

VIRTUAL MOBILITY AS A STRATEGY OF INTERNAL INTERNATIONALIZATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract:

In the context of global educational transformation, higher education institutions in Uzbekistan are increasingly prioritizing internationalization as a strategic direction for improving quality and global competitiveness. Alongside traditional academic mobility, virtual mobility has emerged as an innovative and inclusive mechanism for fostering intercultural competence and global engagement among students. This article examines the implementation of a virtual exchange initiative organized by the Culture Club at the Department of Translation Theory and Practice of Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages (SamSIFL). The project was conducted over a three-month period from September to December 2025 and involved 15 second-year students who participated in intercultural online interactions with peers from different countries. The findings demonstrate that virtual mobility significantly enhanced students' intercultural competence, communication skills, global awareness, and motivation for international collaboration. The study highlights virtual mobility as an effective model of internal internationalization in higher education.

Keywords: virtual mobility, internal internationalization, higher education, intercultural competence, global learning, Uzbekistan.

Internationalization has become a key component of higher education development worldwide and plays a central role in educational reforms in Uzbekistan. National strategies emphasize the importance of strengthening international cooperation, expanding academic mobility, and integrating global standards into higher education institutions. However, access to physical mobility programs remains limited for many students due to financial, linguistic, and logistical barriers. Consequently, universities are increasingly adopting alternative models that enable students to gain international experience within their local educational environment. One of the most promising approaches is internal internationalization, which involves incorporating global and intercultural dimensions into teaching, learning, and campus life (Beelen & Jones, 2015). Within this framework, virtual mobility has gained recognition as an innovative practice that allows students to engage in international collaboration through digital technologies.

Virtual mobility refers to the use of online platforms to facilitate intercultural communication, collaborative learning, and global interaction without physical travel (European Commission, 2017). It provides inclusive access to international experiences and supports the development of essential global competencies. This study explores the implementation of a virtual exchange program organized by the Culture Club at SamSIFL and evaluates its contribution to student development and internal internationalization.

Implementation of the Virtual Exchange Program

The virtual mobility initiative was implemented within the Culture Club, a global community-driven project designed to promote intercultural dialogue and global collaboration. The Culture Club brings together students, educators, and creative professionals worldwide to explore how culture shapes communication, identity, and learning experiences.

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The project was conducted at the Department of Translation Theory and Practice of SamSIFL over a three-month period from September to December 2025. A total of 15 second-year students participated voluntarily in the program.

Through online platforms, students engaged in intercultural interactions with peers from various countries. Activities included:

- ☐ Online intercultural discussion sessions;
- ☐ Collaborative cultural storytelling;
- ☐ Language practice workshops;
- ☐ Group presentations on cultural identity;
- ☐ Participation in global community events.

These activities created an interactive and student-centered learning environment that simulated international mobility experiences in a virtual format.

Educational Impact and Learning Outcomes. The virtual mobility initiative demonstrated significant positive outcomes across several dimensions of student development.

First, participation contributed substantially to the development of intercultural competence. Students gained a deeper awareness of cultural diversity and enhanced their ability to communicate effectively with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This finding aligns with established research identifying intercultural competence as a key outcome of internationalization in higher education (Deardorff, 2006).

Second, the program led to noticeable improvement in students' communication skills. Regular participation in international online discussions strengthened their English language proficiency, increased speaking confidence, and enhanced interpersonal communication abilities. Students became more comfortable expressing their ideas in multicultural academic environments.

Another important outcome was the expansion of students' global awareness. Through interaction with peers from various countries, participants developed broader perspectives on global issues, educational systems, and cultural differences. Such exposure played a crucial role in fostering global competence and critical thinking.

The initiative also significantly increased students' motivation for international engagement. Many participants reported greater interest in pursuing academic mobility opportunities, participating in international projects, and building global professional networks.

Finally, the virtual exchange experience contributed to the development of digital and collaborative skills. Students improved their digital literacy, learned to work effectively in online teams, and developed competencies in virtual communication and project collaboration. These skills are increasingly recognized as essential for success in contemporary global education and professional environments.

Role in Internal Internationalization. Virtual mobility initiatives such as the Culture Club significantly contribute to internal internationalization by providing accessible international experiences to a broader group of students. They help create an internationalized campus environment and support the development of globally competent graduates.

According to internationalization research, integrating virtual exchange programs into institutional strategies enhances both the quality and inclusiveness of global learning (Knight, 2003). In the context of Uzbekistan, such initiatives align with national priorities aimed at improving international competitiveness in higher education.

Conclusion. The experience of implementing virtual mobility through the Culture Club at SamSIFL demonstrates that digital intercultural exchange programs can serve as an effective and sustainable tool for internal internationalization. The three-month initiative successfully enhanced students' intercultural competence, communication skills, global awareness, and readiness for global engagement.

Given the increasing importance of digital education and international collaboration, higher education institutions in Uzbekistan should actively integrate virtual mobility into

their internationalization strategies. Such initiatives provide inclusive, cost-effective, and impactful opportunities for preparing globally competent graduates. Future research may focus on evaluating the long-term effects of virtual mobility participation on students' academic performance, professional development, and international collaboration skills.

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