



NOVEMBER 2020

Virtual Exchange: Keys to Global Workforce Success

GAZELLE INTERNATIONAL
*Making your international higher education strategy work.
Moving from vision to measurable results.*

Dr. Nancy L. Ruther, Founder and Principal, Gazelle International
Alexa Jeffress, CLICK Teaching and Learning Coordinator

About Gazelle International

With our higher education partners -- presidents, professors, educators, program leaders -- we are committed to the success of our graduates as they build our future in this complex global world. Internationalization is a key strategy to the success of all students, and faculty and leadership are fundamental. That is the founding vision of Gazelle International, a registered nonprofit based in Guilford, CT, USA. Yet, in a world of climate change and pandemics, our traditional anchors of education abroad and mobility are hobbled. Virtual exchange is key to re-building that crucial global foundation for our students. Faculty engage students in collaborative team work across countries, and they do it with the rigor of the classroom while also harnessing the power of connective technologies. We have built our virtual exchange (VE) system, CLICK (Collaborative Learning for International Capabilities and Knowledge), to help colleges and universities start small and scale up quickly. CLICK+mobility is the on-ramp to a sustainable, robust international program. Join us in reinventing and scaling up your internationalization efforts with virtual exchange. Let's start "CLICK'ing"!

CLICK System



Virtual exchange is our core approach to providing all college students the opportunity to become more globally-minded citizens through high quality international education. Our system, CLICK works at the heart of the curriculum, engages teachers and student teams in cross-cultural, project-based learning using global workforce technologies within for-credit coursework. Our services include: training for teachers starting or powering up with CLICK, support and assessment for CLICK teachers and campus leadership, advising and planning support for colleges and universities adding CLICK to their internationalization strategies.

Summary

Virtual exchange is a crucial addition to a campus' international education toolkit, as it helps position students for future success. Students, faculty, institutions, and employers alike believe that cross-cultural communication, collaboration, and 21st century skills are key to finding success in today's global workforce. In this briefing, we share lessons from the field as well as insights from our own program assessment. We provide an overview of data from the perspective of employers, students, and institutions, taking into account both quantitative and qualitative information.

We will begin by sharing data and perspectives on employer needs and what they are looking for in recent college graduates. A discussion of how virtual exchange meets those needs will follow. We will then analyze data from our CLICK virtual exchange program metrics to share how we aim to prepare students to meet employer needs. Finally, we conclude with an overview of how virtual exchange strengthens the foundation of international education, study abroad/mobility, and work-study travel.

Objectives

- Share data on employer needs and desired skills for recent graduates
- Show how virtual exchange can meet those specific needs
- Demonstrate how our CLICK program aims to prepare students for the global workforce
- Offer some ways in which virtual exchange can strengthen the overall foundations of a campus' international education initiatives

Success in the Workforce

A summary of the higher education research on employability

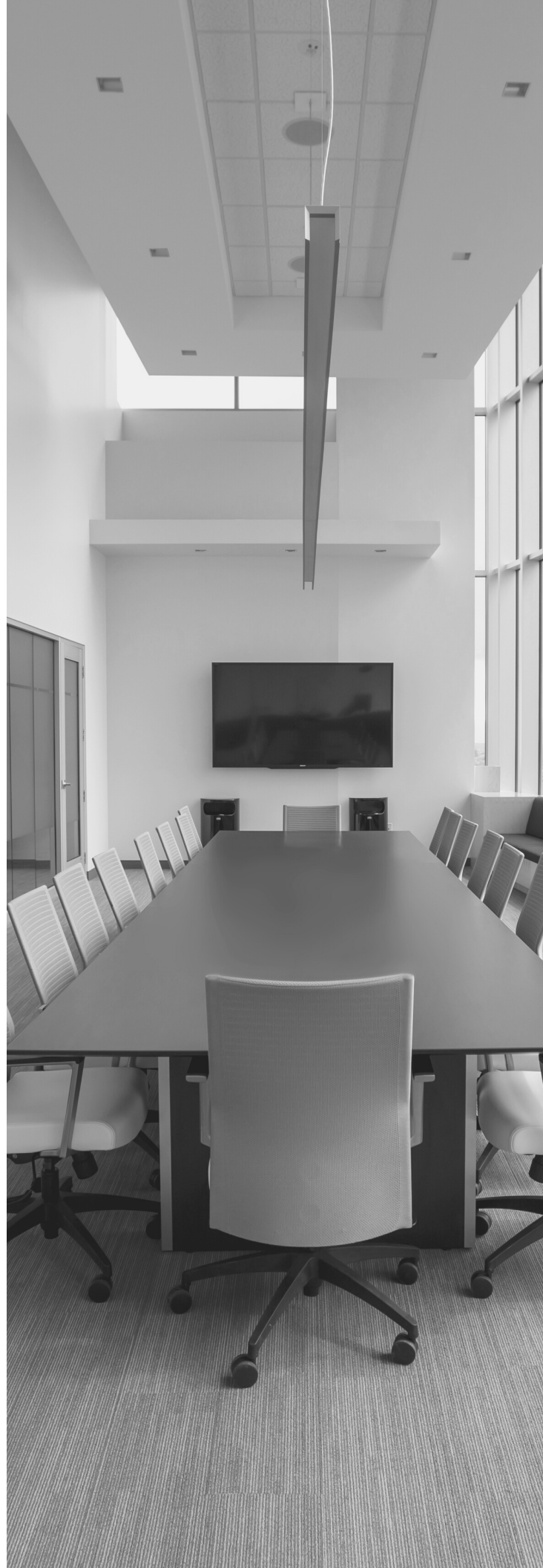
In this briefing, we focus specifically on community colleges, as those are the institutions we have been most closely working with. Additionally, their workforce and student employability needs often differ from those of many four-year colleges and universities. The American Association of Community Colleges ([AACCC](#)) clearly states its workforce goals as the organization aims to “be a bold leader in creating a nation where all have access to the learning needed to participate productively in their communities and in the economy”, in part through “promoting community colleges as the premier workforce development providers in America” and “supporting community colleges to prepare learners to be effective in a global society.” This is done by “empowering community colleges to grow as a global force for learning by disseminating information and promoting international partnerships between American community colleges and countries seeking collaborative opportunities.”

Although the AACCC does not specifically make the connection to virtual exchange, it is clear through its research, publications and activities that the association is devoted to supporting a global education for students. The AACCC also created a flier titled “[The Importance of Global Education](#)”, in which it states the following: “Our world and workplace are rapidly changing, becoming more diverse and globalized. For community college leaders and other decision makers, the importance of global education is an urgent need that is deeply rooted in economics—student employability, our ability to live and work successfully in diverse environments, and the prosperity of local communities. As the largest and most diverse sector of U.S. higher education, community colleges are essential and uniquely situated to ensure America’s future economic prosperity.”

Employer Expectations

Graduating college is no longer enough for many employers, who now seek more skills and experience from their future employees.

Nita Temmerman reports in her University World News article ["International Collaboration to Promote Innovation"](#) that "Employers today certainly expect prospective employees to have much more than just good grades. They are looking for people who display a host of broad qualities such as leadership, problem solving, sound client service and good communication skills." These are all skills that students can develop through a virtual exchange program in which they collaborate with international partners on a project. As students develop soft skills, it is also essential that there is a focus on fostering intercultural competency. We have found that growth in intercultural competency doesn't "just happen". It must be intentionally built into the curriculum.



Employer Surveys

The British Council performed surveys of US companies to determine sought after skills



Of US organizations, 88% ranked intercultural skills as very important or important (58% and 30%, respectively) (p. 9). This is especially true for employees that work in client-facing roles. The above chart was created by [the British Council Culture at Work \(2013\) report](#) to display how employers and organizations describe intercultural skills, with the biggest shapes representing the most mentioned descriptors (p. 9). In fact, one of the most important skills listed by organizations was “works effectively in diverse teams”, which is precisely what students are doing in a virtual exchange project.

The British Council reports that 28% of employees in US businesses claimed to work on a daily basis with international customers or partners, and 26% said they work with international colleagues. (p. 7)

Student Preparation

How do student and employer views on workforce preparedness differ?

The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) published a [comprehensive report](#) (2015) based on surveys from college students as well as from business and nonprofit leaders. We include a brief summary of the most relevant findings:

Nearly all employers (91 %) agree that for career success, "a candidate's demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than his or her undergraduate major." (p. 6)

Nearly all employers (96 %) agree that "all college students should have experiences that teach them how to solve problems with people whose views are different from their own." (p. 4)

More than three-quarters (78 %) agree that "all college students should gain intercultural skills and an understanding of societies and countries outside the United States." (p. 4)

The surveys show that students saw themselves as having more skills and career preparation than the employers did. Although colleges' and employers' desired outcomes for college students are similar, employers believed that students were falling short. Data shows an urgent need to better prepare students for the workforce by providing the kind of experiences, knowledge, and capabilities that employers expect, namely: problem solving, communication, critical thinking, collaboration, intercultural skills, current technology use. These are the same goals that virtual exchange aims to achieve for students, regardless of discipline or major. The emphasis that employers place on broad skills rather than only field-specific skills also reinforces the value that interdisciplinary virtual exchange projects have for students. STEM students can benefit from the experience of working with peers in humanities or social sciences programs and vice versa.



Applied Learning Experience

A summary of the AACU findings on employer perspectives of student travel and cultural competencies

The [AACU report](#) demonstrates that employers seem less concerned about students staying up to date on global events, proficiency in languages other than English, and experience with cultures outside the US (25% or less of employers reported these outcomes as very important) (p. 5). This means it isn't just having experience with other cultures that makes a job candidate stand out, it is being able to solve problems, communicate and reach agreements with people in other cultures or those who hold views different from their own. Applied learning experiences are highly sought by employers in their applicants, and virtual exchange achieves this through project-based learning.

Companies are 87% more likely to hire students with experience in research, problem-solving, and communication skills through a project.

This is a particularly important distinction because it suggests that a travel experience that does not provide an opportunity to develop these skills would be less valuable to an employer. In fact, 87% of employers say that a company would be more likely to hire a recent graduate who demonstrates knowledge, research, problem-solving, and communication skills through a senior thesis or project; 80% to hire a recent graduate who has done a collaborative research project with peers; and 51% to hire a recent graduate who has completed a study abroad program (p. 7). By combining the benefits of intercultural and project-based learning, virtual exchange modules can make students more attractive candidates to future employers.

Intercultural Competency

International experience alone is not enough. How can we do more?



A recent [blog post](#) from the European Association for International Education (EAIE) states that: “there is abundant evidence that, from the perspective of employers, international experience by itself is not enough. Rather, it’s critical that campuses devote more resources to, and become more intentional about, developing the intercultural competencies of students.” The blog also tells us that when we look at the research done on study abroad as an international experience, the results in employability afterwards are skewed by the fact that “the majority of undergraduates – in all countries – who go abroad represent a privileged segment of their student populations.” Virtual exchange provides pathways toward intercultural competence for the entire student population.

Displaying Skills and Competencies

How do companies know what skills recent graduates have acquired?

While we have seen clear evidence that intercultural skills are important in today's global workforce, how can students show they have these in a job interview or on a resume? According to the British Council report "Culture at Work", "less than half of employers surveyed globally feel that their recruiting process sufficiently screens for these skills" (p. 14). Graduates can show their expertise in the interview process by using strong communication skills and showing cultural sensitivity, but it's also important to talk specifically about past experiences working with international teams. That's why we provide students with a document that helps them articulate on a CV or resumé their experience and skills acquired from the CLICK project. Virtual exchange is a project-based, international experience that is certainly worth including on a resume or cover letter.



VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

How can virtual exchange meet student and employer needs for the global workforce?

1

PROMOTES INTERDISCIPLINARY AND
CROSS-CULTURAL LEARNING

2

COST EFFECTIVE MODEL FOR LARGE-
SCALE IMPLEMENTATION

3

ALTERNATIVE TO OR EXTENSION OF
STUDY ABROAD

4

DEVELOPS TECHNOLOGY SKILLS AND
PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

In the next two pages, we will review why virtual exchange is a key way to provide the global education that employers indicate is so urgently needed. Especially with the massive shift to remote learning in higher education in 2020, virtual exchange is taking a more prominent and promising role in campus internationalization. It can be complementary to current efforts and programs for developing students' intercultural skills.



An alternative to or extension of traditional study abroad

There are limitations that prevent some students from being able to participate in study abroad, such as visa restrictions, family circumstances, medical conditions. By implementing virtual exchange (VE) on campus, more students have the opportunity to obtain a global education even if they cannot participate in a traditional study abroad. VE is also a great on-ramp for study abroad. Students can participate in VE to get to know another country, culture, and group of people all while learning to use technology, work across time zones, and build workforce skills without leaving their home communities. Then, the students are ready to travel and fully immerse themselves in the culture. Alternatively, a VE project after a study-travel experience can deepen cross-cultural learning. The ideal situation is what Gazelle International calls CLICK+, where the plus adds a travel experience after the classroom-based VE module. Traditional study abroad on its own has certain limitations that VE can help overcome. The best-quality study abroad program can accomplish large growth in intercultural competencies. However, not all programs are alike. VE is a faculty-stewarded process at the classroom level, and it allows for quality assurance.



STUDENT ACCESS

THE FINANCIAL ASPECT

Virtual exchange is a cost-effective model for all colleges, but particularly for community colleges. It provides a more equitable way to bring global workforce preparation to all students, not just those who can afford to study abroad or qualify for scholarships. All students can participate in virtual exchange programs regardless of citizenship, family circumstances, or travel restrictions because it is built into the course at each home institution.



0%

OF STUDENTS
EXCLUDED BY
COST



INTERDISCIPLINARY LEARNING

Virtual exchange allows for interdisciplinary learning that challenges students to think critically and in different ways. By connecting vastly different disciplines - such as art and engineering, as we have seen in a CLICK module - students are exposed to different viewpoints and ways of approaching projects and problems. This is certainly a skill that is put to use inside and outside of the classroom.



TECHNOLOGY TOOLS

Students are required to communicate socially and professionally using digital technologies such as WhatsApp, Trello, Slack, Zoom, etc. Students also learn to manage projects across time zones, which is a skill that would be more difficult to acquire and enhance in a traditional study abroad experience or a traditional classroom without any international component. Students learn to manage projects using technology and working in international teams with their peers.

CLICK Assessment

Assessment is a critical aspect of our CLICK program. It allows us to make improvements to the program and make a case for the effectiveness of virtual exchange overall. This field of research is growing, and we hope our contributions help expand the interest in virtual exchange programs.

We measure the degree to which student learning goals are met using pre- and post- CLICK student surveys, which include quantitative and qualitative data. In this brief, we focus on the spring 2020 cohort and the goal "greater confidence in finding future success in the global workforce," second in the list below. The full summary of results from 2017-2019 is available in the [2019 Results Update](#).

This research informs our [CLICK virtual exchange training](#) materials so that we can provide the most effective virtual exchange workshops and support for faculty, deans, instructional support staff, and all other individuals engaged in global learning activities.

CLICK Student Learning Goals

- Increased cross-cultural maturity and awareness of the wider world
- Greater confidence in finding future success in the global workforce
- Increased ability to deploy 21st century skills (technology and teamwork)

A Note on CLICK Data

Considerations limitations

There are a few considerations that are important to mention before looking at the survey results. The sample size from spring 2020 was relatively small, 45 answered the pre-CLICK survey and 38 answered the post-CLICK survey. Prior life experience also affects our results, and we ask you to keep this in mind as you consider the results. Some students that are living in the United States - in Connecticut, specifically - are international, immigrant, or multicultural students.

For example, of the [Connecticut Community College System's](https://www.ctcc.edu/) total 2018-2019 enrollment of 65,331 students, 27% were Hispanic/Latinx. Those students may have some multicultural experiences prior to beginning the CLICK project, as opposed to some students from Connecticut who do not hold a passport, have never traveled outside of the United States, and/or have had little exposure to other cultures.

Students at the French IUTs also come from a variety of backgrounds and are not all native French speakers. Therefore, there is a difference in cultural capital accumulation among the students in all groups.

We have not broken the data down further using these specific considerations, but we do note that different prior life experiences could have an impact on the results we analyze. As our sample sizes grow, we hope to take a deeper dive into these sub-data sets to see if and how the international, immigrant or multicultural student experience in the United States may have an effect on the data.

The French IUTs and the US community colleges have similar academic programs, with a focus on technical degrees and employability. However, there are some differences between them that could have an impact on student results.

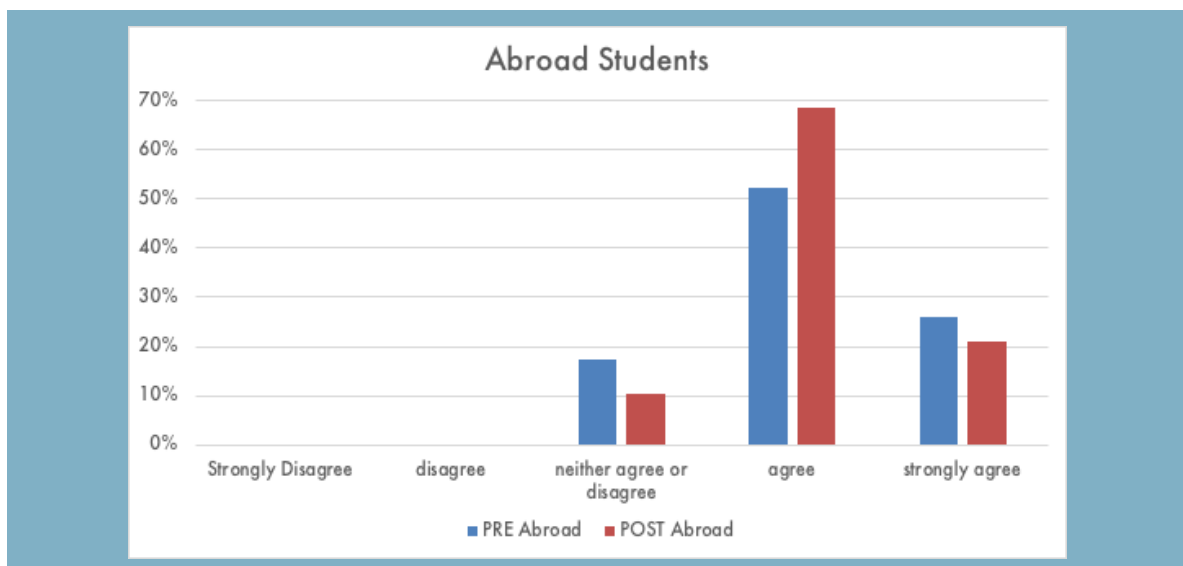
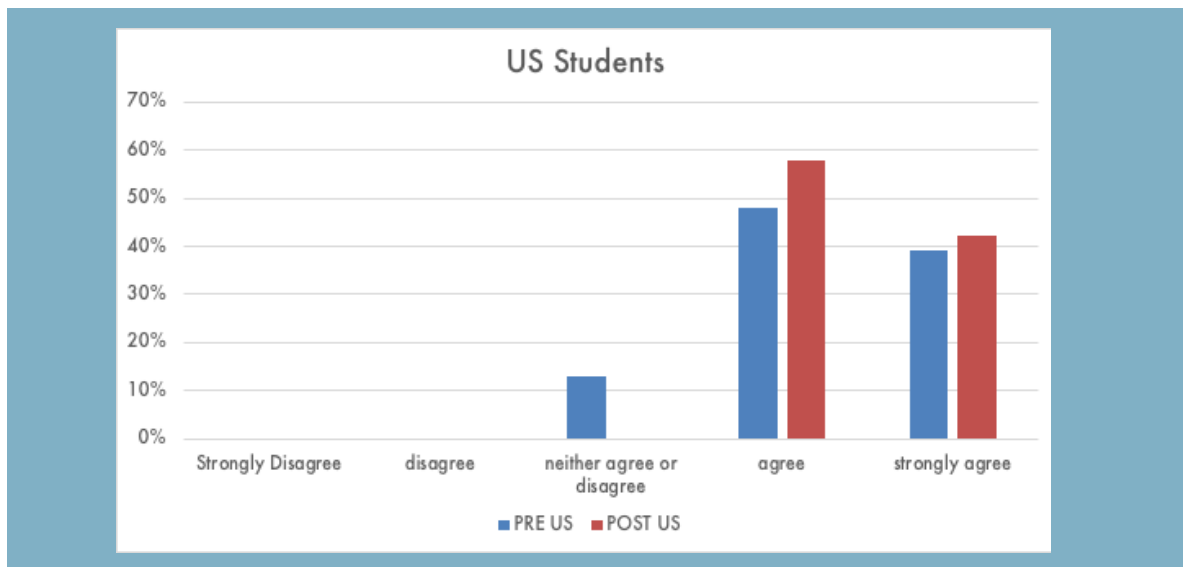


Cross-cultural Collaboration

In the spring 2020 survey, students responded to the following statement on a scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree:

Learning to collaborate cross-culturally will help position me to succeed in the global workforce.

The following graphs break down the responses by the country in which the students were enrolled in courses and into the pre- and post- survey results:



Analysis: Cross-cultural Collaboration

An interpretation of the previous graphs

Both United States and French students believe that cross-cultural collaboration is important for finding success in the workforce. There is a greater shift toward “agree” and “strongly agree” for the American students, but the French students also show an increase in the number of students that “agree” on workforce benefits. Students began the CLICK project hoping that it would provide greater confidence in finding future success in the global workforce, but their agreement with the statement increased after completing the project. These findings suggest that the CLICK project provided students with skills that they believe are valued by employers. The results from the 2020 spring CLICK projects had a more positive shift toward agree and strongly agree than past years.

The most rewarding part of the CLICK project was "the satisfaction of having carried out a project with students from another country."

We attribute this to an increase in teacher training and providing more materials for students throughout the past year’s virtual exchange workshops for new teachers. Gazelle International encourages teachers to talk explicitly to their students about the workforce benefits they are gaining from this cross-cultural experience. We also provide teachers and their students a document that describes specific skills gained from the CLICK module that students can use on a resume or in a job interview. We have found that students may not always make these connections on their own, and it is helpful to build in a conversation about how to present their virtual exchange experience as a unique and positive one that provides them with specific skills for employability.

Changes in Future Plans

Students were asked: "As you reflect on it, how did the experience in the CLICK module affect how you think about your future in studies, work, or other ways?"

Student responses highlighted the importance of intercultural communication, interaction, and collaboration with peers within the CLICK module. For some students in France, this included practice speaking English in a more professional capacity:

"For my professional future, this project has shown me the importance of knowing how to dialogue in English (international language)."

Students commented on the opportunity that CLICK provided for learning about other perspectives and cultures:

"It showed me how to interact with people from other countries and how it provides different perspectives." - US student

"It was a great experience and it [broadened] my horizons as to learn more about other countries. Be more open to learn and interact with other students/people." - US (international) student

Students felt encouraged to seek employment and educational opportunities in other countries, perhaps due to intellectual curiosity and/or greater confidence in their ability to engage with other cultures:

"It has opened a pathway further that I was looking down before this. I have been encouraged by this module to seek out further experiences in other countries, whether it be educational, occupational, or recreational." - US student

"Thanks to this project I know for sure that I want to study abroad to learn about a new culture and because the learning system in another country can be different. Also, I know I would like to work in international business to be able to work with people from other countries." - French student

One student commented specifically on the dynamics of individual and group work:

"It made me think about a collaborative workforce and how it differs from individual work." - US student

CLICK and Student Perspectives

Career plans and changing futures

The qualitative responses above demonstrate the effect that participating in a CLICK module had on students' futures in both personal and professional settings. It is worth noting that two of the three CLICK projects that ran in spring 2020 were centered around the topics of business and marketing. Some students were working explicitly with analyses, skills, and technology they may use in their future careers. The third project entailed creating a short film about life in quarantine during COVID-19. Students did use many technical, collaborative and language skills, but they may or may not have been thinking as explicitly about how that project transfers to career readiness. Again, this is why it is crucial for teachers to engage in a dialogue with students about the skills they may be acquiring.



Challenges in CLICK

Students address the challenges they face during a virtual exchange project

In the post-CLICK survey, students were asked: “What was your biggest challenge with the CLICK learning module?” Though the results were open-ended, they largely fell into the following categories:

Language barriers and communication issues: 13 students

Time zone coordination and time management: 8 students

Collaboration with peers: 6

Technology use: 3

Nothing/no challenges: 3

Left the response blank: 3

COVID-19: 2

Curiously, only 2 students (out of 38) mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic as the biggest challenge.

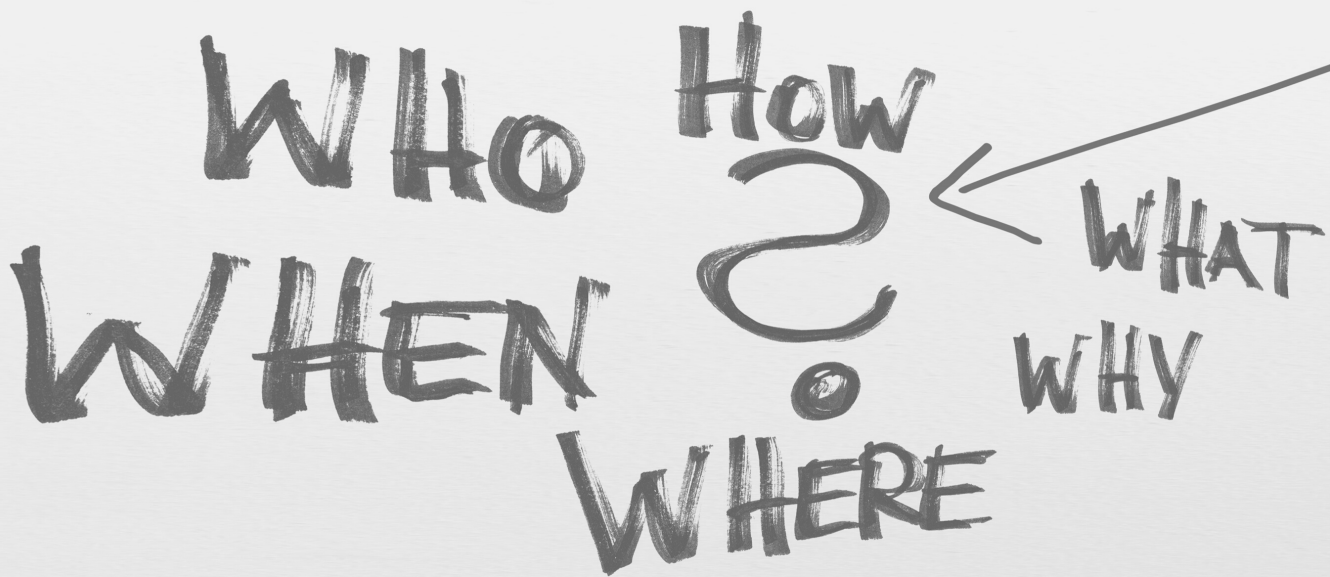
The challenges that students faced are all ones that arise in the global workforce. Learning to work across time zones, communicate with people in other countries (and within your same country or group), work collaboratively and use technology are all 21st century skills that students will need in their post-college lives.

We do not see these barriers as a negative element of the CLICK modules, but rather we view them as a positive way for students to build their skills and capacities to overcome challenges.



Training the teachers

How teachers can promote intercultural development in students



In Gazelle International's training workshops for new teachers, we discuss many models for intercultural competence, teamwork, and technology skills, but it doesn't end there. We aim to help teachers see the value in building intercultural skill development into their CLICK modules. This kind of development does not usually just happen on its own, and teachers need to be intentional about providing opportunities for that learning to occur. This means spending more time on learning about the students and cultures in the partner country. It is a worthwhile activity even though it may not directly relate to the "content" of the CLICK module. Building that relationship at the beginning not only helps students manage their projects better, but it also helps students move toward intercultural competence. They also develop other global workforce skills through team collaboration and technology use.

Virtual Exchange and International Education

Right now, only roughly one-third of US companies are satisfied with the way the country's education system prepares students to meet their intercultural needs ([British Council](#), 2013, p. 16). That means two-thirds of companies think the education system could do more. That is a clarion call for expanding virtual exchange. It can be a major motivator for campuses and faculty who are still on the sidelines. We are happy to see many colleges and universities adopting virtual exchange programs, but we need to expand access to VE more widely in the United States, among other countries.

In order to develop intercultural skills, companies make four suggestions, all of which can be achieved through virtual exchange: "Paying greater attention to the teaching of communication skills; encouraging foreign language programmes; increasing opportunities for international study; developing international research partnerships" ([British Council](#), 2013, p. 19). When we take a look at the student skills developed and rewards gained from our spring 2020 virtual exchange projects, we see a clear alignment between the intercultural skills that companies seek and want educational systems to provide and what our program is doing.

Virtual exchange is key

Virtual exchange is key to achieving success in the workforce because it enhances skills in the areas that employers most often seek in hires of recent graduates. These benefits are particularly useful for encouraging students to join a virtual exchange program, and they also provide buy-in for individual faculty and institutions who want to begin or expand their current international programs. It helps strengthen relationships between employers and colleges/universities, and it provides better career opportunities for students post-graduation. We invite you to [contact us](#) to learn more about implementing or extending virtual exchange on your campus. Check out [our website](#), too!

NOVEMBER 2020

GAZELLE INTERNATIONAL

**PLEASE SHARE YOUR
REACTIONS, QUESTIONS,
AND COMMENTS!**

**WOULD YOU LIKE TO LEARN
MORE ABOUT CLICK?**

E-MAIL US AT
NANCYRUTHER@GAZELLE-INTERNATIONAL.ORG

References

American Association of Community Colleges. (2020). www.aacc.nche.edu ---. (2020). The importance of global education. https://www.aacc.nche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Importance-of-Global_Education_2020.pdf

British Council. (2013). Culture at work. <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/culture-at-work-report-v2.pdf>

Hart Research Associates. (2015). Falling short? College learning and career success. Association of American Colleges and Universities. <https://www.aacu.org/leap/public-opinion-research/2015-survey-falling-short>

Temmerman, N. (2020, June 13). International collaboration to promote innovation. University World News. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200609151140995>

Tillman, M. (2020, June 25). Education abroad and the student employability gap. European Association for International Education. <https://www.eaie.org/blog/education-abroad-student-employability-gap.html>

Meet the authors



NANCY L. RUTHER, EdD **FOUNDER AND PRINCIPAL**

Nancy Ruther, EdD, founded Gazelle International to expand access to international higher education with the signature program CLICK Virtual Exchange. At Yale, she managed faculty led internationalization including curriculum, exchanges, assessment, languages and outreach. Teaching: Yale, UAlbany and UConn. Research: public policy, international higher education, virtual exchange and assessment

Twitter: @nlr51



ALEXA JEFFRESS **CLICK TEACHING AND LEARNING** **COORDINATOR**

Alexa designs instructional materials, participates in CLICK teacher training, coordinates workshops and meeting schedules, serves as a CLICK Network Facilitator, and aligns learning goals with the CLICK rubrics. She is a PhD candidate in the department of Spanish, Italian & Portuguese at the University of Virginia. Research: translation, 20th century Spanish film and literature, virtual exchange, and pedagogy.

Twitter: @alexajeffress

We wish to acknowledge the contributions of the authors and the whole team at Gazelle International who have produced this publication. As Founder and Principal, I am fully responsible for the content as presented.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License 