

Virtual Collaborative Learning: a leading approach to achieve high-quality, world-class online learning in Jordanian universities

Position Paper by the JOVITAL project partners

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the existing need for students as global graduates to be able to think and work beyond disciplinary, national, and sectoral borders. Whilst the transition in emphasis from internationalisation abroad for a mobile minority to internationalisation at home for the grounded many was already a key focus for internationalisation of the curriculum, the **COVID-19 pandemic** has resulted in a significant increase in the demand for online learning opportunities, locally, nationally as well as globally. To respond to the long-term effects of this crisis on education and mobility, universities around the globe are exploring new forms of virtual learning as well as sustainable and inclusive approaches to enable all students as globally competent graduates, to be able to function within complex and multicultural environments. In Jordan, discussions and analysis are going on at different levels to make sure that the lessons learnt from the emergency can express their innovation potential once the situation will go back to normal.

In the last three years, five Jordanian universities:

- Princess Sumaya University for Technology (PSUT),
- Jordan University of Science and Technology (JUST),
- German Jordanian University (GJU),
- Al Hussein bin Talal University (AHU),
- and Tafila Technical University (TTU)

have been working, in collaboration with European partners and with the support of the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union, in a project called **JOVITAL - Jordan Opportunity for Virtual Innovative Teaching and Learning**. The project has fostered dynamics of collaboration and knowledge exchange and has produced an original approach to virtual collaborative learning. Also, the JOVITAL partners have learnt some lessons that can be useful for the development of new university online learning programs in Jordan.

Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL) is a unique and flexible form of online learning. What makes it unique is its focus on online structured and facilitated collaborative learning sessions that bring people together and promote collaborative learning. This pedagogy enables participants to develop soft skills and transversal competencies that are essential in today's job markets and multicultural societies. Additionally, JOVITAL has focused on an added dimension of empowering students by engaging them as e-tutors. In this role, students as e-tutors, support the collaborative learning activities, working with both the academic and with their peers in mutually beneficial ways to make the most of the learning opportunities.

VCL is becoming increasingly important, both for institutions and for students. On the one hand, universities are searching for online learning methodologies that can foster engagement and collaboration among learners, as well as for greater support to build educators' and youth workers' capacities in online pedagogy and facilitation. Students need more than ever to learn how to communicate and collaborate online, and to engage critically with online environments and the media, and with international learning communities.

The Higher Education sector in Jordan is encouraged to incorporate the VCL approach as an essential component of the online and blended academic programs offered by Jordanian universities. Moreover, Jordanian universities should be enabled to offer online international learning opportunities, through internationalization-at-home initiatives, whereby virtual strategic approaches enable many more students than was possible through physical mobility opportunities, to engage in pedagogy and assessment with international learners. In addition, VCL opportunities should be made available to people and communities beyond the walls of the institution, and via mobile learning strategies within refugee camps in Jordan and beyond.

For this to happen:

- **Policymakers** should be aware of the benefits and the challenges connected with large-scale adoption of VCL, as well as of the policy options to foster this innovative methodology
- **University management staff** should be ready to support the process of adoption of VCL in terms of internal promotion, capacity building, and accreditation.
- **Educators** should know how to integrate VCL in their courses, in terms of pedagogy, technology, and course organisation.
- **Students** must be given the opportunity to gain the necessary skills that will lead to effective participation in virtual collaborative platforms and courses.

The JOVITAL partners remain available to support the inclusion of VCL in Jordan, both by helping policy-makers in adding this component to national plans and by supporting universities in implementing the approach and in integrating these activities in their educational offer. In addition, the JOVITAL Jordanian partners can benefit from the establishment of collaborative consortiums with other Jordanian universities, as part of the sustainability of the project.

About JOVITAL

JOVITAL is an international cooperation project co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union during the period October 2017 - 2021 involving four European institutions and five Jordanian universities. JOVITAL aims to foster academic exchange using virtual mobility in order to offer learning opportunities to academic staff, university students and disadvantaged learners in Jordan. More information at: www.jovital.eu

Contacts

Eric Schoop, Wissam Tawileh, TU-Dresden
Katherine Wimpenny, Coventry University
Nada Trunk, ISSBS
Cristina Stefanelli, UNIMED
Mostafa Ali, Jordan University of Science and Technology
Mohammed Daoud, German Jordanian University
Saleh Al-Jufout, Tafila Technical University
Moder Maani, Al Hussein bin Talal University
Adiy Tweissi, Princess Sumaya University for Technology

General enquiries: info@jovital.eu