

Employer perspectives on virtual exchange

Isabella Crawford (Robert Gordon University)

Slide 1

This paper will present the key findings of a PhD project investigating the value of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) as an innovative pedagogical approach and its potential impact on graduate employability, from the perspective of employers. Previous research related to this project (and presented last year at IVEC in Tacoma), focused on student and faculty perceptions. These new findings represent the final group of stakeholders for this project – employers and alumni.

Primary qualitative data collection involved a series of twelve in-depth interviews with employers and alumni from a range of geographical, educational and employment backgrounds. The questions examined participant perceptions of transversal skills; virtual and intercultural competence; university COIL projects; and the type of learning outcomes universities should be aspiring to within the field of virtual exchange. The research paradigm is interpretivist, and an inductive approach will be used to generate a phenomenological epistemology of COIL strategies within Higher Education, including the development of a new conceptual model for virtual exchange which will address the need for future ready graduates in a rapidly transforming, globalised, digital employment market.

Slide 2

The research questions underpinning this project include:

1. What impact can COIL projects have on students' transversal skill development and employability?
2. Should universities engage with emerging pedagogical theory in the field of borderless experiential learning, and how should learning and teaching strategies evolve to accommodate this?
3. How should different stakeholder perceptions of borderless experiential learning shape the adoption, design, delivery and evaluation of COIL projects within universities?

Slide 3

Emerging pedagogical theory identifies a growing need for innovative, student-centered, experiential approaches to learning within a context of rapidly evolving conversational media, the commodification of education and changing perceptions of the academy and lifelong learning. Some of the theories shown on this slide will be related to the primary research findings later in this presentation.

Slide 4

Four distinct thematic layers were extracted from the transcripts for this research. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was applied to the data which enabled superordinate and subordinate themes to be identified, followed by close scrutiny of the signs and indicators embedded in the responses including nuances in the use of language, hesitations and emphasis. These were captured as reflective themes. Finally significant themes were derived from the other three layers and compared to the literature.

Slide 5

The eight significant themes shown on this slide were identified following a thorough examination of the data.

Bhat and McMahon, 2016, argue that technological advances enable intercultural experiential online learning and this was reinforced by the employers and alumni who described a wide range of platforms and applications being used in the workplace to facilitate global collaboration and communication, and the importance of learning through direct experience. The technological challenges and opportunities identified by the participants strongly echoed those of students and faculty from previous research, including platform compatibility, infrastructure and support, cost saving and efficiency.

Building on existing literature and research around globalization and multicultural teams, the participants highlighted challenges with time zones, team dynamics, language and cultural barriers, and the need for exceptionally clear instructions, role allocation and leadership.

The importance of transferable skills for graduate employability highlighted by Albandea, Balcar, Gibb and others, was overwhelmingly reinforced by all the participants with particular emphasis on interpersonal communication; individual motivation, self-awareness and open mindedness; emotional intelligence; problem solving; leadership; digital competence and adaptability.

The assertion by Diamond et al that social interaction skills include intercultural competence was reinforced by most of the employers and alumni, although some believed this would be less relevant to non-globalised organisations. There was however a widely held view that having intercultural competence would be a useful skill for future career progression and an ever evolving digital, global working environment. Some participants reflected on a perceived lack of intercultural competence in themselves and others, and the need for more professional development in this area.

Five interviews were conducted just before the UK pandemic lock down, one on the first day of lock down, and 6 after lock down has started. This resulted in a number of poignant references to the global pandemic and how it has forced rapid digital transformation within organisations across all sectors. Many believed the pandemic has had a positive impact on digital literacy and digital infrastructure and a sudden dramatic shift to remote working. The embracing of technology and more flexible working was regarded as necessary and something that most participants would like to retain in the future, however it is not without its challenges and the importance of the aforementioned transversal skills were seen to take on more importance within this context.

The growing emphasis on theoretical education in intercultural competence highlighted by Deardorff, offset by the need to use intercultural skills to acquire competency recommended by Bauer-Wolff, were reinforced by many of the participants. The widening gap between theory and practice was highlighted as well as the need for universities to embed more 'real life' experiences into the curriculum. The importance of selecting appropriate global case studies and issues for COIL projects was considered vital for a meaningful learning outcome.

Some participants stressed the importance of business ethics and social responsibility within virtual collaboration and learning, including the need to select important global issues with a focus on collaborative problem solving; recognising cultural frames of reference; and mitigating the digital divide and inequalities among participating students and wider society.

The mismatch between student and employer perceptions of intercultural competence highlighted by Bauer-Wolff, was not a strong theme in the interviews. Instead participants highlighted perceived differences in digital competency based on age, sector and the level of first-hand experience individuals have been exposed to. Graduates who have undertaken experiential, competency-based learning were perceived to be at an advantage in the employment market and most believed that universities should do more to facilitate this.

Slide 6

I am now three years into my five-year PhD by public output and have so far published a series of collaborative conference papers and journal articles with my research colleagues in Germany, the USA and Portugal.

I am about to start writing a solo book chapter based on this research and hope to produce a journal article next year as well. If anyone would like to know more about the book entitled 'Developments in Virtual Learning Environments and the Global Workplace', which is being edited by my research team and published through IGI Global, or if you would like to know how to contribute a chapter, please drop me a line – we would love to hear from you!

Within the next twelve months I intend to use the findings of my research to develop a new conceptual model for virtual exchange based on the stakeholder perceptions which have emerged from this project, including students, faculty and employers. I hope this will help to enhance of my own COIL projects as well as those being undertaken within my university and further afield.

Finally, in collaboration with my COIL colleagues, we would like to develop a business plan for bespoke COIL training in public, private and third sectors in response to the recent surge in demand triggered by the pandemic and subsequent global, digital transformation of the workplace.

Thank you for listening, I look forward to discussing my research with you.

Slide 7

[No notes]