Virtual exchanges in Israel: Faculty experiences of implementing a transformative pedagogy

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Abstract
Virtual exchanges (VEs) have become a tool for internationalization at home (IaH) policies in higher education, including Israel. Faculty are key in translating IaH policies by developing VEs. However, little research has been conducted on faculty's perspectives and experiences in VEs. In this small-scale qualitative survey study, using an activity theory framework, I examine Israeli faculty's experiences and perspectives while designing and implementing VEs. The findings highlight the significance of institutional support and equitable partnerships in creating successful VEs and the impact of Covid-19.

1. Introduction
Internationalization, the process of integrating global, international, and inter-cultural dimensions into higher education, virtual exchanges (VEs), where students from different countries learn and collaborate online, and digitalization are three higher education (HE) practices, policies, and research trends. These trends have intersected in the last decade as VEs have become an internationalization tool due to their flexible design and use of advanced digital technologies to enable easy and inexpensive facilitation of student interaction across time and distance.
Driving the internationalization trend is the belief that it provides students the global skills (e.g., digital literacy, language and intercultural competencies) required for the global marketplace (Deardorff et al., 2012; Dooly, 2017) and increases higher education institutions (HEIs)’ global prestige (De Wit & Altbach, 2021). Student and staff mobility (studying or teaching in a foreign country) is considered the best internationalization tool by many global HE policymakers, but for most of the world, only a minority (1-5%) of students can participate (De Wit & Altbach, 2021). Internationalization at home (IaH), providing students international experiences at their home institution, often times using digital tools, has developed to address student mobility limits. VE is a prominent method of IaH, where students from different cultures have sustained interactions for learning purposes, enabled by technology and facilitated by educators. Recent research in IaH has demonstrated the effectiveness of different IaH methods in developing students’ global skills, including VEs (De Wit & Altbach, 2021; Finardi & Guimaraes, 2020). The literature also claims faculty play a key role in translating top-down IaH policy into an educational reality for students.

Since 2018, I have facilitated a VE for academic English skills with other Israeli and European HEIs, experiencing firsthand the benefits and challenges of VEs. This VE was one of many developed during an Erasmus-funded program. During a design meeting, I remember one faculty member joking that our team was the only one that worked well together. In the end, only two out of four courses, including our VE, continued beyond the pilot as collaborative courses, perhaps due to the enjoyable personal relationships between faculty.

Since student mobility in Israel is limited for financial, cultural, and political reasons, IaH is being incorporated into institutional and national internationalization strategies. A part of my college's top-down IaH policy to internationalize courses, I have become pedagogical consultant who advises faculty members on how to transition content courses taught in Hebrew into English medium instruction (EMI) courses while at the same time integrating international perspectives and digital tools. My personal experience with VEs, my professional need to advise faculty on international, language and digital pedagogy, and the current internationalization trends in Israel have inspired me to explore how faculty experience the VE design and implementation process, contextualized with institutional and national internationalization trends.

As stated above, faculty is considered essential for the successful execution of IaH policies, including VEs. It is critical to understand their perspectives during the design and implementation process to provide effective support. While previous research on VEs has developed guidelines on effective collaborative course designs, demonstrated VEs’ ability to improve students’ global skills, and highlighted challenges, little has focused on faculty beyond listing necessary teaching competencies (O’Dowd, 2015).

Moreover, VE research has a pragmatic focus, with limited use of theory. Theory generates a common language to gather, interpret, and compare research, allowing isolated pieces of research to contribute to knowledge beyond the life of a project (Bligh & Flood, 2017). An increased theoretical application would advance IaH and VE research from discrete research studies to developing overarching concepts that could be applied in multiple contexts (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). Activity theory (AT) has been previously applied to VEs, albeit sparingly and only from students’ perspectives, due to its ability to investigate and analyze real-world, complex learning environments within their local context (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Activity theory describes how individual and collective factors (“elements”) affect a goal-driven (or “object”) activity and its eventual outcome. Tensions between the individual and collective elements are called “contradictions”.

This small-scale research aims to compare several faculty’s perspectives and experiences from various Israeli HEIs while designing and implementing a VE to understand faculty’s motivations to facilitate VEs and how they navigated the challenges of VEs. This study uses an AT framework for the research design and data analysis. The following research question attempts to achieve these aims:

1. What are faculty’s experiences and perceptions while designing and implementing a VE in an Israeli HEI?

1.1 What were the perceived objects?

1.2 What were the perceived contradictions, and how were they resolved?

1.3 What were the perceived outcomes?

2. Literature review

I review the internationalization literature, especially IaH and the role of faculty, since internationalization policy is a driving force of VE development in Israel. I also discuss virtual exchanges, focusing on teachers’ roles, since VEs from faculty perspectives are this study’s primary focus. This section uses the word teacher along with faculty since
VE literature covers secondary and tertiary education. I conducted a Scopus search using relevant keywords (virtual exchange, COIL, collaborative online international learning, telecollaboration, global teams) and moved backward and forward through the most relevant papers’ citations to find additional literature.

2.1 IaH as an internationalization method

Internationalization describes how HEIs make policy and practice choices in how to interact with a globalized world to achieve national or institutional goals, such as improving student outcomes, raising research prestige, or increasing profits (Altbach & Knight, 2007). In this study, I use Knight’s (2003) working definition of internationalization at the national/sector/institutional level since I examine VEs within national and institutional contexts: “…the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (p. 2).

One key theme from the literature is the evolution of strategic internationalization policy over the last thirty years. Internationalization moved from an “ad hoc, fragmented” policy of elite Western institutions to a comprehensive national and institutional strategic policy pursued by most HEIs worldwide (De Wit & Altbach, 2021). Recent literature describes a diversity of goals and methods for internationalization policies, depending on national, regional, and institutional contexts (Knight, 2004; Németh & Csongor, 2018; Unangst & Barone, 2019). Despite this diversity, a persisting belief exists that staff and student mobility is the “gold standard” method for achieving internationalization goals (Beelen & Jones, 2015). However, IaH scholars highlight that mobility opportunities are limited, with less than 5% of students having an outbound mobility opportunity (Marinoni, 2019).

Leading internationalization scholars have developed the concept of IaH as an answer to the mobility problem. IaH provides international experiences for students at their home institutions through the “…purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions in formal and informal curriculum” across all disciplines (Beelen & Jones, 2015, p. 69). Some studies found IaH achieved internationalization goals more than student mobility (Soria & Troisi, 2014). While many HEIs have recognized IaH’s value in written policy, practice still shows a reliance on staff and student mobility (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Marinoni, 2019). This contrast between policy and practice underscores the need for action plans to turn IaH policy into practice.

The literature describes three main methods of IaH: integrating international students with home students, internationalization of the curriculum, and VEs (Barbosa et al., 2020; Guimarães et al., 2019; Harrison, 2015). Several scholars agree that faculty are critical stakeholders in achieving IaH goals for all methods since they translate top-down institutional policy into pedagogical practice and research collaborations (Barbosa et al., 2020; Leask, 2015). However, research shows that HEIs view faculty as an obstacle due to a lack of international experience and expertise (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Németh & Csongor, 2018). Beelen and Jones (2015) report a contrast between low investments by HEI in faculty professional development and claims that a primary IaH obstacle is limited faculty skills. Literature recommends professional development of faculty’s global skills and internationalization specialists to guide international curriculum development (Beelen, 2017).

Recent research on VEs as an IaH method show VEs’ potential as a cost-efficient method of developing global skills while delivering discipline-specific content (Guimarães et al., 2019; Helm & Acconcia, 2019; Rubin, 2015). De Wit and Altbach (2021) listed VEs first among recommended actions for the next internationalization phase since it provides students international experiences without mobility. However, this literature mainly focuses on students and is seemingly disconnected from the general VE literature. This study aims to bridge this divide in literature by highlighting faculty roles in VE through empirical research.

2.2 Virtual Exchange—definition, benefits, challenges

While VEs have recently become a strand of IaH research, VEs as a concept, practice, and research field has developed separately across various education levels, disciplines, and geographical areas since the mid-1990s with the rise of the Internet. This evolution created numerous terminologies (e.g., telecollaboration, virtual exchanges, collaborative online international learning) to describe courses that are “technology-enabled, people-to-people education programs sustained over a period of time in which sustained communication and interaction take place between individuals or groups who are geographically separated, with the support of facilitators and/or educators” (ERASMUS+ Virtual Exchange, 2018). VE course design is flexible, appropriate for diverse contexts and educational goals. I employ the term VE since European and Israeli policy use it, and it is not discipline-specific.

VE scholars note that VEs have progressed from simple, one-on-one, teacher-initiated, add-on courses to credit carrying activities encouraged by HEIs and complex, multi-part-
ner projects (Dooly, 2017; O’Dowd, 2016), a similar trajectory to internationalization. A primary research focus in VE literature is the mapping of student benefits and challenges. Benefits include positive student experiences and global skills gains (Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018; Helm & Acconcia, 2019). Barriers to successful VE can be categorized into technological, organizational, and interpersonal challenges. Common technological issues include inappropriate or incompatible digital tools, privacy and accessibility considerations, and cultural use of technology differences (Chun, 2015; Çiftçi & Savaş, 2018; Swartz et al., 2019). Organizational challenges consist of logistical issues (scheduling and time differences), lack of institutional support (technical, financial, and pedagogical), course design, and difficulty balancing course, institutional, national, and global needs (Chun, 2015; Kollias et al., 2005; Marcillo-Gómez & Desilus, 2016; Swartz et al., 2019). Interpersonal conflicts arise between students from different student motivation, linguistic skills, and intercultural competencies (Alvarez & Steiner, 2019; Helm, 2020; Luo & Yang, 2018). Additionally, cultural differences in teaching and learning styles can create misunderstandings between students and teachers (Basharina, 2007). Overall, the literature has a robust understanding of student benefits and challenges. However, research on teachers’ experiences or perspectives in VEs is lacking, leaving a gap in understanding.

2.3 Teacher perspectives in VEs

The sparse literature on teachers’ perspectives in VEs mainly focuses on how teachers can overcome the challenges mentioned in the paragraphs above through well-designed courses, student preparation, and teacher competencies (O’Dowd, 2015). Stornaiuolo (2016) highlights in his case study on a high school VE the importance of teachers modeling intercultural conversations about complex, controversial topics. Other studies emphasize that teachers need to invest in course design and transform moments of student conflict into intercultural learning experiences (Chun, 2015; Clavel-Arroita & Pennock-Speck, 2015). While this literature provides essential guidelines for teachers on designing and facilitating VEs, it seems to place the sole responsibility for a successful VE on the teacher without considering contextual limitations, advising teachers without listening to or addressing their concerns on an institutional level.

Moreover, these studies only discuss teachers’ contribution to successful student outcomes without directly considering the teachers’ personal experience. Nevertheless, this experience can be gleaned from a few studies. Teachers report VE as time-consuming and challenging yet worthwhile for professional development, building international collegial relationships, and providing unique, engaging experiences to students (Kollias et al., 2005; Marcillo-Gómez & Desilus, 2016; O’Dowd, 2015; Swartz et al., 2019). Mudi-amu’s (2020) dissertation on faculty experiences using VEs for IaH purposes found that faculty, through participation in an institution-sponsored VE fellowship program, improved their pedagogical knowledge, became internationalization agents, and felt their students gained 21st-century skills.

Most of these studies used exploratory qualitative methods that lack a theoretical framework. While these insights are valuable to understanding teachers’ perspectives, a more systematic method using an established theoretical framework would advance VE research by establishing a common language to compare results and build a unified VE theoretical framework. Additionally, on a practice level, more theory-based, systematic research would create a more nuanced understanding of how to support teachers and reduce the workload of a VE most effectively.

3. Theoretical framework

For this study, I take an interpretive, subjective viewpoint since it aims to understand participants’ perspectives and experiences within their local contexts (Cohen et al., 2013). Furthermore, based on socio-cultural constructionism, I assume that people actively construct their views, and learning is influenced by interaction with the socio-cultural context (Cohen et al., 2013). To explore this interaction more systematically, I employ activity theory (AT) as my theoretical framework. This framework influenced the research justification, research design, and data analysis. AT is a practical theoretical tool that aligns with the core beliefs of the socio-cultural constructionist approach. It describes the complexity and dynamic nature of real-world complex learning environments, such as VEs, and provides guidance to enhance the design of these environments (Blin, 2012).

AT is a rich, complex theory that is applied across academic disciplines. In this section, I review the fundamental aspects of AT and the most relevant concepts that shaped this research. AT describes the interplay and mutual influence between individuals and their social context, examining the tension between the individual and collective (Kim, 2010; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). The basic unit of analysis is an object-oriented activity (an activity with a specific goal or object) that differentiates between individual action within a collective activity and collective action, focusing on the “complex interrelations between the individual subject and his or her community” (Engeström, 2001, pp. 134-135; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010).
Engeström’s (1987) activity system model visualizes the relationship between six elements of an object-oriented activity system (Figure 1). The subject is the individual or group of individuals from whom the entire system is being viewed. The object is the motivation or purpose of the activity. The tools are the physical and psychological artifacts used to achieve the object. The rules are the formal and informal rules or norms that affect how the activity occurs. The community is the other members of the social group participating in or influencing the activity. Division of labor is how tasks and labor are divided among the community.

Engeström’s activity system model is the basis of my theoretical framework since it provides a systematic way to describe and then compare each participant’s perspectives and experiences while designing and implementing VEs. Additionally, the following four principles of AT described by Engeström contribute to my framework by providing justification, influencing my conceptual framework, and guiding my data analysis.

Engeström’s principle of multi-voicedness justifies this research. An activity system always contains a multitude of voices, views, and interests. This concept allows the analysis of activity systems from different focal points within the same system to better understand a complex activity (Kim, 2010). Most VE research almost exclusively focuses on students’ voices. This study examines the VE activity system from the faculty’s view, an influential voice lacking in the current literature that will contribute to a deeper, more holistic understanding of VEs.

Two principles foreground VEs as the primary unit of analysis while delineating essential background context, thus defining this study’s contextual boundaries. Engeström’s first principle states that the prime unit of analysis is a collective, artifact-mediated, and object-oriented activity system seen in its network relations to other activity systems. In this project, the prime unit of analysis is VEs (meso-level activity systems), as seen within its networked relationship to institutional and national internationalization activity systems (macro-level activity systems) (Blin, 2012).

Additionally, Engeström’s third principle emphasizes analyzing an activity system within the local historical context. For this project, the local historical context is the Israeli internationalization process and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Finally, Engeström’s fourth principle, the central role of contradictions as sources of change, is a central concept in this study’s data analysis. Contradictions are problems or tensions that arise within and between elements in the activity system. Activity systems change when contradictions are resolved. Successful resolutions of contradictions lead
to positive development, while unsuccessful resolutions cause stagnation or collapse. Primary contradictions reside within individual elements of an activity system. Secondary contradictions occur between elements within a system. Tertiary contradictions happen when an updated element is added to an activity system, while quaternary contradictions exist between the activity system under analysis and external activity systems.

3.1 VE and AT

Few VE studies have used AT, mainly to analyze contradictions in activity systems with students as the subject and improved global skills as the object. Despite similarities in contradictions described in these studies, each presented the contradictions using different terminology. For example, Basharina (2007) described three levels of contradictions as intracultural (or personal), intercultural (between students or student/teacher), and technology-related contradictions, while Antoniadou (2011) labeled three levels as intra-institution cultural, inter-institutional, and technology-related contradictions. Madyarov and Taef (2012) and Nishio and Nakatsugawa (2018) discussed primary, secondary, tertiary, and quaternary levels of contradiction in the students’ VE activity system, focusing mainly on primary and secondary contradictions. Only Madyarov & Taef (2012) mentioned quaternary contradictions, which were the impact of political interference and work/life balance on the VE activity system.

All these studies showed that most students had positive experiences in VEs. However, the literature demonstrated how contradiction resolution could impact student satisfaction and learning. Less successful contradiction resolution (avoiding interpersonal/intercultural conflict) led to lower satisfaction and learning, while successful resolution (negotiating conflict) led to higher satisfaction and learning (Ryder & Yamagata-Lynch, 2014).

These studies prove that AT can be successfully applied to VEs to describe contradictions and resolutions within a complex system, placing the challenges of VEs from a student perspective into an established theoretical framework. Analyzing VEs activity systems with faculty as the subject would add another layer of understanding to these complex, social-learning experiences and generate ideas on how best to support VEs.

4. Research design

4.1 Research context

Israeli HE is a two-tier system with an elite, publicly-funded research tier of nine universities and a secondary publicly and privately-funded teaching tier of 53 colleges (Education, 2018). Israel has followed the global trend of internationalization, moving from fragmented, institutional policy only pursued by elite universities to comprehensive national policy for all HEIs. In 2018, the Israeli Council for Higher Education (CHE) declared internationalization as a systematic national policy, allocating significant funds for this purpose. The primary goals of this policy are to raise national research and academic excellence through inbound student mobility and research partnerships, with limited emphasis on IaH and Israeli students (Education, 2018).

In Israel, VEs are a small but growing course design. Erasmus-funded programs have provided the funding, knowledge, and networking to advanced VEs in Israel, especially for second-tier colleges (Yemini, 2017).

4.2 Methodology

For this study, I used a qualitative survey methodology, a simple, pragmatic research methodology that focuses on describing diversity in a population. Many qualitative surveys are conducted as one-shot, one-method studies for pragmatic reasons or when good prior knowledge is available. This method aligns with this study’s research aim of studying multiple faculty perspectives on VEs and the limited time available to conduct the study (Jansen, 2010). Qualitative surveys look at “the diversity of some topic of interest within a given population” (Jansen, 2010, p. 3). In this study, the topic of interest is VEs within Israel, and the population is faculty who have designed and implemented a VE at an Israel HEI in 2020.

4.3 Methods

Before conducting data collection, ethical approval was received from the module tutor, according to Lancaster University’s ethics guidelines.

The primary survey tool was semi-structured interviews since they “produce rich empirical data about the lives and perspectives of individuals” (Cousin, 2008, p. 71). Semi-structured interviews allow for a balance between covering planned issues related to study aims and the need for flexibility to let the interviewee develop ideas and reflections.
on their experience (Denscombe, 2010). Moreover, course syllabi were collected to verify information in the interviews and provide a deeper understanding of the courses. Finally, documents relating to internationalization in Israel (policy documents, relevant websites) were gathered to contextualize the participants’ experiences within Israeli internationalization trends.

Using the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo12, I conducted a systematic analysis using the elements of AT system model as codes (e.g., object, tools) on the transcribed interviews (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Using these codes, I built activity system(s) for each participant to identify contradictions. Then I compared these activity systems to understand the diversity of experiences and perceptions within the survey population. Additionally, inductive, thematic qualitative analysis was used to allow the emergence of unique themes from the data (Thomas, 2006).

### 4.4 Participants

I identified possible participants through purposive sampling to ensure participants had the relevant knowledge and experience to produce the best data (Denscombe, 2010). Four participants were interviewed (Table 1). According to Lancaster University’s ethical guidelines, all interviewees received a consent form and information sheet explaining the study’s purpose and procedures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Type of HEI</th>
<th>Partner country</th>
<th>Discipline(s)</th>
<th>Number of years academic teaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>1st tier university</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel(2 VE courses in 2020)</td>
<td>2nd tier academic college in the south</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neta</td>
<td>2nd tier academic college in the south</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>History/Communications</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilad</td>
<td>2nd tier academic college in the north</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>5</td>
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</table>

While diverse in age, discipline, and HEI type, the participants shared the common characteristic of designing and implementing their first VE in 2020 at an Israeli HEI. The courses were new courses developed as a VE but based on the lecturers’ expertise and similar courses taught using traditional pedagogies. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on Zoom due to geographical distance and Covid-19 restrictions. Video and audio recordings were made with participants’ consent. According to the interviewee’s preference, interviews were conducted in Hebrew and/or English and later transcribed and analyzed in the interview’s language(s). Quotes used in the findings section were translated to English after data analysis.

### 4.5 Survey tool

I created a semi-structured interview schedule based on Engeström’s 1987 activity system model (Appendix A). For example, to understand the object of the VEs from a faculty perspective, I asked participants to describe their own goals and their goals for students for the VE. To explore the impact of cultural norms on the VE, I asked participants to describe the benefits and challenges of working with international partners and to what extent did cultural norms affect student participation.

### 5. Findings

This section presents my findings as four major themes: motivations, institutional support, interpersonal relationships, and Covid-19. I use the six elements of an activity system and the AT principle of contradictions to describe the themes.

#### 5.1 Motivations

One of the first questions asked to the participants was what motivated them to become involved in a VE. All participants responded that a VE seemed a “fun” or “interesting” teaching project. These perceptions seemed to stem from their previous positive international academic experiences, which possibly primed the participants to understand the potential impact of VEs for themselves professionally and their students. Lee and Gilad, the younger participants, had

Table 1. Participants

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only international experiences as students. As Gilad stated, “I love things that are international.” Rachel and Neta, the older participants, also had international teaching experiences through exchange programs and conferences and were excited to guide students on a similar journey. Neta mentioned her previous experiences showed her “it [international experience] was so significant for students.”

5.2 Institutional support impact

The second central theme is the importance of institutional support. Lee and Gilad experienced a perceived lack of personalized institutional support, a secondary contradiction between the subject (Lee and Gilad) and the community (HEI). Both struggled with logistical/administrative tasks (e.g., scheduling and choosing shared digital tools) since their institutions offered some guidance, but it was fragmented and general, such as explaining different educational apps. For example, Lee noted her university offered general advice that was inappropriate for humanities courses: “…What I notice in general about these support systems… they are not catered exactly to humanities ….but instead to a more general approach…”.

Gilad described being overwhelmed with the digital educational app options, which lead to inaction.

…she [the director of digital teaching and learning] said there …are all types of programs that you can use like PowerPoint and its more interactive…but in the end, I didn’t use them because just to learn all these programs… and I understand the program is good…but I said I already don’t have energy…

Both also attended one-day VE training conferences, but they received general advice not tailored to their specific course. Lee resolved this contradiction by seeking personal support from colleagues with previous experience and using familiar digital tools such as Zoom. Gilad also relied on familiar digital tools but never found personalized support.

In comparison, neither Neta nor Rachel experienced this contradiction. This seemed to result from ongoing support from Amy, the internationalization coordinator at the southern college, an expert in internationalization of curriculum. Amy seemed to eliminate common organizational challenges in designing and implementing VEs, allowing Neta and Rachel to focus on pedagogy. As Rachel said, “Amy was next to me …for every deliberation…she was there…”. Neta emphasized how Amy “…was very involved in our course” by assisting with bureaucracy issues (e.g., credit transfers) and pedagogical issues (e.g., course framework).

Interestedly, the importance of personalized international guidance seemed invisible to all participants. When directly asked if they received help from the institution when planning the course, Neta and Rachel answered “no.” Only after probing for more details was the amount of constant and personalized support revealed. Lee and Gilad had difficulty articulating what would have been more helpful. As Gilad said, “I’m not sure that someone could help me so much.” This demonstrates the need for an internationalization specialist to guide faculty in designing their first VE, since the faculty may not understand what help they need.

5.3 Interpersonal relationships impact

Participants experienced three major interpersonal contradictions: faculty-faculty, student-student, student-faculty. Successful resolutions of these contradictions led to a higher perceived impact of the VE on student outcomes, while unresolved contradictions negatively impacted perceived student outcomes.

5.3.1 Faculty-Faculty

Gilad and Rachel experienced an unequal division of labor between themselves and their international partner during the VE, creating a primary contradiction between faculty. Gilad had no previous personal relationship with his partner before the VE; they were introduced virtual through professional connections when Gilad searched for a possible VE partner. Gilad’s partner offered to integrate the VE into an existing course, which limited the number of meetings in the VE and its structure. During the design phase, Gilad felt that he did most of the work creating the VE and that the other teacher was “doing me such a favor.” Each planned his own lessons without input from the other. This contradiction was not resolved during the VE, reducing Gilad’s ability to achieve his stated course object of providing his students with international engagement. In the future, Gilad plans on finding a partner willing to build one shared course to avoid this contradiction.

Rachel experienced this contradiction when pivoting a short-term mobility course into a “binge” VE at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, handling all the logistics and communication herself between six lecturers from Poland and Germany. Rachel concluded from this experience that working with only one partner with an existing good relationship can deliver similar results with less work. She then applied this lesson to her fall 2020 VE, which she built with a German colleague she worked well with from the binge VE course.
Additionally, Rachel and Gilad experienced this unequal division of labor in preparing students for the VE. Both felt their partners under-prepared the German and Danish students for the VE, which seemed to reduce its effectiveness. Rachel prepared her Israeli students through assigned reading and by practicing discussion topics in English beforehand: “We had classes where I threw a topic so they would feel comfortable around a discussion, generally discussing English.” However, she explained that her partner organized the course differently, which meant “therefore, the preparation was less and their [the international students] meetings was harder”. In the following quote, Gilad illustrates how he prepared his students.

…”[I explained] what would be in the lesson, so it was clear what was going on….and also at the end of the lesson I said what we learned. And also in the next lesson, I said what we learned in the previous lesson.

However, his partner did not complete similar preparations.

In both cases, this contradiction was not resolved during the VE, leading to exaggerated cultural characteristics of students that will be described in the following section. Rachel and Gilad plan to prevent this contradiction in the next iteration of their VEs by running identical courses on both sides of the partnership.

In contrast, Lee, Neta and Rachel (in her fall 2020 VE) experienced positive and equitable working relationships with their international partners, making the complex, time-consuming planning and running of the VE enjoyable and rewarding. All three described their partnerships as “flowing” and used overly positive language when describing their working relationship. Neta commented that “…we didn’t divide it [the work], it flowed quite naturally” and that her partner was “…a lovely woman, it was nice for me to work with her”. Rachel state that “we did it [the work] together” and “it was very dynamic.” Lee called her partnership “very symbiotic” and stated that she “…learned a lot through it [working with her partner] and it was really enjoyable”. These positive working relationships allowed these participants to attain their object of having an enjoyable teaching experience.

The participants’ contrasting experiences in their partnerships highlight how personal relationship between facilitators can significantly impact the faculty’s experience of VEs, for better and for worse.

5.3.2 Student-Student

Different cultural norms among the students caused a primary contradiction. Lee and Rachel mentioned differences in age and life circumstances, causing a gap in experience and knowledge among students. Israeli students were much older because their army service delayed their higher education. This delay also meant that some Israelis worked to provide for themselves and possibly, their families. The German students were younger and had less responsibilities. All participants mentioned general cultural characteristics, such as Israeli students as more open and less formal, while the German students as more reserved and formal. In the following quote, Rachel explained how the Israeli students participated more willingly in discussions than German students.

…”the Israelis flew for it. They really liked the…they talked too, they were very open…the Germans had a very hard time. I mean it took a long time until the [German] students started speaking English, it was very difficult for them.

Rachel and Neta also highlighted discipline-specific cultural differences, such as viewing social work as activism versus simply a government job or discussing the Holocaust as citizens of the perpetrating nation versus citizens of the country built by survivors, or as Neta expressed it “was your grandmother a Nazi?”. In VEs with more perceived successful student interaction, these differences were resolved through conversation, especially at the beginning of the VE. Modeling and facilitating discussions on cultural differences was perceived as an essential step in encouraging international engagement between students. Lee stated, “we also addressed it [cultural differences] in class in the beginning.” Neta emphasized the importance of the facilitators modeling these discussions by saying, “…we needed to demonstrate this difficult conversation [about the Holocaust] for our students to help defuse it.”

5.3.3 Faculty-Student

The last interpersonal contradiction, cultural clashes between faculty and students, is a secondary contradiction between social norms and the community experienced by Rachel and Gilad. For Rachel, this contradiction occurred as a conflict over her teaching style with the German students. Rachel described herself as “…a very strict teacher. You know, if I go to a breakout room and they are talking about their babies, I say, let’s go back. I am very very strict.” However, from Rachel’s perspective, her German students expected to be catered to as consumers. Rachel saw her
strict style as causing “antagonism” between herself and the students. This contradiction was resolved through discussions between Rachel and her partner and then with the students, “created a very, very interesting and enabling dynamic” between herself and the students.

For Gilad, this contraction was expressed mainly as discomfort with the Danish students, which limited his ability to interact with them. Gilad showed his discomfort by saying, “They really aren’t my students, I can’t really comment [criticize/correct] them. Also, some of them had very different names…, I couldn’t say ‘Liz, can you please explain’…like I could with my students”. The uneven partnership between Gilad and his partner could be blamed for Gilad’s discomfort since it contributed to the Danish students being less prepared for the exchange. The short timeframe of the VE also limited the time Gilad interacted with the Danish students, making him feel more like a guest lecturer than a co-facilitator.

5.4 Covid-19: Historical context

Three participants mentioned the impact of Covid-19 on their VE, a quaternary contradiction because pandemic restrictions halted international travel and closed campuses in Israel and partner countries. Covid-19 caused Neta and Rachel to suddenly pivot previously planned mobility “binge” courses into VEs. They both recognized videoconferencing’s potential to facilitate sustained international student engagement through discussions and projects. As Neta stated, “…since there is Zoom, we’ve understood its potential”. An advertisement for Rachel’s course emphasized how Covid-19 provided opportunities to develop VEs: “Also in this complicated period of Covid-19, we’re not giving up on developing internationalization and just now an interesting window of opportunity has opened up to advanced VEs.”.

For Lee, who originally planned to videoconference between two physical classes in conference rooms, Covid-19 solved the logistical challenge of booking classroom space. As she stated, “And then I tried to [book the conference room again]…like it was complicated. So it turned out to be perfect actually, to do it on Zoom.”.

In addition, since most VEs in this survey occurred several months into the pandemic, Israeli students and teachers already had a semester of experience with videoconferencing tools, reducing the need to teach technology tools during the VE. As Rachel stated, “…at the beginning of Corona, people didn’t know how to use the Zoom too great. I don’t think I would do this [teaching to unmute] now, cause you know, everybody knows it already”. The participants perceived that Covid-19 advanced familiarity with digital tools necessary for VEs and created opportunities to pursue VEs that didn’t exist previously. Covid-19 is an example of the importance of time and national context in a local activity system.

6. Discussion

This section discusses this study’s main insights in conversation with relevant literature to answer my research questions on faculty’s perspectives and experiences designing and implementing VEs in Israel. The insights include personal, interpersonal and external dimensions.

On a personal dimension, a motivating factor for the participants’ involvement in a VE was their previous international academic experience. This finding strengthens the belief that faculty’s international experiences can contribute to IaH (Beelen & Jones, 2015). Nevertheless, as I established earlier, staff professional development is vital for impactful internationalization, even for staff with previous experience (Beelen & Jones, 2015). Moreover, some literature claims that previous international experience is not needed for faculty to participate in IaH programs if HEIs provide professional development (Beelen, 2017; Mudiamu, 2020).

On an interpersonal dimension, my findings emphasize the importance of facilitators’ partnership on faculty’s experience during a VE and achieving desired outcomes. Lee, Rachel, and Neta demonstrated that a close, equitable working relationship with their VE partner contributes to overcoming challenges through dialogue with their partners and students, enjoying the heavy workload, and achieving their desired outcomes. This finding seems congruent with Marcillo-Gomez’s and Desilus’s (2016) findings that their friendship helped them overcome challenges in a VE and enjoy the experience.

In contrast, Gilad showed the challenges of an uneven partnership, which seemed to create and exaggerate contradictions that were never resolved, leading to partially achieved outcomes. Similarly, O’Dowd’s (2015) case study of four novice VE teachers highlighted the difficulty of negotiating with a partner to build a VE.

Ryder and Yamagata-Lynch (2014) reported that students in a VE with a high-functioning partnership (negotiating interpersonal contradictions) achieved better intercultural and language skills outcomes than students in a low-functioning partnership (avoiding interpersonal contradictions). This study demonstrates how interpersonal relationships
affect the outcome of a VE, despite focusing on students, not faculty. Successful VE outcomes seem dependent on negotiating interpersonal contradictions, not mitigating or preventing them. The facilitators’ relationship is an under-studied and undervalued element of a VE that deserves more attention.

The importance of an internationalization specialist in minimizing organizational challenges is another significant finding concerning interpersonal relationships. This finding bolsters internationalization scholars’ claims that internationalization specialists should guide lecturers, even those with international experience, when designing international courses or undergoing an internationalization of curriculum process (Beelen, 2017; Leask, 2015). Mudiamu (2020) reported that faculty who participated in a HEI-sponsored VE fellowship program developed a community of practice, gained professional skills, and felt supported by their institution during the VE. Ongoing, specialized professional development and institutional support for faculty designing and implementing VEs do not eliminate challenges but reduce them and create a rewarding professional process for faculty, who then better facilitate the experience for students.

The Covid-19 pandemic was an external dimension that affected the VEs in this study. Although Covid-19 disrupted plans for some participants, it was an opportunity to explore the potential of VEs for internationalization. Covid-19 positively impacted the participants’ VEs since the pandemic normalized videoconferencing and online learning digital tools. This finding contrasts some studies on emergency remote teaching and learning during Covid-19 or political unrest, which reports negative effect on learning due to the complexity of rapidly moving to online learning from face to face learning, despite best efforts to maintain educational continuity (Czerniewicz et al., 2019; Madyarov & Taef, 2012).

7. Conclusion

Previous studies have demonstrated VEs’ potential to achieve IaH’s aim of providing students opportunities to improve global skills without leaving their home institution using advanced digital tools despite multiple common challenges. Most research focuses on students’ experiences or best design practices and tools, not faculty’s experiences. This research on faculty experiences during VEs contributes to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of VEs as a tool for IaH. Using an AT framework, this study demonstrates that previous international experiences can motivate faculty to participate in VEs and the importance of the co-facilitators’ relationship for a successful VE.

Moreover, this study shows that faculty, as critical stakeholders in IaH policies, benefit from specialized institutional support. HEIs in Israel and other similar contexts interested in developing VEs for IaH, especially in the wake of increased acceptance of online communication and teaching tools due to Covid-19, should focus on building support systems for faculty that provide personalized guidance to help faculty gain or translate international experiences into discipline-specific pedagogy using the appropriate digital tools. Providing faculty opportunities to improve global and digital skills themselves may also help facilitators build positive partnerships with their international co-facilitators.

This study’s main limitation is the small number of participants. Additionally, only the Israeli side of the faculty partnership was explored. Further research with a larger number of participants and both sides of the partnership could expand these findings in the Israeli and international context. Also, further research could compare faculty’s and students’ experiences within the same VE.

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Appendix A: Semi-structured interview schedule

A. Motivations
1. How did you become involved with this virtual exchange program?
2. What were your motivations to design and implement this virtual exchange?

B. Program Design
3. How did you choose the topic of your VE?
4. Describe in your own words your goals for the students in the VE and your own goals.
5. How did you choose the design of the course?
6. How did you choose the digital tools or technological platform for the course?
7. How did you collaborate as a team? What were the challenges and benefits of working as an international team?
8. What were the biggest challenges in designing the course? How were they overcome?
9. What types of training, professional development or other supports did you receive while designing and implementing this virtual exchange? Where they effective?

C. Implementation
10. In your opinion, to what extent did students achieve the learning outcomes of the course?
11. Which activities seemed the most engaging for participants? Which activities seemed less engaging? Why?
12. To what extent did cultural (institutional) norms or differences affect student participation?
13. In your opinion, to what extent were the choice of digital tools successful? Why or why not?
14. What was effective or not effective in terms of facilitating the exchange?
15. What recommendations would you make for improving your program?