

Case Study

Virtual Student Exchange 2018

Key Points

- The project enabled students to experience a location that they could not otherwise have accessed.
- It reduced the impact on the environment by avoiding air travel.
- Research was conducted into real world public health issues as experienced in a refugee camp in Lebanon.
- It provided the students with an opportunity to experience a variety of modern technologies.
- Intercultural and international understanding was enhanced.

Who?

The program involved undergraduate students studying on Public Health programmes both at Cardiff Metropolitan University and in the Lebanon.

Why?

Student exchange schemes offer excellent opportunities for the learning and development of undergraduate students. However, the use of air travel places high burdens on the environment and the costs involved mean that these experiences are often reserved for wealthier institutions and richer students. They are relatively unsustainable due to the continued requirement for quite high levels of funding. Through the internet and modern telecommunications tools virtual student exchange offers another option, with most of the benefits of physical travel. Also, the students would have been unable to attend the camps if they were to travel to Lebanon as at the time of the exchange these were in an area that was not classified as safe for normal travel by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

How?

Students from the UK and Lebanese universities linked classrooms via videoconferencing software with initial support from academics in America, the Lebanon and the UK. They were then put into pre-assigned teams of three or four students, with all teams having members from the UK and Lebanon. Each team was given its own WhatsApp discussion group to get to know each other and work on their allocated tasks. The Lebanese Instructor monitored all discussion groups, providing support when it was requested.

A problem-based learning approach was used for the exchange, to teach the students about the public health issues associated with Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon, with each team being assigned a different subject area to investigate. After researching their areas, the groups completed interview guides which were used by the Lebanese students whilst visiting camps accommodating Syrian refugees in the Bekaa Valley. After obtaining informed consent, the Lebanese students were also able to capture, edit and share 360-degree footage of locations within the camps.

Finally, a videoconferencing session was held, enabling the Lebanese students to present their team's findings on the public health issues, practicalities and risk mitigation procedures used in their designated area of investigation. The UK students were then able to interact with the 360-degree video footage using VR technology. The UK students were interviewed individually and transcripts of the interviews were analysed.

Outcomes

The students achieved the learning outcomes for their respective programme modules. The splitting of a large area of research into sub-sections for mixed groups of Lebanese and UK students to investigate and the sharing of the summarised findings of each group meant that all students involved were able to cover a large subject area over a relatively short period of time. The exchange encouraged all students participating to consider employment overseas and provided a memorable and powerful learning experience that invigorated participants' interest in the subject matter.

References

H. Dawson, N. Alami, K. Bowen and D. Maddah, "The use of virtual reality for public health education with reference to Syrian refugee camps", in Proceedings of the Virtual and Augmented Reality to Enhance Learning and Teaching in Higher Education Conference 2018. Ed by J. Hudson and R. Kerton. IM Publications Open, Chichester, pp. 73–81 (2019).

