

Transnational student consultancy – an integrated approach to business students' learning

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Abstract

Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are under pressure to enhance graduate employability. The concept of graduate employability refers to a mix of specific skills, knowledge, and personal attributes; among others internationalisation, innovation, and entrepreneurship skills. This paper asks the question: How can HEI enhance students' internationalisation, innovation, and entrepreneurship skills in order to foster graduate employability? The authors provide insights into a transnational student consultancy teaching approach that was implemented simultaneously at five European HEI in the winter term of 2017/2018. The paper adds to the practical dimension of internationalisation, entrepreneurship education, and innovation pedagogy by presenting an example of how these interrelated concepts can be integrated into a course for business students. The authors discuss important challenges of implementing transnational consultancy projects at HEI, such as varying academic calendars and administrative requirements, matching student teams and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), as well as managing expectations. Based on participant feedback, this paper draws three lessons learned for lecturers that are involved in transnational teaching projects.

Keywords: *internationalisation, student consultancy, entrepreneurship education, innovation pedagogy, employability.*

1. Introduction

In the face of increased international business dependencies and shortening half-life of knowledge, Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are under pressure to “*produce highly mobile graduates able to respond to the ever-changing needs of the contemporary workplace*” (Andrews & Higson, 2008, p. 411). This has sparked a debate on a growing gap between the skills and capabilities of graduates and labour market requirements that is closely linked to the concept of graduate employability (Kinash, Crane, Judd, & Knight, 2016). Employability refers to the “*capacity to obtain and/or create work*” (Kinash & Crane, 2015, p. 150) and encompasses a mix of specific skills, knowledge, and personal attributes. HEI and graduates alike are often unsure of the necessary skills that contribute to graduate employability (Lödermann & Scharrer, 2010). In particular, internationalisation, innovation, and entrepreneurship skills are considered as key factors in enhancing employability (Saulich & Lehmann, 2017). However, specific teaching approaches related to the three concepts often remain vague. This paper asks the question: How can HEI enhance students’ internationalisation, innovation, and entrepreneurship skills in order to foster graduate employability? The authors provide insights into a transnational student consultancy teaching approach that was implemented with business students at five European HEI in the winter term of 2017/2018. The paper seeks to add to the practical dimension of internationalisation, entrepreneurship education, and innovation pedagogy by presenting an example of how these interrelated concepts can be integrated into a course for business students.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reflects on the theoretical foundations of the student consultancy teaching approach. Section 3 delivers a detailed description of the approach and section 4 discusses the challenges that HEI faced while implementing the teaching approach. Section 5 concludes and draws three lessons learned.

2. Theoretical Foundation

The educational concepts of internationalisation, entrepreneurship education, and innovation pedagogy seek to increase the employability of students and staff at HEI while focusing on different sets of skills and methods. Internationalisation skills incorporate intercultural skills as well as the ability to interact in global settings (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Entrepreneurship skills comprise task oriented skills related to business development and management as well as behaviour oriented skills which are linked to specific personal traits (Henry, Hill, & Leitch, 2005a, 2005b; Neck & Greene, 2011). Lastly, innovation skills refer to a number of individual, inter-personal, and networking skills which are needed in innovation creating processes (Kettunen, J., Kairisto-Mertanen, L., Penttilä, T., 2013). Saulich and Lehmann (2017) argue that the three concepts require broadening

traditional content-focused curricula and making use of teaching methods that foster deep learning (Bennet & Bennet, 2008), best acquired through active methods and learning in real work situations. Table 1 summarises the sets of skills and related teaching approaches proposed by research on internationalisation, entrepreneurship education, and innovation pedagogy. The transnational student consultancy teaching approach presented in section 3 seeks to incorporate all three sets of skills.

Table 1. Relevant Sets of Skills for Internationalisation, Entrepreneurship, and Innovation

	Internationalisation	Entrepreneurship	Innovation
Set of skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intercultural skills • Foreign language skills • Global awareness • Ability to interact in global settings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Task-oriented skills: small business development and management • Behaviour-oriented skills: personal traits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set of individual, inter-personal and networking skills needed in innovation creating processes
Tools/ Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intercultural trainings • Distance learning • Student/staff mobilities • Credit/degree mobility • International networks • Off-shore campuses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entrepreneurship as a method • Active: learning by doing • Practicing skills in real life/work situations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating intra-HEI & regional networks • Applied research • Group interactions • Entrepreneurial and international activities

Source: Saulich and Lehmann (2017, p. 903)

3. Transnational Student Consultancy

The transnational student consultancy approach is part of the international project “INTENSE – INTernational Entrepreneurship Skills Europe”, supported as a strategic partnership under Erasmus+. The project is implemented by five partner universities from five European countries (Belgium, Croatia, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands) and runs for a period of three years. The overall aim of INTENSE is to promote the internationalisation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and HEI in Europe by 2019 and to enhance the employability of students and HEI staff. The project outputs include a transnational teaching module on the internationalisation of SMEs. The module focuses on different internationalisation strategies of SMEs (see Saulich, Wohlgemuth, & Lehmann, 2017 for a literature review) and on challenges that SMEs face while internationalising. As part of this teaching module, students participate in a transnational student consultancy project.

3.1. Student Consultancy Component

The teaching module is held parallel at the five universities which are partners of the INTENSE project. In each country, students provide advice to two SMEs with the aim to promote the SME’s internationalisation. Universities established contact with SMEs

beforehand with the help of local mediators, e.g. the chamber of commerce. The consultancy project is designed for students who are in the midst or end of their bachelor studies and have completed (or are currently taking) classes on project management and international management (which are other components of the teaching module of the INTENSE project). Students work together in teams of five to seven students, each collaborating with one SME.

The consultancy project was supplemented by a course that follows a blended learning approach; meaning that some lectures took place as regular lectures in the class room while others were e-learning and individual counselling sessions. The course started off with task related knowledge, provided mainly in regular lectures. It focused on research skills, project management skills, e.g. defining team roles or developing a work breakdown structure, and international management components. This was combined with behavioural skills such as teamwork, consultancy skills, and business etiquette that were taught in interactive classroom sessions and workshops by external experts.

In order to prepare the consultancy project, lecturers had initial meetings with the companies to discuss the implementation and the specific topic of the consultancy project. The actual consultancy project started with a kick-off workshop with companies and student teams organised by the lecturer at the beginning of the academic term. During the kick-off workshop, students interviewed the companies based on interview outlines which they had prepared beforehand and agreed on specific tasks. Afterwards, students were responsible to coordinate the cooperation with the company by themselves. Four to six weeks after the kick-off workshop, students presented their preliminary findings to the company. The mid-term presentation served to clarify questions, gather additional company information, and to further specify the tasks of the students. At the end of the academic term, students presented their findings to the companies at an intermediary institution, e.g. the chamber of commerce, and handed over their final consulting report. The final presentation served as a multiplier event to attract companies for further consultancy projects.

The student consultancy project enhances students’ entrepreneurship skills by training task-related and behaviour-oriented knowledge through active teaching methods. It also transmits innovation skills by encouraging students to create networks with SMEs and intermediary institutions.

3.2. Transnational Component

As mentioned above, the student consultancy projects were implemented simultaneously in five countries. In order to enhance the students’ internationalisation skills, student teams cooperated transnationally as demonstrated in the example in Figure 1.

Team A in Germany collaborated with SME A also based in Germany. SME A wanted to internationalise to the Netherlands. Team A was supported by team B, based at a HEI in the Netherlands. Team B provided team A with relevant knowledge on the Dutch market. At the same time, team A provided specific information on the German market to team C. Team C is based in Finland and collaborated with the Finish SME C who seeks to internationalise to Germany.

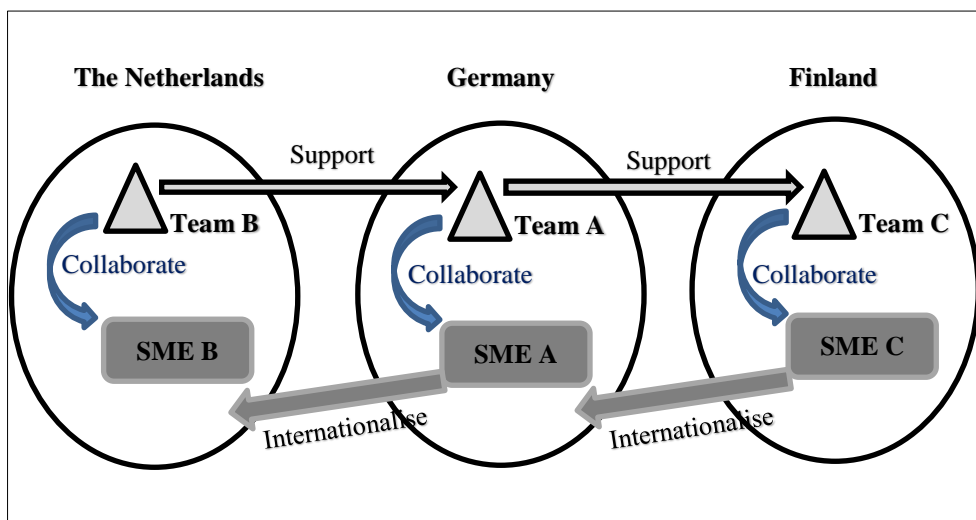


Figure 1. Transnational Student Consultancy

This system of providing support to another team and receiving support by another team ensured that students acquired market-related knowledge in two European countries – the country in which they are based and the country to which the SME they are collaborating with seeks to expand. Moreover, students gained insights into two different companies and products: first, the company they are collaborating with; and second, the company of the foreign team they are providing support to. Furthermore, each team has to cooperate with two other teams with different cultural backgrounds. This enhances the teams' networking and teamwork skills by fostering inter- and intra-group cooperation. The transnational consultancy project supports intercultural learning among students, helps them to establish international networks, and increases their language skills. Inter-team collaboration partly took place at a one-week student meeting that offered students the opportunity to jointly work on their projects and to participate in workshops on entrepreneurship and an intercultural training. Students also collaborated virtually and thereby trained their distance learning and virtual team skills. In sum, the consultancy project increases the students'

ability to interact in international settings and enhances their understanding of international business.

4. Challenges of Implementing Transnational Consultancy Projects

The following section discusses some of the challenges we faced and draws lessons learned. Each issue will be addressed rather shortly, as we focus on completeness instead of detail.

4.1. Differing Administrative Processes and Academic Schedules between Countries

Even though we were aware that this would be an issue before starting the project, we were surprised how much the academic calendars at the partner universities varied. For instance, exam periods and breaks between terms overlapped in such a way that the international student meeting could only be implemented in one week of the term. Also, cooperation between student teams was difficult as some students started their consultancy projects in early September while others started in November. Hence, when students of the five partner countries met, the progress of their projects was at very different levels.

Integrating the INTENSE teaching module into the curricula at all HEI also turned out to be a challenge. At some HEI all components of the module (International Management, Project Management, Transnational Student Consultancy) were taught in one term or within one extracurricular module. Others spread them over various modules and academic terms. What is more, the assessment requirements, number of ECTS points, and time period for the consultancy project varied as it had to be adapted to the regulations of the respective HEI.

4.2. Matchmaking of Student Teams and SMEs

We tried to find SMEs that wanted to internationalise to one of the participating countries to ensure a circle of support between the student teams (s. Figure 1). Finding SMEs that met this criterion took some effort. Also, we had to make sure that not all SMEs want to internationalise to one specific market, as this would have meant a more extensive workload for the students of this country. Furthermore, recruiting SMEs, scheduling meetings before the consultancy projects started, and organising the kick-off meeting and the event for the final presentations make this course exciting but time-consuming for the lecturer.

Another challenge that we faced was the steering of enrolment numbers for the consultancy project, due to university regulations in some countries. In Germany for instance, lecturers did not know how many students would participate in the course and what their background knowledge was until the first class meeting. Furthermore, students were – by university

regulations – entitled to disenrol from the course throughout the first three weeks of the course, which lead to a rather late kick-off of the consultancy project.

4.3. Managing Expectations of SMEs and Students

We faced diverging expectations on several ends. The intermediary organisations which we approached to recruit SMEs were surprised to hear that we could only support two SMEs per country and academic term and would have preferred a larger scale. This would have been impossible in terms of student supervision and coordination efforts. Even though students were eager to work on a real-life case, some were overwhelmed and expected more support or upfront instructions on how to be a consultant. To give students a better idea of consultancy work and to discuss specific challenges they were facing it was extremely helpful to organise a workshop with an external consultant. Interestingly, many students expected SMEs to have a clear and detailed vision and workplan for their internationalisation process. They were surprised to learn that SMEs did not address them with a clear-cut task and, as a first step, they had to find out what the needs and expectations of their client were.

5. Conclusion and Lessons Learned

The aim of this paper was to add to the practical dimension of internationalisation, entrepreneurship education, and innovation pedagogy by presenting an example of how these interrelated concepts can be integrated into a course for business students. The authors presented an example of a transnational student consultancy project that seeks to enhance students' international, entrepreneurial, and innovation skills; all contributing to graduate employability. In particular, the consultancy project fosters students' task-related skills in the areas of SME internationalisation as well as behaviour-oriented capabilities, such as teamwork, networking, consulting, and intercultural awareness. All of these skills are crucial to excel in globalised work environments.

The authors like to emphasise three important lessons learned. First, when implementing transnational consultancy projects, all teams should start simultaneously at all participating HEI in order to ensure that the student teams are at similar stages when they start to cooperate with each other. Lecturers need to start planning well in advance to overcome diverging academic calendars and HEI regulations. Second, it is important that lecturers provide extensive support to students through individual counselling sessions by adapting the course syllabus to students' changing needs throughout the project (delivering inputs just-in-time), and by involving external consultants to discuss specific challenges that students face while collaborating with SMEs. Finally, lecturers are advised to discuss the requirements and limitations of the consultancy project proactively with external

stakeholders, e.g. chambers of commerce, students, and SMEs beforehand and during mid-term evaluations. One way to manage expectations is to prepare a handout for all stakeholders that lists the scope of the consultancy project, its outputs, and some requirements for all participants.

Further research is needed on the impact of the project on students’ competences. During the second run of the transnational student consultancy project with more students in the academic winter term 2018/19, the partner HEI will conduct an evaluation of the students’ competence improvement with the help of the INCODE barometer.

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