contain information that will personally identify you. If you have any questions about the survey, please contact Dr Sara Ganassin. I have understood the above information (please tick here)

Section A: Demographic information

Question 1. Where are you studying?

Question 2. What is your email address?

Question 3. What is your gender?
 Male   Female   Prefer not to say

Question 4. At what level of education are you currently studying?
 Master's level Doctoral level

Question 5. What is your nationality?

Question 6. Is English your first language?

Yes   No

Question 6a. If English is NOT your first language, what is your current level of English proficiency?

- CEFR below level B2 (IELTS less than 6.5)
- CEFR level B2 (IELTS 6.5)
- CEFR level C1 (IELT 7.0 – 8.0)
- CEFR level C2 (IELTS 8.5 – 9.0)

Question 6ab What is your first language (or languages?)
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Section B: Understanding of interculturality and multilingualism

Question 7. What is your understanding of **interculturality**?

Question 8. What is your understanding of **multilingualism**?

Question 9. How important is **interculturality** in the workplace, particularly formal and informal educational settings?

- Not important
- Slightly important
- Moderately important
- Important
- Very important

Question 10. How important is **multilingualism** in the workplace, particularly formal and informal educational settings?

- Not important
- Slightly important
- Moderately important
- Important
- Very important

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Section C: Learning experiences related to intercultural skills and global knowledge

Read the following statements (Q11 à Q25) about your **learning experiences related to intercultural and global knowledge** and choose **ONE** option that is most **True** to you.
1 = Strongly disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Neither agree nor disagree
4 = Agree
5 = Strongly Agree

		1	2	3	4	5
Q11	I possess and I am able to demonstrate the English language and intercultural communicative skills needed for **employment**.					
Q12	I possess and I am able to demonstrate the English language and intercultural communicative skills needed for **global engagement**.					
Q13	I possess and I am able to demonstrate digital competencies (e.g., use of Youcut video editor, navigate between online learning platforms).					
Q14	I am able to explain ways in which different types of identities (gender, age, racial, ethnic, national, geographical, historical, linguistic, etc.) impact on others in professional contexts.					
Q15	I have an academic understanding about **'multilingualism'** that allows me to engage in critical discussions.					
Q16	I have an academic understanding about **'interculturality'** that allows me to engage in critical discussions.					
Q17	I am able to **understand** how language and interculturality are empowering resources for engagement with others.					
Q18	I am able to **appreciate** how language and interculturality are empowering resources for engagement with others.					
Q19	I have the ability to **name** my intercultural experiences in different educational settings.					
Q20	I have the ability to **critically question my** intercultural experiences in different educational settings.					
Q21	I have the ability to **explain** to others my intercultural experiences in different educational settings.					
Q22	I am able to **analyse** a series of critical incidents and case studies.					
Q23	I am able to **assign reasons** to a series of critical incidents and case studies beyond easy attributions to cultural differences.					
Q24	I am able to demonstrate willingness to **engage with others** in a professional context.					
Q25	I am able to demonstrate willingness to **produce learning outputs** with others in a professional context.					

Read the following statements about **your presentation skills (Q26 à Q29)** and choose **ONE** option that is most **True** to you.
1 = Strongly disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Neither agree nor disagree
4 = Agree
5 = Strongly Agree

		1	2	3	4	5
Q26	I am able to use visual aids effectively for my presentation.					
Q27	I am able to organise a well-structured and coherent presentation.					
Q28	I am able to make effective use of examples from relevant academic theory for my presentation.					
Q29	I am able to make effective use of examples from relevant research studies for my presentation.					

Data Protection Statement