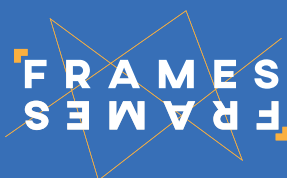




## **STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK**

**FOR THE INTEGRATION OF BLENDED  
MOBILITY AND VIRTUAL EXCHANGE IN  
HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**



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## About FRAMES

FRAMES “Fostering resilience through Accredited Mobility for European Sustainable Higher Education innovation” aims to foster a harmonised implementation and accreditation of Virtual Exchange, as an integral part of (blended) mobility approaches, among European Higher Education Institutions, making the European Higher Education Area more innovative, intercultural and resilient.

The project is funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union and spans over 2 years (March 2021 – February 2023).

FRAMES is implemented by:

UNIMED – Mediterranean Universities Union (Italy)

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Sharing Perspectives Foundation (The Netherlands)

University of Girona (Spain)

University of Limerick (Ireland)

University of Siena (Italy)

More information on the Project can be found at: <https://frames-project.eu/>

## Partners

The logo for UNIMED, featuring the word "unimed" in white lowercase letters inside a blue circle.The logo for UNICollaboration, featuring the word "UNICollaboration" in a sans-serif font with a small graphic of three colored dots (blue, orange, and green) to the right.The logo for the Universitat de Girona, featuring the text "Universitat de Girona" in a serif font, with a stylized graphic of a building above the text.The logo for the University of Limerick, featuring a green graphic of a building and the text "UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK" and "OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH" in green.The logo for the Università di Siena, featuring a circular seal with a figure and the text "UNIVERSITÀ DI SIENA" and "1240" below it.



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## — INTRODUCTION

This Strategic Framework aims to support the adoption of Blended Mobility (BM) and Virtual Exchange (VE)<sup>1</sup> as **regular and consolidated practices** within the international activities of Higher Education Institutions across Europe, **complementing physical and virtual mobility**<sup>2</sup> to increase the number of students who **benefit from an international/intercultural experience** as part of their education, thus developing their **transversal/soft skills**.

For the purpose of this framework, VE is referred to in all its forms, be it a ready-made programme or a co-designed project. Co-designed VEs are developed by teachers from at least two Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to develop students' transversal skills in addition to furthering their understanding of specific course content. They are usually centred around subject-specific curricula. Ready-made programmes, on the other hand, are designed by professional VE providers, and can be integrated into Higher Education (HE) courses or stand alone as an opportunity for students from different disciplines to discuss and learn about specific topics. Ready-made programmes are usually centred around transversal skills development and require less time for HEIs to adopt and integrate into their curricula. Ready-made programmes<sup>3</sup> are therefore a quick and effective way for HEIs to gain familiarity with Virtual Exchange.

BM and VE are not an end in themselves, but rather (like physical mobility), the means to an end: VE and BM can contribute to **increasing the number of students who benefit from an international and intercultural experience** as part of their education, thus developing their **transversal skills**. This advantage also extends to the teachers, who are able to expand their digital, pedagogical and intercultural competences, through the implementation of their projects. BM and VE can also provide an opportunity for HEIs to innovate their teaching, develop a more student-centred approach, and develop the learning opportunities they provide.

<sup>1</sup>In the FRAMES project, by Blended Mobility (BM) we mean a combination of a Virtual Exchange and a physical mobility, while Virtual Exchange (VE) can also be a stand-alone learning experience, or integrated in a course, without being combined with a physical mobility exchange. This is why here we refer to both BM and VE, to include both cases when VE is combined with a physical mobility or when it is not.

<sup>2</sup>Within the FRAMES project, by Virtual Mobility we understand “the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to obtain the same benefits as one would have with physical mobility but without the need to travel” (Bijnens, Boussemaere, & Rajagopal, 2006, 20 p. 5). In other words, enabling the students in one HEI to follow lessons – and possibly taking exams – in a different HEI (as they would do with a physical mobility) without the need to collaborate with the students from the host institution does not classify as Virtual Exchange.

<sup>3</sup>Experienced ready-made virtual exchange providers are the Sharing Perspectives Foundation (<http://www.sharingperspectivesfoundation.com>) and Soliya (<http://www.soliya.net>), which both were part of the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project.

This strategic framework is built upon the lessons learnt from the FRAMES project, and in consideration of the European policies in the field. More specifically, reference is hereby made to the research carried out to draft and publish the [FRAMES Scenarios Report](#)<sup>4</sup>, the interviews made with practitioners for the two rounds of the FRAMES training, and the [FRAMES Toolkit](#)<sup>5</sup>, aimed at HE professionals, so that they can access the tools and information provided (including case studies on the various approaches that HEIs can take to integrate and accredit VE and BM). The Framework is also in line with the EU Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027)<sup>6</sup>, which outlines the vision for high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe, and contributes to two of the main objectives of the [European Strategy for Universities \(2022\)](#)<sup>7</sup>:

- Empowering universities as actors of change in the twin green and digital transitions by providing opportunities for digital and hybrid inclusive intercultural education experiences.
- Reinforcing universities as drivers of the EU's global role and leadership, connecting them with institutions, their staff and students, around the globe.

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<sup>4</sup>FRAMES Scenario Report: Beaven, A., Pittarello, S., & van der Heijden, C. (2021). Scenarios for the integration of Virtual Exchange in Higher Education. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5573614>

<sup>5</sup>FRAMES Toolkit: Mühlbauer, J., & van der Velden, B. (2022). Toolkit for integration of Virtual Exchange in Higher Education. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7101684>

<sup>6</sup>COM(2020) 624 final, 30 September 2020

<sup>7</sup>COM(2022) 16 final, 18 January 2022

## — RATIONALE

HEIs aiming at adopting BM, and VE in general, as regular practices within their international activities will require leaders who can actually steer the profound changes needed at managerial, educational and cultural levels. Adopting VE as a regular practice will support HEIs in their ambitions to:

- **become more inclusive** by offering an international experience to those students that are less likely to go abroad as part of their education;
- **increase Internationalisation at Home (IaH) and Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC)** by enabling their students to exchange ideas and collaborate with peers in different geographical areas, thus developing a better understanding of global issues and of different world views, even if they do not take part in a physical mobility programme;
- **boost the employability** of their graduates by preparing them to enter an international and intercultural labour market, by developing their transversal skills;
- **change participants' attitudes**, by broadening horizons, helping them to go beyond stereotypes, making students and teachers more open-minded, and equipped with better intercultural communication skills;
- **offer innovative educational opportunities**, enabling their staff to develop skills relating to digital and international teaching practices;
- **increase institutional resilience to unforeseen circumstances**, training their educators to teach in online environments;
- enhance **sustainable internationalisation**, from an environmental and economic point of view;
- strengthen or extend **partnerships** with institutions across the globe;
- raise the **profile** of the university at national and international levels.

The aim of this Strategic Framework is to provide a set of actions for the integration of BM and VE in HE that **recognises national and institutional differences**, and the specific challenges educators face when implementing BM and VE. This set of actions, structured into the five areas illustrated in the following paragraphs, will help HEIs to:

- develop an **institutional structure supportive of BM and VE** across all HE units, departments and degree programmes;
- Introduce BM and VE in their institutional strategies related to **internationalisation – including Internationalisation at Home and Internationalisation of the Curriculum –, digitalisation and educational innovation**;
- include **BM and VE as activities carried out in the context of international partnerships**;
- strive to implement **quality VE activities, both as part of BM programmes and of curricula in general, through recognition and accreditation** of the unique learning outcomes that the VE component provides;
- support educational and organisational staff to sustainably offer VE activities through **provision of resources, recognition and training**.



## TARGET AUDIENCES AND STAKEHOLDERS

Sustainable **implementation of BM and VE** requires **collaboration between different units within the HEI**, such as the Internationalisation office, Academic Affairs, IT services and academic departments, offices dealing with Inclusion and Sustainability, as well as with relevant stakeholders outside the institution. **University leaders and managers**, who are the main target of this Framework, will hence need to advocate for the changes described in the following chapters, by involving:

- **Internationalisation officers**, because BM and VE contribute to **enhancing comprehensive internationalisation strategies and increasing Internationalisation at Home (IaH) practices**, by allowing students to work with their peers in other countries even if they do not take part in a physical mobility;
- **HE programme Coordinators**, because BM and VE can enhance **sustainable internationalisation** of HE degree programmes (First-Cycle, Second-Cycle, PhD). BM and VE also offer opportunities to strengthen or extend partnerships with institutions worldwide;
- **students**, because BM and VE can guarantee a **more inclusive HE learning environment** by offering an international experience to those students that are less likely to go abroad as part of their education;
- **teaching and administrative staff**, because BM and VE offer the **chance for innovative learning opportunities**, enabling them to develop their skills relating to **digital and learner-centred teaching practices, as well as acquiring a more international outlook on their own discipline**;
- **careers office staff**, so that they can raise the awareness of employers regarding BM and VE as activities which enhance students' **employability** by helping develop transversal and subjects-related skills.

At a further level, university leaders and managers will play a crucial role in advocating for changes at local and national levels, by involving the following key stakeholders:

- **Ministries of Higher Education and National Agencies for Quality Assurance in Higher Education**, since they can create a supportive environment in terms of **funding and regulation**, which would enable HEIs to adopt BM and VE as regular practices within their international activities.

## — TIME FRAME

HEIs need to plan the integration of BM and VE within a suitable time frame: this can go from less than 6 months if the plan is to offer a ready-made programme to students, to a year (or more) if different units need to be involved in the development of an institutional strategy or a co-designed VE project. Having a clear and detailed Action Plan can help establish an agreed time frame, as well as identify different steps, stakeholders, champions and detractors, and necessary resources.

To this end, the FRAMES partners have produced a template for an [Action Plan](#), the last step in a series of activities, published as the [FRAMES Toolkit](#), to help HEIs to successfully integrate BM and VE within their educational offer.

## — AREAS OF ACTION

To integrate VE and BM as a regular practice within HE, university leaders and managers are encouraged to take action in the following five areas, in accordance with their national and institutional regulations, while taking into account the administrative context of their institutions. For institutions new to VE, some initial steps could be taken quickly and easily, leaving time for the gradual implementation of the remaining steps.

### 1. Strategic Coordination

In order to ensure that BM and VE are integrated smoothly within a HEI's educational offer, university leaders and managers are encouraged to:

- **set up a Working Group dedicated to BM and VE**, which can meet at regular intervals to monitor and coordinate BM and VE activities and which includes representatives of the various stakeholders concerned, including the Internationalisation unit, Inclusion Officer, Sustainability Officer, Student Services, IT department, Educational Offer, Academic Affairs, student representatives etc;
- **coordinate BM and VE at central (institutional) as well as decentralised (faculty/departmental) level**, by appointing a dedicated institutional position. Central coordination can be carried out within the international office;
- **include BM and VE in different institutional strategies and policies**, such as those related to internationalisation, digitalisation, teaching innovation, inclusion, and sustainability.

### 2. Human, economic and IT resources

The integration of BM and VE in HE programmes inevitably requires both economic and human resources, but supports a broad range of institutional objectives when achieved. Therefore, to ensure integration, it is advisable that university leaders and managers:

- **identify a BM and VE coordinator** that can oversee BM and VE design, implementation and evaluation at central (institutional) and decentralised (unit/department) level;
- **appoint dedicated staff within degree programmes to support the implementation of BM and VE**, including facilitators, instructional designers, tutors;

- **provide support, including financial**, for teaching staff that develop and implement BM and VE (i.e. time release to develop VE, specific training in VE, continuous professional development in the field of VE);
- **make IT support available** for activities linked to BM and VE;
- **provide sustained financial support** for ready-made VE offers, if these are considered the best option within the specific context of the institution;
- **set up customised services for students**, in order to familiarise them with the practices of BM and VE and raise their awareness of the value of including BM and VE in their university studies;
- **support the visibility** of BM and VE activities through a dedicated space on the institutional website, as well as conference presentations, meetings within HEI departments and other national/international HEIs and networking events.

### 3. Accreditation and recognition

Accreditation hereby refers to the process of granting official status to the knowledge, skills and competences developed as a result of a course or of an educational experience (e.g., an internship) by a HEI. This must be done through the process of granting credits. In comparison to accreditation, recognition does not automatically imply credits. Recognition without credits can include, for example, the awarding of a specific diploma or a digital badge.

As shown in the FRAMES scenarios report<sup>8</sup>, accreditation and recognition are seen as strong motivators for students, and it is important to ensure that recognition and accreditation are applied equally to all participating students in the BM and VE experiences. As above, these two aspects can be broken down into smaller steps that are implemented gradually.

Within this context, HE leaders and managers are encouraged to:

- **involve the various HEIs units concerned with accreditation and recognition** in the design, implementation and assessment process from the very beginning. They need to work closely with the units responsible for mobility programmes as well as with programme coordinators, to ensure that this type of educational activity is fully recognised for all participating students and accredited if appropriate;

<sup>8</sup>Beaven, Ana, Pittarello, Sara, & van der Heijden, Casper. (2021). Scenarios for the integration of Virtual Exchange in Higher Education. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5573614>

- **ensure recognition of the whole set of learning outcomes that are achieved by the students.** Recognition concerns all the learning goals attained by participants at the end of the BM and VE experiences, including those related to the development of transversal (soft) skills;
- **ensure recognition of the specific BM or VE component** if these are inserted into existing courses, and adapt accreditation accordingly. Recognising the specific learning objectives of a BM and VE component will help motivate students and increase the value of their international learning experience;
- explore the possibility of **including VE and BM among the activities recognised as international**, so that they complement physical mobility in the students' transcript of records (starting, for example, by including them in the Diploma Supplement);
- **ensure recognition that is valuable not just to students, but also to all the staff involved.** This can be achieved through Open Badges, microcredentials or awards granted, for example, to the best BM or VE project each year, or by ensuring visibility through dedicated institutional web pages showcasing innovative teaching practices;
- ideally, **define the credits to be awarded and other forms of recognition** for the participants in the BM or VE project jointly with the partner institution, to **avoid asymmetric recognition** (whereby, for example, students from different institutions receive different credits for the same work).

#### 4. Quality

The quality of BM and VE needs to be ensured through organisational structures, processes and partnerships. HE leaders and managers are encouraged to consider the following points:

- **build equitable partnerships** between institutions involved in the BM and VE to ensure equal engagement between the partners and equal commitment among participating students. European University Alliances are an ideal context in which to ensure this type of equality, since they already foresee joint mobility initiatives. Adding BM and VE to strengthen those programmes would thus be beneficial and relatively easy to achieve. University Alliances can also help ensure the sustainability of BM and VE activities;

- BM and VE can be incorporated into all subject areas, enhancing quality and innovation, so **encourage adoption** across the curriculum;
- **ensure that** BM and VE projects are designed with an eye to those international learning opportunities that have a high learning potential in preparing graduates to meet the challenges of a globalised world;
- **develop competence(s) of teaching and administrative staff through** regular training courses and professional development **initiatives**. Designing and developing BM and VE require a set of competences including those related to pedagogical design, to the management of learning processes, to the integration of BM and VE into syllabi and curricula, and to the assessment of learning outcomes beyond those strictly related to course content;
- **implement a mentor scheme** within the institution between staff new to BM and VE and experienced VE-practitioners in order to exchange ideas and knowledge, and ensure the quality of new BM and VE projects;
- offer **tested and validated ready-made programmes** which have a proven methodology on student's transversal skill development.

## 5. Sustainability

The sustainability of BM and VE implies a forward-looking plan that should be carefully designed from the start, so that this innovation is not just the result of one enthusiastic individual (who may one day leave the institution).

University leaders and managers committed to ensuring that the institutional BM and VE strategy is not only successful, but also sustainable in the long term, are encouraged to:

- **create a community of practice** to raise awareness of BM and VE as educational practices, to offer support to existing practitioners and coordinate dissemination of information, guidance and (peer) tutoring services for staff involved in BM and VE;
- **incentivise career progression** of teaching staff who include VE into their practices and courses, and grant awards for good practice in BM and VE;

- **support long term planning** of the BM and VE initiatives by incorporating these into wider projects/networks (e.g. European University Alliances, governmental/institutional projects/research projects etc.) and in institutional strategies and policies;
- **promote awareness** of BM and VE activities among staff and students to increase motivation and buy-in. Involve former students as testimonials (Alumni network) to increase curiosity and motivation in younger students;
- **partner with ready-made virtual exchange providers** who have ongoing programmes every semester, which offers continuity in the VE programming at HEIs.

## — RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENTS AND POLICY MAKERS

HEIs will not fully exploit the potential of VE as an innovative pedagogy that can contribute to the fulfilment of their vision and mission unless governments and public authorities in charge of Higher Education create a supportive environment, in terms of funding and regulation, enabling HEIs to adopt BM and VE as regular practices within their educational offer. It is important to stress that Blended Mobility (BM) and Virtual Exchange (VE) are **complementary activities to physical and virtual mobility**, aiming to increase the number of students who **benefit from an international and intercultural experience** as part of their education.

Below is a summary of recommendations resulting from the findings of the FRAMES project, and aimed at policymakers as well as policy advocates to raise their awareness of the value of BM and VE and to ensure governmental and institutional support for the integration of BM and VE in Higher Education across Europe and beyond:

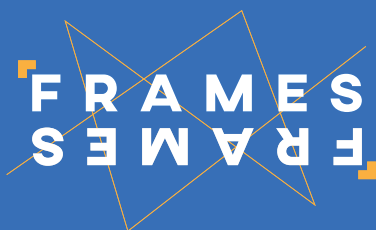
- **make VE (whether as part of BM or not) compulsory within HE programmes**, acknowledging its capacity to innovate learning and support students' career, also for those who would never be physically mobile;
- **include BM and VE as a benchmark** for Quality Assurance Agencies to assess HE programmes, which would imply innovating the quality standard by the national authorities;
- **provide** appropriate and stable funding and resources for **training for all staff in order to equip them with what they need in order to design, deliver and evaluate quality BM and VE**. Provide this **funding alongside funding for ready-made virtual exchange providers** who have a proven ability to run large scale virtual exchange programmes, allowing more young people to benefit from VE as a meaningful intercultural experience as part of their education;
- support HE staff to sustainably offer VE activities through **provision of resources, recognition and training**;
- **reinforce strategic alliances between HEIs** for the development of joint BM and VE programmes embedded in specific degree programmes at different levels (Bachelor, Master, PhD), inspired by the European Universities Alliances.



## — CONCLUSIONS

By formulating these recommendations, the FRAMES team hopes to contribute to a smooth integration of BM and VE within the institutional strategies and policies of HEIs, and to further enhance the digital readiness and inclusiveness of the Higher Education system in Europe and on a global scale. To this end, it is crucial to signal that:

- the **implementation of BM and VE requires collaboration between different actors and units within the HEI**, such as the academic leadership, internationalisation office, academic affairs unit, inclusion and sustainability offices, IT services and academic departments;
- the **sustainable integration of BM and VE takes time and resources**, but supports a broad range of institutional objectives when achieved. Faster solutions can be found in ready-made virtual exchange programmes, which can be offered across the different disciplines and programmes;
- a concrete **Action Plan can help** ensure successful and sustainable BM and VE integration and accreditation. To this end, we have designed a Toolkit which helps you invest time and resources effectively;
- the full potential of VE can be exploited if governments and public authorities in charge of Higher Education create a **supportive environment**, in terms of **funding** and **regulations**, that enables HEIs to adopt BM and VE as regular practices within their educational offering, and **support ready-made programmes** to scale its participant numbers.



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