Global Learning: An Integrated Approach

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1. Background and objectives

Especially for Universities of Applied Sciences, lectures should not just focus on bringing the theory to the students but to apply them to today's economic business needs.

Focusing on studies in Business Administration, the curriculums for the corresponding Bachelor programs are very similar in many countries. But while lecturing mostly the same content, the part of applying theory to practice differs widely. In the approach outlined in this paper, the focus lies on teaching students how to start a business. To reach the goal the program will combine lectures in the virtual classroom, followed by team-based project work with a final presentation. Following the World Economic Forum, startups are seen as a more and more important part of the economy: *"Startups are crucial in bringing about societal change as well as driving economic recovery and responsible growth." (World Economic Forum 2022/05)*

While startups are seen as an important driver in the world's economy, starting a business might also be the only way for a sufficient income in some countries. In other areas it is only one of many options. Still, the foundations, the rules and guidelines for getting started are quite similar. This is the rationale why it has been chosen as the core teaching element in this integrated approach.

The illustrated approach in this paper focuses mainly on university programs for Business Administration, but could also include other departments, like engineering, natural or environmental sciences.

It integrates three main thoughts:

- Similar theoretical contents at the universities all around the world.

- Growing importance for trans-national cooperation.

- Startups becoming more and more the drivers of our economies.

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Dr. Aschmann's main research interest is in the area of management accounting / controlling with a special focus on sustainability and digitalization. In addition to her work at the university, she also works as a volunteer lecturer in sub-Saharan countries.

The following outlined approach is based mainly on the experience made during an exchange with an university in Zambia. (B360 Education Partnerships). It is meant to be generally implementable. Therefore, any university could use the outlined steps to further strengthen international cooperation and learning.

2. Project phases

The phases of the integrated approach will be outlined in the following:

Phase 1: Founding a partnership

In the first phase it is key to find partner universities and lectures that are willing to cooperate in an international project. Prerequisites would be

- Background in relevant subject matters (finance, marketing, managerial accounting, human resources etc.)

- Fluency in English (potentially any other language, depending on the participating countries)

- Sufficient technological equipment/experience to allow for online learning.

For the partnering universities, it would be beneficial if they are located in similar time zones and having overlapping semester times.

While it is beneficiary to have one main point of contact (i.e. responsible lecturer at each university), the theoretical background might very well be delivered by various professors depending on their field of studies as well as potential guest speakers from businesses. In any case, covering the theoretical background should come from all participating universities, i.e. lecturers from all involved countries.

Phase 2: Building a joint curriculum

Once the partnership has been established the participating universities need to set up a joint curriculum. Participating in this international project should not be a mandatory but rather an elective class. It also might facilitate the set up having the project scheduled as a "blocked seminar" rather than a weekly event. The number of participating students should also be limited – a total of not more than 30 seems advisable. The group of students should be composed in equal parts from each of the universities. To have similar working conditions, it also should be agreed upfront how many credit points (if at all) students may achieve by participating. Especially once combining countries with rather different university programs, study requirements and / or evaluation schemes it may e advisable to rate the project as "participated with / without success". That would lead to students getting the same amount of Credit Points once participated successfully rather than getting grades.

The involved university lecturers would then have to agree and set up the table of content for the lectures, the time frame and topics covered for the project, as well as the requirements students have to fulfill to participate (like language and technical skill, field of studies, years of studies).

To facilitate the start of the program, it would also be helpful to pull together a list of potential startup ideas early on in the process. The ideas should be realistic for each of the participating countries, rather than just focusing on national conditions. Based on the gained experience with the exchange in Zambia, possible business areas could be sustainability, culinary offers and elderly care. Each of these topics had been chosen by students in Zambia, but also would have worked for student projects in Germany.

Phase 3: Finding business partners

The universities involved should, in the next steps, work on finding business partners. Involving local businesses as potential sponsors, potential guest lectures for special topics but most of all as jury members for evaluating the project outcomes and final presentations. Feedback from practitioners is a central element of the approach, enabling a grounded and business-related feedback for the students.

Phase 4: Call for tenders

Once the program has been set up and the involved lecturers and businesses have been found, the project should be advertised at the participating universities. Students should be informed about the time frame and all other relevant prerequisites (language, technology, etc.) also including the credit points that might be achieved. Each university would have to decide based on which selection criteria they will select the participating students. The result of this phase should be to have the participating group of students. Ideally it consists of the same number of students from each of the participating universities.

Phase 5: Run the project

Each university should start its individual kick off either onsite at the campus or potentially online. Then, the program will take place as prescribed in the set-up documentation. Each participant needs to be provided with the required connection information. Also, there needs to be a cloud-based collaborative platform where documents can be uploaded and retrieved.

Based on the agreed schedule, the class will be taught as a COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) project. COIL here being understood as an approach bringing together students and professors across cultures to learn, discuss and collaborate as part of their class (State University of New York). The individual theoretical topics should be presented by lecturers (and potentially guest speakers) from all involved universities, i.e. countries. This way not only the internationally similar economic fundamentals get addressed, but also national aspects of each topic. Still the lectures are only the theoretical part of the program.

Before getting started, students should be split up into virtual teams - ideally groups of 4 to 6 students. Each team should consist of participants from all involved countries. The teams need to organize themselves by deciding on how to cooperate. Still the official classroom hours should allow for team collaboration.

Each team needs to come up with its own business idea for their startup. It would be up to the team to define in which country the startup should be set up. Depending on the selected country, the work in the team will have to be allocated. While students from the chosen country might provide more of the country specific details, the students from the other countries may focus more on background research or theoretical input.

The first part of the project will be dominated by the lectures, and only provide limited time for the teamwork. Once the theoretical background has been set, the students would be given time to elaborate on their individual business plans for their startup idea. The structure to be overed will be given by the lectures. The lecturers should also reserve time for the final presentations.

The last part of the program will be the presentation of the business ideas by each team. Students will present to all other students, all lectures and representative of the involved companies and / or guest speakers. Whether students just receive feedback, the best presentation gets selected or even grades are allocated would be based on how the program had initially been set up.

Phase 6 (add on): Further steps of development

The initial idea is to set up a "Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)" program but this might be further developed.

While the online way of learning and working as a team might already facilitate international cooperation, this could be further strengthened by allowing the lectures to visit the partnering universities and their colleagues abroad. This would enable onsite program preparation, and strengthen understanding and cooperation among the universities.

Another step could be a hybrid version. The main part – the classroom phase – will still take place online. But for the final phase (shaping the startup idea, finalizing the presentation and presenting it), about half of the students would also travel to the partnering country. The decision where the presentation will be held should depend on the country for which the startup has been designed. Whether international travel is included or not needs to be determined prior to the program start. Deciding factors would be first of all the funding. National funding as well as potential additional sponsoring of participating companies are of critical essence. Apart from the financial aspect, the willingness to travel of students and teachers must be present. Furthermore, potential legal and medical prerequisites must be met. Finally, the entire program could take place onsite in one of the participating countries, i.e. students from the other countries would go abroad for the duration of the program.

3. Results and benefits

The outlined approach for international learning does require a large amount of preparation, the willingness and engagement of the teachers involved, supporting companies and secured financing. These requirements should not be underestimated. Still, the approach offers numerous opportunities for the students, the universities and the involved companies. The students would benefit from learning and working in international groups. They gain an understanding on how the theory of business administration is taught and studied in other countries, on how research is done and on how to best incorporate tools and techniques. Additionally, they have the possibility to learn about the economy and the general conditions in the partnering country. They also have the chance to get practical experience and learn how to cooperate in multi-national teams. Taking part in such an international project would also be an asset in their CV.

The universities will also benefit from the international cooperation. It will broaden the horizon of the involved lectures and offer possibility for international exchange programs. In times of growing competition among universities, it might also lead to a competitive advantage. Last but not least, the universities involved might be seen as ambassadors of their home country therefore even intensifying international cooperation in a wider sense.

Besides the students and the universities, the involved companies could also benefit from the program. First of all, they do get in immediate contact with internationally skilled, ambitious and open-minded students. The program could therefore be seen as an exclusive labor market.

Another benefit for the companies could be that their participation in students' programs could be seen as a volunteering / social engagement aspect. This will have a positive impact on their reputation. The companies could use the program to get a more grounded evaluation of their employees' management skills. Based on the above-mentioned experience in Zambia, the involved European companies had sent some of their employees as lectures in the outlined program. This had been part of the assessment of whether somebody is qualified for further management responsibilities.

Overall, the approach would therefore be seen as a win for students, win for universities and win for companies.

4. Conclusion

Following the quote of the Chinese philosopher Xunzi, learning arrives at putting it into practice: "Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, involve me and I learn".

Based on this, the outline program goes beyond the mere lecture. While lecture is still an integral part of how universities work, universities of applied sciences should focus on putting theory into practice. Therefore, the presented integrated approach combines both elements: Sound scientific theory as well practical implementation. Beyond that, it allows for international cooperation and learning from the partnering countries. Once

the project language is different from the native language, this adds another learning experience. As the initial version of the program is offered online, cost would be limited. Going beyond the initial set up, the approach could be supplemented with international exchange elements, i.e. visiting the partnering country. Last but not least, it could be focused on topics or business ideas that can help the global search for a road to more sustainability.

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