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Online international learning: Internationalising the curriculum through virtual mobility at Coventry University

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Virtual mobility initiatives are one of the most flexible, versatile and inclusive approaches in the provision of international experience opportunities. Given that in most universities only a small fraction of students can benefit from forms of academic mobility that involve travelling abroad, Internet-based intercultural interactions prove to be instrumental in widening participation in international experience. This article focuses on the virtual mobility scheme of Coventry University (CU), known as Online International Learning (OIL). OIL projects involve online interactions between CU students and peers at non-UK universities, so they can work together on subject-specific learning tasks or activities while developing key attributes of global graduates, namely Intercultural Competence and Digital Skills. After discussing OIL within a wider

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Introduction

The term 'internationalisation' refers to one of the key trends reshaping the higher education (HE) arena over the last few decades. HE internationalisation

encompasses a highly diverse range of initiatives and endeavours that universities, along with governments and other key actors in the sector, undertake in order to help adapt to an increasingly globalised world (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2009). Most, if not

all, of the activities and processes that are core to universities have already been internationalised to some extent. Indeed, this phenomenon has permeated institutions at all levels, as implied by Knight's widely quoted definition of the term, according to which internationalisation is 'the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions (primarily teaching/learning, research, service) or delivery of higher education' (Knight 2004).

More specifically, the notion of 'Internationalisation of the Curriculum' (IoC) focuses on the idea of developing an international and intercultural dimension into a programme of study, which includes curriculum content, delivery methods and other services aimed at supporting students' educational journeys (Leask 2009). Ultimately, the goal is to help students develop a series of attributes, qualities or competences that may enable them to address the challenges of living and working in contemporary societies – as citizens and professionals – and to assume associated responsibilities.

Universities and governments have put much emphasis on internationalising the curriculum by means of student exchanges, as illustrated for instance by the Erasmus programme in Europe. Nevertheless, 'not all students have the means or the inclination to study abroad' (Jones and Killick 2013, 3) and indeed only a small fraction of students in most universities, certainly within Europe, tend to engage in academic mobility (Beelen and Deardorff 2015). Therefore, if universities are to provide all their students – not just a subset – with opportunities to benefit from international experience, it is imperative to devise and implement a wider range of IoC strategies that take place not only abroad, but also at 'home' or on 'campus'.

This paper focuses on the first implementation stages of a scheme aimed at internationalising the curriculum across all disciplines at Coventry University (CU) by means of so-called 'virtual mobility' experiences. The term Online International Learning (OIL) has been chosen to refer to projects that fall under this modality of international experience at CU, which involves Internet-based dialogic interactions between students and peers at international partner universities.

Developing global graduates

CU is committed to providing students with the opportunity to 'become global graduates with an understanding of cultures, languages and belief systems other than their own, so they may make a positive contribution to an increasingly multi-cultural, interconnected and complex world' (Coventry University 2011). More specifically, the *Coventry University Group International Strategy* (2014, 3) established the following goals to be achieved by 2020:

- (1) All students equipped for the global world of work.
- (2) All students offered international experiences.
- (3) All courses demonstrating substantial internationalisation.
- (4) All students and staff to have the opportunity to acquire intercultural competency.

While one of these four goals is explicitly focused on developing abilities to engage in intercultural communication, this aspect also permeates all other goals and is indeed the cornerstone of the *Model for Progression in International Experience* (Adrey 2014) that we will describe below.

Consequently, global graduates will not only be fluent in discipline-specific knowledge and equipped with relevant employability skills, but will also have some proficiency in intercultural exchanges as well as in using technologies to communicate and participate in distributed networks of collaboration.

Intercultural competences

According to Deardorff (2006, 247 – 248), intercultural competence can be defined as 'the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes'. In an ever increasingly globalised world which is defined by the proliferation of opportunities for intercultural encounters (and also increased risk of misunderstandings), relevant organisations and governmental agencies have stressed the importance of fostering intercultural dialogue and providing citizens with the necessary intercultural capabilities (Council of Europe 2008; The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union 2006; UNESCO 2013).

Universities and educational institutions at large may operate as key players in the achievement of such a goal (Bergan, Restoueix, and Council of Europe 2009; Higher Education Academy 2014; UNESCO 2006). Besides having the duty to educate students so they can thrive as responsible citizens in culturally diverse societies, universities also need to ensure that students have the opportunity to develop as global-minded graduates who are equipped and capable of rapid integration into a complex and internationalised work-place, as increasingly required by employers (British Council, IPSOS & Booz Allen Hamilton 2013; Diamond et al. 2011).

Intercultural competence is not automatically acquired nor is mutual understanding reached simply in the presence of diversity. Therefore, it becomes essential to foster engagement, interaction and dialogue – beyond mere exposure to diversity – in order to facilitate students' development of key capacities and qualities that are integral to attaining intercultural competence, namely:

- Respect ('valuing of others');
- Self-awareness/identity ('understanding the lens through which we each view the world');
- Seeing from other perspectives/world views ('both how these perspectives are similar and different');
- Listening ('engaging in authentic intercultural dialogue');
- Adaptation ('being able to shift temporarily into another perspective');
- Relationship building (forging lasting cross-cultural personal bonds);
- Cultural humility ('combines respect with self-awareness'). (Deardorff 2011 cited in UNESCO 2013, 24)

Model of progression in international experience

In order to achieve this, CU has implemented a comprehensive model that includes a varied range of opportunities for gaining international experience both at home and abroad, within and outside the formal curriculum (Adrey 2014). This strategic approach was recognised in the 2014 Award for Innovation in Internationalisation of the European Association for International Education. The model consists of various types of mobility and experiential learning activities that aim to help students become global graduates, particularly through the development of intercultural competence. It is a progression model because elements reinforce each other while providing students with the possibility of configuring their own learning pathways. Historically, discussions of intercultural competence development in academic settings have centred on study abroad, overseas internships, volunteering or on extracurricular units of study that are perhaps sometimes compartmentalised and not embedded within the discipline. However, empirical evidence increasingly supports the belief that IoC needs to happen within discipline-specific contexts (Leask 2012). While the CU model incorporates opportunities for international experience outside disciplines (e.g. student-led cultural events, work experience in the United Kingdom for international students, languages training), one of the key strengths of the model is its focus on IoC within the disciplines, mainly by means of virtual mobility.

Internet-based internationalisation at home

The idea of adopting online technologies with the aim of internationalising the curriculum is not new. Indeed, the pioneering *Strategic Plan for Internationalisation* approved in 1999 at Malmö University (Nilsson 2000), the institution where the term internationalisation at home (IaH) was first coined (Leask, Beelen, and Kaunda 2013), already identified the Internet as an important medium for the provision of international

experience by means of virtual classrooms with participants based in different countries.

The term 'virtual mobility' soon gained ground as a way of describing those cross-border educational interactions that are achieved 'not through time spent abroad, but through participation in networks facilitated by technology and involving links to students and institutions abroad' (Sweeney 2014, 9). However, consensus remains elusive with regard to the terminology that scholars, practitioners and policy-makers use when referring to these kinds of initiatives. For instance, terms such as 'online intercultural exchange' (O'Dowd 2007), 'globally networked learning' (Starke-Meyerring 2010) or 'virtual internationalisation' (Middlemas and Peat 2015) also refer to initiatives that involve some sort of online interaction between students at universities in different countries.

According to Wit (2013) 'virtual mobility' is the preferred term in Europe – having been used in documents of the European Commission and other organisations in the continent – while the term 'collaborative online international learning' (COIL) has gained popularity in the USA over the last few years. In particular, COIL refers to a very specific approach developed at the State University of New York (SUNY):

[COIL] Courses are co-equal and team-taught by educators who collaborate to develop a shared syllabus that emphasizes experiential and collaborative student-centered learning. In most cases students are enrolled, charged tuition, and awarded grades only at their home institution. [. . .] a COIL course engages students in learning course content both through their own unique cultural lens and also by exchanging their cultural and experiential lenses as they move through the learning material together. (State University of New York Global Center n.d., p.4)

Universities often perceive these types of online cross-border interactions as an opportunity to improve students' levels of intercultural competence, as illustrated by the definition provided by one of the several EU-funded projects focusing on this type of initiative:

Virtual Mobility is a form of learning which consists of virtual components through a fully ICT supported learning environment that includes cross-border collaboration with people from different backgrounds and cultures working and studying together, having, as its main purpose, the enhancement of intercultural understanding and the exchange of knowledge. (Bijnens et al. 2006, 26)

Nevertheless, it is worth stressing that while being a requirement, mere exposure to cultural diversity is insufficient to help students develop those attributes. Therefore, it is crucial to establish mechanisms within this learning process that guarantee opportunities for direct engagement and interaction with diverse others. Further still, it becomes imperative that learning outcomes and collaborative activities are aligned and oriented towards that aim.

Since students who engage in traditional academic mobility only represent a small fraction of the entire student population for most universities (Beelen and Deardorff 2015), internationalisation leaders often see online learning as a mechanism for offering international experience opportunities to everybody, especially those who are not able to travel and/or those who decide not to do so for any reason. However, the expectations and rhetoric around virtual mobility initiatives have tended to overestimate its potential to democratise education, as is often the case in the field of educational technologies at large (Davies and Eynon 2013; Friesen 2008; Selwyn 2011). Several barriers and challenges have prevented this potential from being actualised, leading to a situation where universities have, at best, only managed to embed such initiatives as part of a piecemeal approach.

Moreover, the link between IoC and intercultural competence development is not always easily constructed without appropriate support, capacity-building or the internationalising of educators themselves. Despite the growing breadth of internationalisation initiatives, efforts do not always translate easily into meaningful teaching and learning interventions for the diverse modern-day classroom. Certainly, it is not always easy for some lecturers to define or interpret the relationship between their subject and internationalisation without appropriate and practical support that is pertinent to their teaching contexts, though access to such training is often limited and/or far from where academics live and thrive.

It could also be argued that the majority of international educators and experts converse and collaborate with other international educators and experts, and not necessarily with subject teaching experts. Unsurprisingly therefore, professional development for faculty to enhance their ability to integrate international and intercultural dimensions into their teaching has been identified as a key barrier for many institutions (Egron-Polak and Hudson 2014). Equally, academic cultures and dominant paradigms may impede absorption of external input when teachers are in the process of internationalising their curricula to further exacerbate this gulf.

OIL: CU's virtual mobility scheme

There is considerable amount of flexibility in the design of OIL projects, as there are only three basic

requirements: (1) Students must engage in some sort of online dialogic interaction with international peers on discipline content, (2) the collaborative activities must be informed by a number of internationalised learning outcomes and (3) there must be a reflective component (e.g. essay, focus group) that helps students make explicit the learning resulting from engaging in such intercultural encounters.

OIL projects are usually embedded into the formal curriculum and take place in the context of a module so that learning activities are informed by intended learning outcomes that incorporate an international or global dimension – with a special emphasis on developing skills and attitudes that enable mutual understanding in intercultural situations.

In order to fully grasp the impact of virtual mobility initiatives and maximise opportunities for improvement, it is crucial to adopt a comprehensive analytical perspective that places such educational uses of technology within the wider social milieu and organisational arrangements in which teaching and learning processes take place (Haythornthwaite 2006; Selwyn 2010). The Socio-Technical Interaction Networks (STINs) approach (Creanor and Walker 2010; Kling, McKim, and King 2003; Meyer 2006; Villar-Onrubia 2014) can be extremely useful in this regard, as it offers an analytical framework that helps us understand the way social dynamics and technological elements mutually shape each other. The following sections will draw on this approach to present important characteristics of the CU virtual mobility scheme.

STINs are heterogeneous compounds made of 'people (including organisations), equipment, data, diverse resources (money, skill, status), documents and messages, legal arrangements and enforcement mechanisms, and resource flows' (Kling et al. 2003, 48). While each OIL project might be modelled as a specific socio-technical network consisting of particular elements, here we will draw on the STIN approach to identify the key generic elements that characterise any – or at least most – OIL projects at CU.

Core actors

Students and academic staff at CU and partner institutions are the key interactors in any OIL project, although other stakeholders are involved in the design and/or delivery of them. Lecturers at all partner universities work together in the design of learning activities that entail some sort of online interaction between their students, whether it is asynchronous or synchronous. Advanced students or teaching assistants have also operated as facilitators in some OIL projects with high numbers of participants.

In 2014–15 alone there were almost 1,900 students at CU who participated in over 70 OIL projects established across all faculties in partnership with universities in more than 30 different countries (see Figure 1).

USA (7) China (5) France (5) Spain (5)
 Germany (5) Holland (4) Mexico (4)
 South Africa (4) Canada (3) Argentina (2)
 India (2) Italy (2) Japan (2) Russia (2) Armenia (1)
 Australia (1) Belgium (1) Brazil (1) El Salvador (1)
 Estonia (1) Jordan (1) Lithuania (1) Oman (1)
 Poland (1) St Lucia (1) Switzerland (1) Taiwan (1)
 Tanzania (1) Turkey (1) Ukraine (1)

Figure 1. Countries of partner universities (in brackets the number of projects per country)

Apart from those interactors, a wider range of stakeholders are directly involved in the provision of international experience through OIL. A team of intercultural engagement and e-learning specialists at CU's Centre for Global Engagement (CGE) is available to provide OIL project leaders with training and assistance in the processes of articulating internationalised learning outcomes, designing learning activities or establishing collaborations with new partner universities. Likewise, CU's e-Learning Unit and the learning technologists based in each faculty play a key role in supplying assistance in the delivery of projects where needed.

CU's leaders and policy-makers operating at different levels (e.g. deputy vice-chancellor, deanery teams at faculties, heads and associate heads of departments, as well as the director of CGE and other central services) also play an important role, as they are responsible for the creation and implementation of rules and structures that may favour (or hinder) engagement in the provision of OIL opportunities.

Besides partner universities, which are essential for obvious reasons, there are other external organisations that have played an important role, for instance providing resources and/or external recognition. A few OIL leaders have received funding from the Higher Education Academy and some projects have received prestigious accolades – for instance the MexCo languages OIL project was one of the finalists in The Guardian University Awards 2015 under the category online and distance learning.

Types of interactions

Online dialogic interactions are the backbone of OIL projects. The nature of such interactions is highly varied since the model is not prescriptive with regard to modes of communication, technologies or types of learning activities. The minimum requirement is that students engage in some sort of ICT-enabled dialogue with peers at international universities, leading to a 'symbolic exchange process whereby individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities negotiate shared meanings in an interactive situation' (Ting-Toomey 1999, 16).

In some projects communication itself is the main output, taking the form of, for instance, asynchronous discussions via online forums and/or virtual live debates where participants exchange ideas on a certain academic topic or

converse about core readings. For example, students of Coventry Law School critically debated with peers from Pontificia Universidad Católica (Buenos Aires) on the impact of various legal systems on the lives of United Kingdom and Argentinian citizens. Whilst the debate examined views presented in an article from *The American Journal of Comparative Law*, students also conducted independent research, reviews and mock debates to prepare for the live interaction.

Other projects require students to participate in collaborative tasks that result in the creation of diverse products, such as academic posters, software, architecture prototypes, graphic designs or videos. For example, Civil Engineering students from CU School of Energy, Construction & Environment worked collaboratively, both synchronously and asynchronously, with peers in South China University of Technology (China) to improve the design of an existing United Kingdom highway junction. The project required students to deliver a report and presentation to an expert panel of industry professionals based on contextual design, cost-effectiveness, creativity and sustainability factors. The project aimed to develop students' understanding of the importance and impact of cultural diversity in team-based engineering professional practice. While some projects consist of just a few interactions that take place during a very short period of time, others may span across the duration of a module and involve a series of regular interactions throughout an entire term.

Regulatory and policy frameworks

Some OIL projects involve partnerships formalised by means of, for instance, an Erasmus agreement or a Memorandum of Understanding. However, this is not a requirement and indeed most OIL projects only rely on direct links between project leaders at CU and colleagues at other universities.

With regard to the extent to which the OIL scheme is embedded into the overall strategic orientation of the university, it is worth mentioning that it is identified in several strategic documents as one of the possible instruments for the delivery of the institutional commitment to offer international experiences to all students, most notably in the *Coventry University Group International Strategy 2020* (2014, 3) and the *Coventry University Group Education Strategy 2015–20* (2015).

Enablers and barriers

OIL project leaders involved at the piloting stage of the scheme are arguably driven by a genuine interest in

pedagogical innovation and/or internationalisation of the curriculum, as there are no direct incentives attached to this activity. Having said that, the opportunity to travel abroad with the aim of working on the design of OIL projects with collaborators at partner universities may be perceived as a key motivation.

In order to continue increasing the number of OIL project leaders and reach wider proportions of the student population at CU, it is crucial to put into place mechanisms aimed at recognising the effort of those lecturers who engage in the provision of OIL opportunities. In this regard, in 2015 a new category specifically devoted to OIL projects has been incorporated into the CU Excellence Awards for Teaching and Learning.

With regard to students' participation in OIL projects, in most cases it is presented as a formative educational experience for students at CU, so the intended learning outcomes themselves and the opportunity to interact with people based in other countries are key motivations. However, it is worth stressing that, in a context where students have a high number of competing priorities, the lack of formal or credit-bearing recognition may lead to increasing levels of disengagement after the initial momentum.

Most critically, it was evident that when teaching staff incorporated OIL activities as part of the core schedule of module learning activities, students seemed to accept these as 'regular' seminar or workshop tasks so that engagement was not adversely affected. In cases where OIL activities were not aligned to the discipline and were clearly perceived as 'bolt-on' exercises by students, the activities were viewed as 'additional work' or unrelated to the module assessment. In our goal to help improve the quality and levels of participation, OIL project leaders were encouraged to align activities to the module summative assessment.

Resource flows

The OIL scheme relies on a series of internal and external resource flows. Key pillars in this respect are the staff mobility funds that allow lecturers to travel abroad in order to establish solid working relationships with collaborators at non-UK universities and experience intercultural interactions of their own. The Erasmus Plus funds, channelled through the British Council, are available to fund trips within the EU, while lecturers interested in establishing OIL projects in collaboration with universities outside the EU may apply for internal financial resources. These funds were established in 2013 – 14 and have funded trips resulting in 52% growth in OIL projects during 2014–15.

As already mentioned, some OIL project leaders have also secured external funding, mostly from the Higher Education Academy. Apart from such financial resources, there is specialist and technical support provided both centrally – mainly at CGE and the e-

Learning Unit – and at faculty level – by learning technologists.

Technical infrastructures and choice points for the system

The flexibility inherent in the OIL model of virtual mobility is also illustrated by the wide range of technological solutions chosen by project leaders to enable the online interactions of students. While some projects may simply rely on some rather basic means of online communication, such as e-mail, others involve the use of virtual learning environments (e.g. Moodle), social media platforms (e.g. Facebook), voice-over-IP services (e.g. Skype) and any other Internet-based tools that are suitable for the dialogic interactions in which OIL participants are required to engage.

Most of these infrastructures are third party solutions, whether they are available free of charge (e.g. Google Applications, Twitter, Facebook) or involve some sort of commercial agreement between the university and service providers (e.g. Microsoft, Learnium).

A considerable number of projects draw primarily on Open Moodle, a virtual learning environment managed by the CU e-Learning Unit in which members of other universities can be enrolled. One of the key reasons this is among the top preferred solutions by OIL project leaders is that academic staff at CU are very familiar with this platform and may readily provide access to non-CU students to join an existing, supported, 'safe', academic learning environment. All modules taught at the university make use of this platform at least to some extent; however, OIL projects find use of Moodle is often complemented by students initiating and engaging in parallel dialogues within social media platforms.

Pedagogical considerations are key in the choice of technologies and the way they are used in the context of OIL projects, given that such decisions are always aligned with the design of collaborative interactions, which are ultimately informed by the intended learning outcomes that students are expected to achieve after participating. Likewise, the number of students participating in a given OIL project may also have a direct impact on the choice of technologies.

Economic and political factors also play an important role in such decision-making processes. For instance, the range of options is politically limited in the case of OIL projects that involve collaborations with countries such as China, where access to certain online services (e.g. Facebook, Google Docs) is limited. In this case Open Moodle has proven to be essential.

The level of fluency in English language of students at partner universities is also a key factor when defining suitable modes of interaction and, therefore, when choosing suitable technical solutions to enable such

communication processes. Most notably, asynchronous forms of interaction are often preferred by those students who have low levels of confidence communicating verbally in English, or where academic conventions encourage a particular style or approach to critical discussion and interaction that is distinctly different from the student-centred approach favoured in the United Kingdom.

Other key considerations – excluded actors and undesired outcomes

Even though a high number of students at CU have already had the opportunity to participate in OIL projects, with increasing numbers of students expected to have access to this opportunity in coming years, it currently remains that the vast majority of students have not had the chance to benefit from this form of international experience. Furthermore, in certain cases, some students enrolled in modules with an embedded OIL project will not have had the opportunity to participate, as only a subset of students was selected in order to maintain suitable ratios between participating CU and partner university students.

Given that communication in almost all OIL projects take place in English, except in the case of foreign language learning modules, some students at partner universities may find it difficult to engage in collaborative activities. In order to increase inclusivity in these cases, it is important to consider this factor when designing activities and choosing modes of interaction. Moreover, it must be borne in mind that internationalisation efforts have been often interpreted, probably quite rightly in too many cases, as new forms of neo-colonialism where the 'others' competencies are devalued and vast parts of the world are victimized' (Stier 2006, 4). In this regard, it is essential to ensure that ideas and approaches of all participants are treated as equally valuable in principle, disabling any potential prejudices that may bias interactions.

One of the key aims of OIL projects is to help students engage effectively and appropriately in intercultural dialogues. However, intercultural interactions are prone to misunderstandings (Lago and Barty 2003) and can even lead to negative outcomes such as reinforcing stereotypes. In order to counteract this it becomes essential to implement mechanisms aimed at helping students reflect on such interactions and grasp the role of culture in the way they unfold.

Just like studying abroad and exposure to diversity do not ensure on their own increased levels of intercultural competence and reduced ethnocentrism, the same applies for online intercultural encounters. As noted by Boehm, Aniola-Jedrzejek, and Kurthen (2010, 140): 'the literature is perhaps too optimistic about the awareness-increasing outcome of the "form"

(international online exchange), ignoring the importance of the specific "content" and contextual factors influencing interaction, thereby leaving important questions to be examined'. Therefore, it is important to tailor each OIL project to discipline and group-specific factors.

Conclusions and future developments

Virtual mobility initiatives such as OIL are one of the most flexible, versatile and inclusive approaches in the provision of experiential learning opportunities aimed at facilitating students' intercultural competence development. While forms of IoC that involve travelling abroad exclude a considerable segment of the student population at most universities, virtual mobility can help increase the number of students who benefit from collaborative work with peers at universities around the globe.

Nevertheless, in order to make these online interactions a fruitful learning experience, it is important to carefully design activities in alignment with precise internationalised learning outcomes and taking into account context-specific factors (e.g. disciplines, demographic attributes of participants, group sizes).

Only by providing academic staff with relevant resources and training opportunities will universities be able to provide meaningful and sustainable international experiences, whether they are ICT-enabled or not. In this article we have outlined the key principles of the virtual mobility scheme of CU and how it sits within a wider framework for internationalisation of the formal and informal curricula.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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