

Collaborative Online International Learning: case studies of HEIs in Sultanate of Oman, UK, and Ghana

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Abstract

Online International Learning (OIL) facilitates bringing together students virtually from various Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) located at different countries. The framework adopted for Collaborative OIL implementation involved academic staff members and students from Middle East College (MEC), Sultanate of Oman, Coventry University (CU), UK and Ghana Communication Technology University (GCTU), Ghana, in solving a particular problem or a set of tasks based on the Internationalized Learning Outcomes over an online platform, in a collaborative manner. The whole experience provides students and academic staff members a new perspective of interaction, experience and learning in Higher Education with a global impact. Collaborative OIL (COIL) was executed as a driving force towards Internationalization strategy at the participating HEIs. Students expressed their satisfaction and mentioned in the feedback that the activities benefit them to improve digital competences, intercultural experiences, and collaborative skills that would help them succeed in their future career prospects.

Keywords: *Collaborative Online International Learning, Internationalization, Intercultural engagement, Sultanate of Oman, UK, Ghana.*

1. Introduction

The Internationalization strategy adopted in various universities has been found to be a key success to develop global capability among the students (De Wit et al. 2015). Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is one of the techniques adopted by the Centre for Global engagement at Coventry University (CU), UK to bring out the advantages of developing several skills including digital and intercultural competences among students through module-specific activities, as part of their internationalization strategy (Coventry University). The academic partnership of Middle East College (MEC), Sultanate of Oman and Ghana Communication Technology University (GCTU), Ghana with CU provided an opportunity to attempt COIL projects and offer a creative and distinctive learning experience to students of MEC and GCTU.

Academic mobility is challenging. This was witnessed the most in the COVID pandemic times. CU has been active in promoting virtual mobility through OIL (Villar-Onrubia and Rajpal 2015) even before the pandemic. Several stories of OIL projects and testimonials have been published in the university website which apparently indicate the success of OIL projects with their academic partner universities and colleges. This article discusses OIL projects executed amongst Undergraduate (UG) and Postgraduate (PG) students at MEC, CU and GCTU.

2. Literature review

Several researchers (Naicker et. Al 2021; Appiah-Kubi and Annan 2020; Marcillo-Gómez and Desilus 2017) have been working on harnessing the benefits of COIL projects for the enhancement of their institutional students' experience. Naicker et. al (2021) carried out an empirical study and found that Pre-COIL, students that they had difficulty in adapting to new situations ($p < 0.001$), while post-COIL students were more culturally curious ($p < 0.00$). They found that the key challenges to the student experience enhancement included challenges around language, technology, and partner dynamics. The key enablers include a structured outline, faculty facilitation and student engagement.

Marcillo-Gómez and Desilus (2017) view the use of COIL in a slightly different perspective focusing on institutions such as Jesuit institutions who face financial challenges while trying to provide access to quality education and experience for their students. They found COIL as an opportunity for students to participate in a study-abroad experience while at the university using technology.

The guide developed for university faculty at The State University of New York, to implement Collaborative Online Learning courses is encouraging that highlighted on the collaborative approach to OIL amongst scholars and faculty mentors (SUNY COIL Center Version 1.4). Ramirez (2019) found that COIL among the university students in the Arizona-Sonora Magaregion facilitated the importance of international relationships in addition to developing global citizen skills in students.

Gokcora (2021) found COIL as an opportunity to enhance academic skills (peer reviewing, learn to react to peers'

comments, cross-cultural engagement, research, and writing) of students through collaborations among them enrolled at different campuses. COIL has been a boon especially during the COVID pandemic in promoting critical discussions in the academic programs by students from different universities and colleges.

Appiah-Kubi and Annan (2020) stated that Multinational companies continuously seek for engineers who are interculturally competent and achieving this competency can be expensive although a more cost-effective method is the COIL. They identified common project deliverables for the collaborating institutions' course learning outcomes. They found that the students who participated in the COIL experience performed significantly better on the project work. In addition, they got positive feedback with 70% (of the 11 students at University of Ghana) and 85% (of the 20 students at University of Dayton) respectively reported that the collaboration was either effective or very effective.

Overall, the literature survey confirms that COIL is an effective method to promote internationalization and fosters skill development in students required to prosper in future careers.

3. Design framework

An asynchronous approach of collaborative learning was followed where students worked on a single project or set of tasks framed for the chosen modules including Project offered at collaborating HEIs however with a time lag (due to the difference in the start of the semesters at HEIs) but in the same semester. Figure 1 depicts the COIL framework adopted.

4. Implementation

Case study 1:

Study level – UG

Collaborating HEIs – MEC and CU

COIL project aim - To build an app that helps to navigate and alarm students about their classes in case they are lost in locating the classroom within the campus and forget about the class respectively, however customized to respective campuses.

The project was designed in a way to include several activities/interactions on a mutual shared digital platform to share the ideas and thoughts at both the ends. Four students each from both the campuses presented and discussed their innovative ideas, over a social media platform named 'Discord'. They shared their knowledge and thoughts for adding better features and functionality for the app therefore the software requirement specifications were edited and modified several times before the final product specifications were achieved.

The knowledge exchanged significantly helped students to make right decisions while developing a piece of software. Moreover, the students at both campuses enjoyed the

discussions over the social media where they exchanged their ideas and the methods to be applied while developing the application customized to their environment. MEC students felt that it gave them a new perspective of what CU students prefer to design and use in the same project. The project was summative and formative in nature for students at CU and MEC respectively.

Case study 2:

Study level – PG

Collaborating HEIs – MEC and CU

COIL project aim - To widen the knowledge of Enterprise Systems in a global context and enhance intercultural communication.

The COIL activity implemented for PG was among M. Sc (IT) students at MEC and the M. Sc (MIS) students at CU with the aim of enriching students' knowledge on the module (Enterprise systems) contents in a global context through knowledge sharing on the tasks assigned and build up the capability of peer reviewing the work. There were, on an average of 20 students from each campus participated in the activities.

The communication was established through CU OpenMoodle page created by Moodle administrator at CU. Three tasks aligned to the Learning Outcomes along with an Icebreaker activity was designed. Students at one campus were encouraged to critically review the solutions provided by students at the other campus, of the tasks. There had been fairly good communication among the students at MEC and CU by peer reviewing their solutions on the tasks assigned to them that spread across the semester. This was monitored by the project leads at both the ends. MEC students had to submit a report on the OIL experience consisting of critical reflections which was assessed. Therefore, the project was summative and formative in nature for students at MEC and CU respectively.

Case study 3:

Study level – PG

Collaborating HEIs – MEC and CU, GCTU

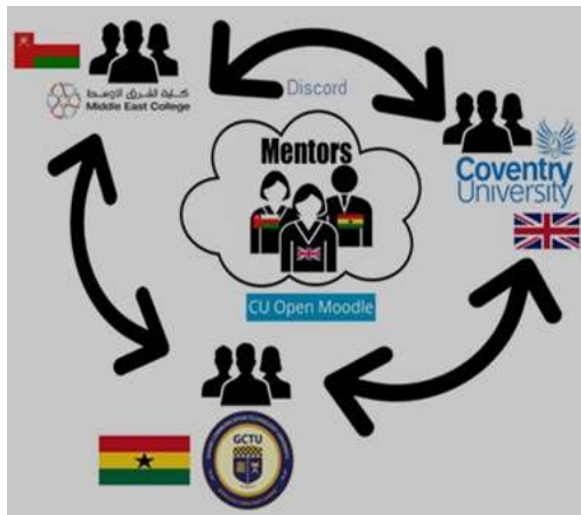
COIL project aim – To help PG Students understand how research is perceived in other cultures and how best to carry out research.

For each activity of the Project titled "Doing Effective Research", students were required to share their understanding of key research concepts. This included (i) understanding of the process of critical reading and writing and (ii) method of sourcing and reviewing literature (iii) critical review of the document (iv) approach to publishing research findings (v) approach to avoiding Plagiarism and the impact of every aspect on their research. They were then required to read what other students have written, think about how they can improve their research process and write their comments. Mentors

were assigned specific tasks however facilitated on sections they were interested in. The project was formative for all students. There were, on an average of 25 students from each campus who participated in the activities.

Figure 1

COIL model



5. Reflections

Students and academic staff members found extremely interesting to exchange ideas and experiences each other. Moreover, they found COIL to be an amazing opportunity to get to know each other, culture diversity, working methods and writing style while communicating with each other. Self-motivated students with leadership qualities were easily identified at both the ends in case study 1 project. Some students' participation was limited; however, there was evidence in developing leadership and teamwork skills among the active scholars, which are key to employability. The main challenge was the time lag of the start of the semesters at the HEIs. However, the issue was limited with the nature of assessment task undertaken being formative most of the time. It is worth mentioning that COIL created an environment that fostered creative thoughts for innovation shared among the students and the joint research publication: an outcome of case study 1.

Motivating some of the PG students to take part in COIL was challenging since a few of them could not really capture the purpose of it in the beginning of the semester; however, they could at a later stage. There is no doubt that COIL is one of the best ways to promote the key focus areas of internationalization. The knowledge exchange through COIL is found to be huge which significantly helped students at all campuses from a global context. In addition, several aspects of MEC Learner attributes such as digital competence, intercultural engagement,

communication skills and teamwork skills, could be enhanced with this practice. COIL provided an opportunity to enhance student and academic staff experience and exposure to work with international universities. Glimpses of COIL activities and student feedback are presented in the Appendix. Students who successfully completed the tasks were provided with the certificate of completion of COIL project.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Coventry University in the UK believes there is value in OIL projects and has been carrying out several projects with partner Institutions across the globe. MEC in the Sultanate of Oman and GCTU in Ghana are two HEIs that CU has partnered for COIL and successfully completed the projects as described in the above sections.

MEC considers COIL as a crucial means of driving the internationalization strategy of the institution which creates the opportunity for students to experience international learning besides an international quality curriculum that develops global capability and intercultural competences. CU aims on developing digital skills and intercultural competences. GTUC considers COIL project as one of the means of enhancing student engagement by bringing together students around the globe (virtually) to share experiences and build their capacity to deal with the dynamics of technology in education.

Designing innovative tasks and activities in the COIL projects to promote internationalization is significant. The benefits of participating in such activities are numerous. Joint student projects can be planned that can possibly lead to innovations. The experience that will be gained through such activities help students build up networks internationally. This obviously makes them equipped to get employment and sustain in a multicultural environment.

Appendix

Case study 1:

Activity:

- <https://www.evernote.com/shard/s650/sh/57e3c5e5-6905-4b3c-963f-db319a5ec80d/351a15787f17e83ffa26b40985290079>

Feedback:

- <https://www.evernote.com/shard/s650/sh/1efa4657-3b98-4c4a-8fda-75b88c821da9/67262bb48f6c0fc9bd205731d0e2623a>

Case study 2 and 3:

Activity:

- <https://www.evernote.com/shard/s650/sh/339ad3bd-2426-4a0b-a385-95bb8a812e8d/b04eddfc31a1ddfadb8514f84fe58bc>
- <https://www.evernote.com/shard/s650/sh/29c1f463-8f79-425f-b0ae-76ce782d3408/c6df0d7c367790edc1cc60e32d28d210>

Feedback:

- <https://www.evernote.com/shard/s650/sh/f3898446-cc59-4393-a671-944db565af1a/0600cfc827df2d3ae783d9a9f3fd6b8>
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