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Enhancing Intercultural Competence through Collaborative Online International Learning: A Case Study from Albania and Lithuania

ANISA KUME
University of Tirana, Albania
anisa.kume@unitir.edu.al

FATMA JAUPI
University of Tirana, Albania
fatma.jaupi@unitir.edu.al

SAULIUS TVIRBUTAS
Kauno Kolegija University of Applied Science, Lithuania
saulius.tvirbutas@kaunokolegija.lt

This paper contains a case study of the Faculty of Economy, University of Tirana (FEUT) and Kauno Kolegija's use of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) in Lithuania. The program lasted five weeks in late 2024. Students collaborated across borders on virtual platforms and undertook assignments that were integrated into both institutions' curricula. The study used a mixed-methods approach involving pre- and post-surveys and qualitative introspection. It examines the effects of COIL on students' intercultural skills, online collaboration, and teamwork in international groups. The results show that COIL enhances students' sensitivity to cultural differences, increases their confidence when collaborating with peers from other countries, and improves online communication and problem-solving skills. The research also highlights the potential of COIL to offer inclusive and sustainable alternatives to classical physical mobility. By presenting an applied model of virtual collaboration, this study contributes to the existing literature on the internationalization of higher education through online teaching modalities.

Key Words: collaborative online international learning (COIL), intercultural competence, digital collaboration, higher education innovation, sustainable internationalization

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INTRODUCTION

In response to the accelerating changes in higher education, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) has emerged as an innovative pedagogical model that facilitates global interaction and cultural

exchange via the internet. Initially developed by the State University of New York (SUNY) in 2006, COIL allows students from different nations to work together within existing course frameworks without the need to travel (Rubin 2017; Rubin and Guth 2022).

[290] The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of online learning and made COIL a viable option for international collaboration (Liu and Shirley 2021). Furthermore, the growing global interest in environmental concerns and the need to mitigate carbon emissions associated with international travel have highlighted the value of COIL in enabling sustainable global interaction (Nikula et al. 2022).

This paper reports on the initial COIL experience at FEUT, developed in collaboration with Kauno Kolegija. It describes the development and delivery of the course, as well as student feedback, contributing to the growing body of research supporting COIL implementation in higher education. The study seeks to answer the following question: How does COIL help foster intercultural competencies and teamwork skills in students?

In the context of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation, COIL serves as a bridge between regions. As Southeast European universities move towards integration into broader academic communities, online collaboration becomes an important means of facilitating cultural learning and regional inclusiveness. This case study contributes to this discussion by documenting an East-East European university partnership, reflecting patterns in the global landscape of higher education that go beyond the traditional West-North axes. Within the Euro-Mediterranean region, COIL can support policy goals aimed at developing regional academic cooperation and mobility in a digital-first context. COIL can be especially valuable for institutions in economically disadvantaged or transitioning countries, as it enables international collaboration without the need for significant investments in infrastructure. Furthermore, regional cohesion and employability can be strengthened through the multilingual and multicultural competencies developed via COIL, which align with the EU's green and digital education transformation. Integrating COIL into regional education policies would align with the vision of the European Education Area to provide inclusive and sustainable learning opportunities, especially to students who are typically underrepresented in exchange programs.

As Albania falls within the Mediterranean cultural region, students tend to exhibit culturally embedded traits such as high-context com-

munication, relationship-based collaboration styles, and strong group ties. These cultural inclinations have the potential to shape how students engage in virtual group work, negotiate meaning, and develop intercultural competence in COIL contexts. Understanding these regional worldviews helps place students' experiences into context and [291] enriches the interpretation of learning outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The SUNY COIL Center (2020) describes COIL as a pedagogy that brings together students and teachers from various cultures to learn, share, and work together within the curriculum. De Wit (2013) considers COIL to be a new instructional pedagogy that contributes to intercultural skills and fosters inclusive international education. Key elements of COIL include online collaboration, intercultural communication, collaborative curriculum design, and environmental sustainability (Hackett et al. 2024).

Previous research has confirmed that COIL effectively improves cultural competency and IT proficiency (Hackett et al. 2023). Garcia et al. (2023) and Rebek et al. (2022) in their research also refer to the pedagogical benefits of COIL, although their studies are primarily qualitative and case-based.

Jones et al. (2021) assert that structured intercultural activities, like COIL, lead to better learning outcomes than unstructured international exposure. Leask (2015) also highlights the inclusive internationalization of the curriculum, which COIL supports through higher student engagement.

Peric and Vitezic (2016) point out the role of organized academic interventions in developing intercultural competence within the Euro-Mediterranean region as essential to achieving COIL's objectives.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on the theory of intercultural competence, defined as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures (Deardorff 2006). The COIL model falls under the 'internationalization at home' movement. Its purpose is to offer international learning opportunities to students regardless of their ability to travel (Belen and Jones 2015). Additionally, the research utilizes constructivist learning theory. It emphasizes the importance of social interaction in creating knowledge, especially in diverse cultural and lin-

guistic contexts. This theory helps us understand students' experiences and learning outcomes in the COIL project.

METHODOLOGY

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Participants and Group Composition

The COIL partnership followed a previous Erasmus+ mobility program between Kauno Kolegija and FEUT. The 'Business Communication in the Digital Age' COIL project included 48 students from Kauno Kolegija, Lithuania, and FEUT, Albania. Students from both countries were devided into 8 multinational groups, and each group analyzed a real-world organization operating in both countries. They collaborated and presented their findings together online.

Research Design

This study used a qualitative case study research design to examine students' experience and learning achievements in the COIL project. This approach enabled in-depth intercultural interaction and collaboration within a learning setting to be documented. A mixed-methods data collection plan was used to supplement the case study.

Specifically, the research included pre- and post-course questionnaires administered to Albanian students at FEUT. The questionnaires contained Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. They assessed four main areas: (1) intercultural competence of the students, (2) digital collaboration skills, (3) teamwork experience, and (4) overall satisfaction with the COIL process.

Qualitative data were collected using students' written reflections submitted upon project completion. These reflections provided richer insights into students' perceptions, cultural learning, and challenges encountered during the collaboration. Researchers coded responses manually, utilizing thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step model to identify patterns and recurring themes. Some examples of themes included 'communication flexibility,' 'cultural awareness,' and 'online professionalism growth.'

To ensure trustworthiness and reliability, data triangulation was used by comparing reflection responses with survey responses. Additionally, peer debriefing among researchers helped verify interpretations and reduce bias. The instruments used included surveys and reflection essays. The experience lasted five weeks, in accordance with SUNY COIL guidelines, and took place from November to Decem-

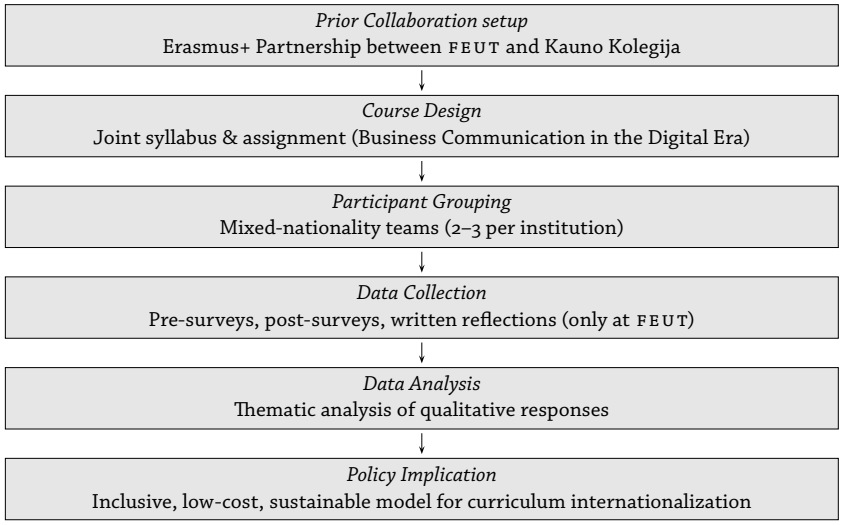


FIGURE 1 Methodological Flow of the COIL Study

ber 2024. Even though only FEUT students were surveyed, such tools should be included in future studies involving students from both institutions to facilitate cross-school comparison. The research process is described graphically in Figure 1.

While only FEUT students were surveyed due to institutional constraints and the need for language harmonization, unprompted comments from Lithuanian participants were shared during the final COIL reflection session and generally aligned with the patterns observed. In future cycles, parallel instruments from both partner universities should be used to allow for direct comparison.

RESULTS

Survey feedback and comments showed clear increases in students' awareness of other cultures, communication skills, and flexibility. Students felt more confident working with international classmates and valued the richness of learning from diverse perspectives.

Key takeway included:

- Increased appreciation of cultural diversity in business settings.
- Effective teamwork in diverse environments.
- Recognition that online collaboration could be a long-term alternative to in-person interaction.

Challenges included managing time zone differences and occasional

TABLE 1 Summary of Student Feedback Pre- and Post-COIL Participation

Aspect Assessed	Pre-COIL (%)	Post-COIL (%)
Confidence in working with international peers	45	80
Improved intercultural understanding	50	85
Digital collaboration skills	55	88
Teamwork across cultures	52	83

NOTES Data reflect student responses from FEUT based on pre- and post-surveys conducted during the COIL experience.

misinterpretations due to language barriers. Regarding the structure of the groups, remarks indicated certain perceptual differences based on gender and team composition. Female students emphasized empathy, patience, and flexibility in multicultural collaboration, while male students highlighted efficiency and leadership in task organization. In addition, students in more mixed gender and multinational groups reported higher levels of co-responsibility and trust. These results suggest that group diversity can enhance the COIL learning process as well, if appropriately managed.

The results in table 1 show clear improvements across all measured aspects. Notably, the percentage of students who reported confidence in collaborating with international peers increased from 45% to 80%. Intercultural competence and perceptions of cooperation also showed significant gains. These findings support the results of Hackett et al. (2023), further confirming the effectiveness of COIL in developing the skills required for the 21st century.

DISCUSSION

The findings validate previous research on the efficacy of COIL in enhancing intercultural competence and online teamwork (Hackett et al. 2023). The team project encouraged learners to apply theoretical knowledge to practical, real-world scenarios while gaining crucial 21st- century skills. The study illustrates how structured, objective-driven COIL activities can be successfully embedded into university curricula.

This study echoes the work of Hackett et al. (2023), who emphasized COIL's impact on students' cultural intelligence. The significant gains observed in the post-surveys are consistent with the findings of Garcia et al. (2023), who recognized COIL as being particularly effective in international business education due to its contribution to developing a global mindset. The shared learning experience observed in this

study parallels that of Rebek et al. (2022), in which students acquired intercultural competencies through collaborative virtual assignments across international institutions.

These findings are consistent with Vadnjal's (2016) study, which argues that cultivating an international mindset – even among family business students – can positively influence their future career decisions. COIL may help foster such mindsets through intercultural collaboration experiences akin to entrepreneurial global exposure. [295]

Furthermore, the findings contribute to the ongoing discussion of internationalizing the curriculum in non-Western contexts. As Leask (2015) argues, international experiences need to be available to all students and not just those who can travel. The Albania-Lithuania partnership described here is an example of inclusive, scalable, and sustainable internationalization.

The study also highlights the importance of structured online interaction in global learning environments. Jones et al. (2021) note that intentional design of online interaction produces greater intercultural benefits than simple exposure to diversity. Through active facilitation of students via tasks and reflection, this COIL model promotes deeper learning.

In addition, this research illustrates that COIL can be an effective way to develop transferable skills beyond academic settings, such as cross-cultural negotiation, flexibility, and time management. These skills are especially valuable in the post-pandemic globalized workplace, where virtual teamwork has increased. Reflective reports show that students appreciated the emphasis on digital literacy and cultural empathy, with COIL serving as a successful vehicle for soft skills development.

Finally, the partnership between institutions in the Western Balkans and the Baltics offers a unique perspective on the experience of students from underrepresented regions in international education research. This broadens the geographical scope of COIL research and highlights the potential for COIL adoption outside of North America and Western Europe.

LIMITATIONS

While this study is informative, several limitations are worth mentioning. The sample was restricted to students at a single university (FEUT) only, and thus the ability to compare between national groups

was limited. The five-week implementation allowed for meaningful engagement but excluded exploration of impacts on student behavior and academic achievement over a longer period. Voluntary participation may have created selection bias towards highly motivated students. The
[296] study also did not base its findings on direct instructor perceptions, which could provide meaningful insights into pedagogical alignment and intercultural facilitation. Future research can address these limitations through longitudinal designs and the inclusion of faculty, as well as multiple cohorts representing diverse student perspectives.

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this case study offer insightful lessons for international education policymakers, academic administrators, and faculty. First, COIL is a low-cost and inclusive alternative to traditional mobility programs. This is especially true for institutions and students with limited resources to traditional exchange programs. Second, incorporating COIL into the curriculum is supportive of national and institutional strategic priorities for digitalization and internationalization at home.

Intercultural dialogue within Mediterranean education policy must be promoted through inclusive tools like COIL in order to bridge geographic and cultural gaps, as noted by Cerović and Bjeljac (2015). From a policy perspective of view, COIL projects should be supported by education ministries and funding bodies as part of internationalization strategis in higher education. COIL training should be included in faculty development programs in order to support virtual collaboration tool training, intercultural facilitation, and co-teaching design. FEUT and Kauno Kolegija demonstrate that, with an open structure and institutional support, initial COIL collaborations can lead to outstanding learning outcomes and strengthen global academic network.

Within the Euro-Mediterranean region, COIL can support the achievement of policy goals for regional student mobility and exchange in a digital-first era. Economically constrained or post-transition institutions can benefit significantly from COIL, as it facilitates internationalization at minimal infrastructure costs. Moreover, the multicultural and multilingual skills developed through COIL enhance employability and regional integration, aligning with the EU's green and digital transitions in education.

For institutions to expand COIL, investing in faculty development is critical. Training must include not only technology tools but also in-

tercultural pedagogical practices. Group dynamics, variations in language, and differences in academic cultures have to be addressed by facilitators. Institutional support for co-teaching agreements, mutual learning objectives, and cross- institutional grading practices is essential to support the sustainability of COIL programs. Integrating these skills into academic development programs can prepare the institution to better undertake future collaborations. [297]

CONCLUSION

This case study adds to the growing body of literature on Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) by presenting evidence from a new partnership between Albania and Lithuania. The results show the potential of COIL to promote greater access to international learning, enhance intercultural and collaborative capabilities, and enable sustainable patterns of internationalization in higher education.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. To begin with, only students from one of the two participating institutions, FEUT, were included; therefore, the findings cannot be widely generalized. Secondly, the sample size was small, and the COIL experience lasted only five weeks. Thirdly, without a control group, the study is limited in its ability to make causal inferences from the changes observed.

To better inform future research, it is suggested to implement mixed-methods designs that involve both partner institutions, include larger and more diverse student populations, and extend the COIL implementation period to allow for long-term learning effects. Furthermore, including a control group or baseline measures can provide a cearer understanding of COIL's independent effect on student learning outcomes.

This example also illustrates how universities in emerging and less globally connected regions, such as the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, can actively engage in global virtual learning initiatives. By reducing the economic and organizational obstacles typically associated with international study, COIL expands access to global experiences and promotes academic equity. The strategy used here is more ecologically sustainable in its approach to globalization, replacing travel-based mobility with meaningful digital collaboration.

This study highlights COIL not only as a pedagogy for instruction but also as a catalyst for more inclusive and regionally responsive global education policy. As global education policy shifts towards an

increased focus on digital equity and sustainable collaboration, examples like COIL offer scalable and adaptable solutions for institutions with varying levels of capacity. The FEUT and Kauno Kolegija case illustrates that innovation in internationalization can emerge from less,
[298] not solely from major global centers of study. Thus, the study confirms the need to engage underrepresented academic voices and promote inclusive pathways for effective cross-border interaction. COIL is both an academic innovation and a strategic initiative to enhance academic equity, reduce ecological footprint, and strengthen regional academic connections across the Euro-Mediterranean space.

The case also provides valuable lessons for institutional policymakers. Integrating COIL into formal curriculum frameworks, rather than treating it as an add-on, can help make internationalization a normative feature of learning at home. Incentives for teaching staff, technical support systems, and recognition of student participation can drive greater adoption. Institutions must also prioritize the monitoring and evaluation of COIL's impact to guide further improvements and to ensure alignment with national and European strategies for digital and inclusive learning.

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