

Challenges in Higher Education Teaching Collaborations – a CAGE distance framework analysis

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Abstract

Transnational teaching collaborations have many advantages, but also create challenges. Many challenges relate to distances between partner countries. The CAGE (cultural, administrative, geographic, economic) framework helps to assess and classify the impact of various distances. The framework was initially developed for a business context. We test the usability of the CAGE model in a higher education institution (HEI) context by relying on insights from an EU-teaching collaboration project. Within the project, students and lecturers from different HEIs consult real-life firms in going abroad. Teams from the home and the host country of the firms work together in these collaborations. We conclude that the framework is helpful for HEIs. Administrative distances seem to be the most crucial aspect in selecting the right partners for teaching collaborations, whereas geographic and economic distances are manageable. Cultural distances had less of an impact in our setting, but we expect a stronger impact for other projects. The teaching community can learn from the insights of the illustrated collaborations to avoid specific challenges and successfully set up cross-country teaching collaborations.

Keywords: HEI; Collaboration; internationalisation; co-teaching; CAGE; distance.

1. Introduction

The benefits of transnational teaching collaborations at higher education institutions (HEI) are well known. Students develop their intercultural skills, practice their foreign languages, and learn to interact in global settings (Altbach & Knight, 2007). They also develop their ability to contribute to innovation creating processes through individual, inter-personal, and networking skills (Saulich & Lehmann, 2017). These abilities increase their employability and have an indirect positive effect on future employers (Kinash, et al. 2016). The internationalisation of teaching activities is also beneficial for the teaching staff. Besides the learning opportunities that also applies to students, lecturers can develop their networks, tap complementary knowledge, and get inspired through the exposure to different teaching methods across countries (Wohlgemuth, Saulich, & Lehmann, 2019).

Although, the benefits of transnational teaching collaborations are well established, we rarely see them in practice or only in rudimentary forms. „Traditional approaches such as mobilities are a start, but do not go far enough, in that they have a limited audience and little institutional impact” (Nilsson, 2000, p.40). A potential reason might be the challenges that are related to the internationalisation process. Distances between countries can complicate relationships. To classify and address those challenges, Ghemawat (2001, 2007) developed the CAGE framework and postulated that the decisive distances are cultural (C), administrative (A), geographic (G), and economic (E). We therefore ask: *Which CAGE Factors are the most relevant when establishing HEI teaching collaborations?* To answer our research question, we rely on insights of the EU-funded transnational collaboration project INTENSE (INTERNational ENTrepreneurship Skills Europe).

We briefly introduce the INTENSE project in section two, before we detail on the CAGE framework and its influences on our HEI collaboration in section three. Section four concludes. We provide the following contributions: First, the CAGE framework was developed for a business setting. We test the usability of the CAGE framework, in an academic setting. Second, we illustrate how to select partner countries for successful international collaborations, based on the CAGE model, by describing challenges that occurred in the INTENSE project. We can show, based on our case, that administrative distance seems to play the largest role in international HEI collaborations, This might create an awareness and other cross-country collaboration projects can learn to avoid them.

2. The INTENSE Teaching Collaboration

The aim of INTENSE (intense.efos.hr) is to develop and implement a cross-country teaching module (15 ECTS) in the field of international management. After completing the module, students should be able to guide small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through the process of going abroad in the form of a transnational consultancy project.

In joint workshops that involved five partner HEIs from different EU countries (Belgium, Croatia, Finland, Germany, and the Netherlands) the content structure and teaching methods were developed. Each institute contributed to developing teaching material that corresponded to its specific field of expertise. Overall, the implementation of the module (September 2016-August 2019) involved staff trainings, development of teaching materials, pilot runs in every HEI, revisions based on lecturer feedback, and the final implementation.

The module is taught in parallel at all HEIs that participate. Some components are taught in regular national setting, with standardised content across countries. However, the capstone of the module is a real-life transnational consultancy project that requires cross-country co-teaching. Figure 1 illustrates the general idea of the cooperation.

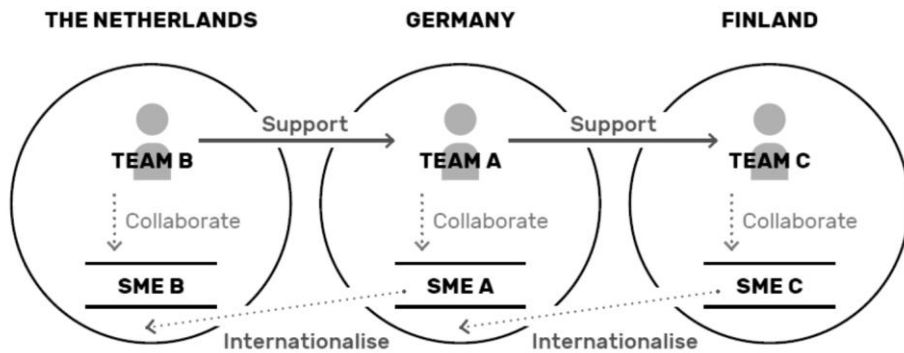


Figure 1. Transnational Student Consultancy. Source: Adapted from Lehmann, Saulich and Wohlgemuth (2018)

The transnational student consultancy has been explained in Lehmann et al. (2018) and Ammeraal (2019). Basically, student team A in Germany consults the German SME A, who wants to internationalise to the Netherlands. The Dutch student team B supports team A with relevant knowledge of the Dutch market. At the same time, team A provides specific German market information to team C from Finland (Lehmann et al., 2018; Ammeraal, 2019).

In addition to development of the module and its contents, this system of providing and receiving support to and from other student teams at different HEIs is the core collaboration component. The HEIs and the involved lecturers need to constantly work together to make this system work. This continuous interaction and preparation involves several challenges.

3. Challenges in Implementing the Collaboration

3.1. The CAGE Framework

The Uppsala-model of internationalisation (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977) postulates that it is easier to engage in host countries that are proximate to the home country. Ghemawat (2001, 2007) developed this further by specifying proximity. He developed the CAGE-framework to identify and assess the impact of cultural, administrative, geographic, and economic distances between countries on internationalisation endeavours. Some distances have stronger impact, depending on the industry and type of internationalisation (Beugelsdijk et al., 2018). The framework should help managers to decide which country to expand to. While the framework was developed for a business context, it might also be useful to assess the likelihood of successful HEI collaborations between countries. Thomas and Ghemawat (2008) use the CAGE-framework to analyse potentials to include globalisation in curricular, but do not discuss HEI collaborations. We assess the impact of the distances on the INTENSE project below.

3.2. Cultural Distance

Attributes that create cultural distance are different languages, different ethnicities, religions social networks, and social norms (Ghemawat, 2001, 2007). These create different interpretations on how to structure relationships.

Within the INTENSE project, cultural distances did not have such a strong impact on the collaborations. This has different reasons. First, students and staff specialise in the field of international management, that directly addresses these challenges and thus, probably prevented some. Furthermore, all participants are fluent in the transfer language English.

This does not mean that we did not have cultural conflicts. We did encounter the standard intercultural challenges such as miscommunication and different approaches to schedules and deadlines (Hall, 1989). A further cultural distance we could identify, was the general connection between HEIs and SMEs. In some countries, strong ties between HEIs and the business community are the norm. Other countries struggled to convince SMEs of the fruitful relationship as lecturers had little experience with working in a real-life consultancy project.

However, we felt that the overall impact of cultural distances was smaller than expected, given the international management literature (Taras, Steel & Kirkman, 2010).

3.3. Administrative Distance

Reasons for administrative distances are the absence of colonial ties, the absence of shared monetary or political associations, political hostility, and institutional weakness (Ghemawat, 2001, 2007). Since all countries of INTENSE are EU-members, we initially assumed that

administrative distances will not be a decisive factor. However, this seems to be the most crucial distance that should be considered before setting up relations.

Like teachers before (Minett-Smith & Davis, 2019) we realised that intrinsic motivation and like-mindedness of the faculty is not found everywhere. Some lecturers minimised collaboration as it was perceived as too time demanding and difficult. We attribute this mainly to administrative distances, as incentives for lecturer to participate in cross-country collaborations varied. Some lecturers did not receive any time- or financial compensation.

Furthermore, academic calendars and course requirements across universities varied greatly, which made the scheduling of work phases and team meetings difficult. Another challenge was steering the enrolment for the consultancy project. 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 entitled to disenroll from the course throughout the first three weeks of the course, which is difficult for a real-life consultancy project. In the Netherlands, the project was also open to incoming exchange students meaning that e.g. an Irish student was working on the project and had to interview Dutch wholesalers. For students not speaking the native language this was quite a challenge.

Although, the European credit transfer system (ECTS) aims to ensure a comparable workload for students, the workload expectations differed substantially across countries. Resolving those situations early on and discussing the progress of both teams and the quality of their work regularly is crucial to avoid misunderstandings (Wohlgemuth et al., 2019).

Administrative distances seem to be the most crucial challenge in setting up collaborations. Since the EU Bologna-process aims to harmonize higher education across the EU, we assume that this distance has an even stronger impact on collaborations between countries that are not part of a political or economic union.

3.4. Geographic Distance

Geographic distance between countries is assumed with a lack of a common border, physical remoteness, as well as weak transportation and communication links. Particularly with the need to communicate often this distance becomes important (Ghemawat, 2001).

Three partners had a rather low distance with joint borders, whereas two partners had a larger geographic distance. Hence, the distances between countries of the INTENSE project did not allow for much face-to-face communication, due to cost reasons and environmental concerns that result from traveling. Therefore, cross-country team communication relied mainly on virtual tools. Various channels, such as e-mails, text messenger services, video-conferencing, phones, file sharing services etc. were used. No specific medium is superior in all cases, but the diversity creates additional value (Tenzer & Pudelko, 2016). Nevertheless, we tried to ensure regular face-to-face meetings at least twice per year during 2-3 days project meetings.

Our experiences show that a combination of virtual communication and face-to-face contact is beneficial. Less distance would allow for more personal contact, which would be better. However, while virtual communication is not perfect, it was sufficient for our purposes. Therefore, we conclude that geographic proximity is beneficial, but not crucial in this setting.

3.5. Economic Distance

Economic distance between countries refers to differences in consumer income as well as differences in the costs and quality of inputs and infrastructure. This distance is the most important attribute for most businesses (Ghemawat, 2001). However, for HEI collaborations, it seems to have less influence.

The partner countries of INTENSE are all EU members. Therefore, the distances are not too high. The partner country with the lowest per capita GDP and the highest economic distance to other project partners is Croatia (Miloloža, 2015). Accordingly, the financial compensation for participation in the project was also the lowest in absolute (€) values. While the EU-funding intends to create comparable relative compensation (based on the countries income levels), this sometimes creates some frustration for the involved lecturers.

We could observe that the SMEs we consulted were usually interested in entering the economically and geographically largest market (Germany). This created some imbalance between outgoing and incoming firms from and to Germany. As Figure 1 illustrates, a balance is very desirable for the project. Interestingly, it seems that SMEs do not chose their target country based on the economic distance between home and host country as suggested by Ghemawat (2001), but by the economic strength of the host country.

Otherwise, the HEI collaboration was less affected by economic distances. However, the INTENSE HEIs are all state-owned non-profit organisations and are not exposed to the same market mechanisms as businesses or profit-oriented private HEIs,.

4. Conclusion

The CAGE framework was developed for a business context. We contributed by testing its usability in a HEI context. Ghemawat (2001) suggests that the distances are not equally important for all industries. We conclude that economic distance is not that important for state-owned non-profit HEIs. However, it might be decisive for profit-oriented HEIs.

Our second contribution is an illustration of criteria that help to select partner countries for successful international collaborations based on the CAGE model. We considered administrative distances to be the most crucial aspect to look for. Particularly harmonised academic calendars, harmonised workload expectations, and student selection criteria played a role in our setting. The international management literature suggests that cultural distances

create a lot of frustration (Taras, Steel & Kirkman, 2010). Since all our involved lecturers and students are from that field of expertise and are well prepared to address them, we did not observe a lot of challenges that relate to international culture. However, we expect a stronger impact on lecturers and students that are not prepared in this regard. Geographic distance forced us to rely a lot on virtual collaboration. This is not ideal, but sufficient. Therefore, we consider geographic distance to be manageable in a HEI context. Table 1 summarizes our findings for our project of five state-owned HEIs within the EU.

Table 1. Summarizing CAGE distances in the INTENSE project.

CAGE Distance	Challenges experienced in INTENSE	Potential mitigation strategies
Cultural distance	Miscommunication + different approaches to schedules Differences in HEI-SME connections	Common language Intercultural sensitivity training
Administrative distance	Differing incentive structures for teachers Varying academic calendars Varying course requirements, workload expectations and enrolment regulations	Teambuilding among lecturers + aligning incentives Developing joint rules and structures beforehand
Geographic distance	Limited possibilities for face-to-face meetings	Virtual collaboration (Based on teambuilding among lecturers)
Economic distance	Differences in financial compensation for participation	Align incentives

With the help of the CAGE framework, we describe challenges that occurred in the INTENSE project. Many of them are probably not idiosyncratic to the INTENSE project and will occur in a similar way in other projects. They can learn from us and avoid these challenges, e.g. through a CAGE framework-based partner selection.

Additionally, while this paper discussed many challenges that come with cross-country collaborations, none of the challenges we faced is that severe that it should stop us from engaging in collaborations. We were able to master all of them and hope to motivate the community to engage in future transnational HEI collaborations.

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