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Cooperation and long term partnership between Karlsruhe, Laurea and Saimaa University of Applied Sciences based on business simulation joint course

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Introduction

Cooperation and partnership between other universities in different countries is encouraged in strategy papers of many universities. Many student and staff mobility programs already exist as well as cooperation in R&D contexts. However, joint courses offered by several universities together and implemented in curricula are not common. This paper focuses on long term cooperation and partnership between Karlsruhe, Laurea and Saimaa universities of applied sciences to offer a joint international business course based on business simulation.

EU-level framework

European commission defines growing internationalization and international mobility of students, researchers and staff as some of the key factors in the communication of an agenda for the modernization of Europe's higher education systems. One of the main benefit of the internationalization is the dissemination of the ideas and best practices as well as the professional development of the people working on education. Virtual mobility is recognized as one, many times under exploited option. In general, creation of virtual learning platforms and utilization of variety of ICT solutions is seen as an opportunity to take up innovative practices in education, improve the level of learning and enrich the learning experiences. (European commission, 2011)

Another suggested field of improvement for higher education is the recognition of the transversal skills along with the specific professional skills. Transversal skills are understood to be working life skills that are important in many occupations. Examples of this type of competencies are language and cultural skills, teamwork skills or IT skills. The good level of transversal skills is proposed significantly improve the employability of the person, especially in the international sphere.

Simulations as an environment to practice business and transversal skills in an international cooperation

Business simulations can be used as practical learning tools in modern business education. In the business studies context the students can practice their business skills in an as close to realistic situation as it is possible to simulate. The students apply their knowledge on various business areas in running a virtual company via a business simulation game. The aim of the business simulation course is that the students gain comprehensive understanding on how strategic business decisions are made in teams in areas like marketing, pricing, and investments and they can be used in various sectors such as manufacturing industry, international trade and hotel and hospitality industry. Competing against other teams makes the learning experience motivating and real-like.

When business simulations are offered jointly and internationally in cooperation between several universities, the students don't know each other in the beginning. Yet, they are expected to work in virtual, international, and intercultural teams. This way they learn capabilities needed in their future professional careers. (European commission 2011; ec.europa.eu, 2015)

Aligning course set-up to suit different curricula

At the starting point of co-operation simulations were part of the business studies curriculum in each of the three universities. However, there was no continuous international cooperation with other universities although some experiments had been carried out with other international partners. Karlsruhe, Laurea and Saimia shared the same vision: Long term partnership and implementation of mixed international teams formed of students from all partnering universities.

When students from different universities participate in the same course together, the course set-up has to be the same for all. Therefore course schedules had to be adjusted to suit all the universities. Learning platform issues and communication with the students were surprisingly difficult to unify as all the universities had different systems and security standards in place. Pedagogical choices required adjustments as well due to different learning objectives, learning activities and assessment practices in each university.

Teacher level experiences

Although simulations were part of the business studies curriculum in each of the three universities, there was no continuous international cooperation. Best practices and new knowledge was created at many levels in international surrounding. Teacher's experiences about arranging a joint course on a continuous basis have been gathered throughout the planning, realization, assessment and reflection process of each course.

Learning to be flexible in planning a joint course was found to be the most important issue. Teachers from different countries learnt about each other's pedagogical methods, were able to align learning objectives and activities to be the same for the participants from the three universities, chose a common online learning platform and gained experience from using several digital virtual team-working tools some previously familiar only to one (Adobe Connect, Skype, Google tools, Webex, etc.). This way the jointly offered international course was improved from the original domestic ones.

Many skills were enhanced at the teachers' level. There was the need to use the language and cultural skills and virtual team work skills. The sharing of knowledge and new ideas was not limited to learning to use the new digital tools. Also the pedagogic knowledge was enhanced through the common creation of learning activities and reflective discussions after each course. The point of these discussions was to think together what we learnt as teachers, what was good about the course and where we had the room for improvement.

Student level learning experiences

Student feedback about their learning was collected immediately after the last assignment of the simulation by an open question in an electronic feedback form "What were your learnings from participating in the simulation?" Out of 31 students 15 participated in giving their feedback.

Student's answers were analyzed by content analysis technique. Based on that three areas of learning were found in the answers, namely international teamwork, virtual teamwork and decision-making in businesses. In the following, learnings in these three themes is summarized.

International teamwork: Most of the students had worked in international teams during their studies at their own campuses. This experience was different because team members came from different universities in different countries with different back-grounds and previous studies. Students had realized how they can learn from each other and benefit from other team member's different knowledge base, experience and perspectives on international business.

Virtual teamwork: Although before the simulation the students reported they had experience in virtual tools, working virtually with strangers was more difficult for them than they had expected. Lack of motivation of some team members in some teams was reported to be the reason for poorly functioning teamwork. Teams experiencing poor teamwork also spent less time together online and they sensed that they really didn't know much about their team members. Students commonly used communication tools for teamwork were Skype and Facebook and other social media tools.

Decision-making in a company: As already concluded, this simulation was about making informed decisions when leading a company based on analysis on the present competitive situation in the simulated environment. The students realized the complexity of management decisions and how different activities and decisions in a company are intertwined. Past results are important and guide decisions for the future and before making final decisions it is important to analyze the possible outcomes. In decision-making it was important to focus on strategic big decisions.

According to the student feedback the joint course with foreign partners was motivating, it enhanced learning and they got a real experience of the challenges they might face while working in international companies and teams.

As one of the students put it: "business simulation games are really beneficial for students who have an attitude for learning. It challenges students and also enhances some abilities needed in a working life such as teamwork and leadership skills. I can also think of other advantages: simulation games shape innovativeness and creativity and increase the ability to make decisions. Students will learn to set goals and become more determined to achieve these goals. They also increase risk awareness, and help understand market rules.

Conclusions

Based on these learnings and experiences it is suggested that when creating a joint course with international partners a systematic way to approach the planning is needed. In this case Bloom's taxonomy was found to be a good model to guide thinking towards a jointly accepted set of learning objectives, contents and learning tasks and activities.

The implementation of joint simulation enhanced the transversal skills such as language and cultural skills, teamwork skills or digital and social media skills both on teacher and student level. Additionally, teachers have been able to develop their pedagogical skills in an international setting throughout the courses.

Learning objectives were well reached when using jointly arranged simulation. To support students' motivation and belonging to the team it is proposed that learning activities are designed to increase team members' knowledge about each other. Once team members know each other, they can better

trust each other and that way build mutual commitment to do their best for the benefit of themselves and each other.

The next experiment in this co-operation is to arrange a face to face week for the students before the actual game rounds. The purpose is to help the students to get to know each other before starting the virtual teamwork. The students from all three universities kick off the next joint course at Laurea Tikkurila campus in the end of October 2015. In the medium term the intention is to expand the partner network. Some discussions with potential universities have been held already.

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