# Engaging Students via Online Projects: Cross-cultural Inter-university Teaching Cooperation Projects for Business Education

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## Abstract

The article describes two initiatives between higher education institutions (HEIs) in Poland, Germany, and India, which have been carried out as a response to an increasing demand for pedagogical methodologies that enable to reach a deep level of student engagement. Active learning has been implemented in order to enrich students' experience and equip them with skills that help to face contemporary labour market challenges. In the article, the case study methodology has been used. The subject of the analysis are two groups of students participating in initiatives presented by the article. The article takes an empirical approach; the evaluation surveys have been distributed and students evaluated the experience positively and would recommend participation to their peers. As benefits they emphasised mainly working in a culturally diverse environment, gaining useful skills, and carrying out interesting projects. The main challenges reported were remote and intercultural communication, time management and the data gathering process. The main limitation is the qualitative methodology – it does not allow the authors to form general conclusions.

**Keywords:** active learning, project-based learning, cross-cultural teaching, student engagement

**JEL Classification Code:** M53

# Introduction

Teaching is one of the three elements of the university's mission, next to research and responsibility (the so-called third mission) (see for example Brdulak, 2014). Poland belongs to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which is also called the Bologna Process. The EHEA builds instruments, which include, among others, ECTS, learning outcomes, and qualifications frameworks. These instruments are commonly associated with bureaucracy and additional responsibilities for academic staff. However, the introduction of the formal framework by the EHEA can generate a number of opportunities, enabling member countries' universities to match and standardise teaching processes. As a result, through a certain compatibility of educational systems it is possible to create joint educational projects whose beneficiaries are students and teachers as well. Those projects align with the formal framework, without the need to introduce additional agreements or regulations. In addition, as a result of the pandemic and increase in the importance of online forms of teaching, the pressure on designing innovative forms of project-based learning is growing. Particularly, this concerns opportunities that can enable students to cooperate internationally in times of almost nonexistent student mobility options.

In this article two examples of such initiatives have been described. The first one is the joint teaching project conducted by SRH University of Heidelberg (SRH Hochschule Heidelberg) in Germany and SWPS University of Humanities and Social Sciences in Poland. The cooperation took place in the summer semester of the 2018/2019 academic year. The second one is the virtual programme carried out by SGH Warsaw School of Economics in Poland and Athena School of Management in India. The project was carried out in the summer semester of the 2019/2020 academic year, which means the kickoff of the project overlapped with the universities' lockdown due to the global pandemic. In addition, both projects are examples of using active learning methods to prepare students practically for contemporary challenges of the labour market and to equip them with competences to face rapid changes in times of uncertainty.

The main goal of the article is to present initiatives that can lead to increased engagement of students in teaching. Both described initiatives may be perceived as case studies, therefore, a direct comparison is not possible.

## Engaging students in the learning process

Currently, we can observe a revolutionary shift of academic environments in response to ongoing technological, economic, and social changes. One of the implications is the change of focus from the teacher to the learner and development of learning approaches such as collaborative learning, cooperative learning, effective learning, or problem-solving. These can fit into pedagogical methodology of active learning (A-Rahmane & Al Rubaii, 2004). Active learning is an approach in education aimed to deepen students' involvement in the learning process more directly than it is the case of traditional teaching forms. The use of this type of methods is particularly important when working with the generation of millennials (Prensky, 2010), who have been raised in an environment of constant changes and diversity – the generation currently constituting a vast majority of students at universities. Active learning methods place students, not the instructor, at the centre of the teaching process (Roehl, Reddy, & Shannon, 2013) and require participants to use higher level competences. The lecturer or teacher is required to plan the course of activities in order to engage students without overloading them with the course content. Within this process, university teachers change their role, they become the moderator of the learning processes who can apply a wide range of empowering teaching and learning methods (Rózsa, 2014). Simultaneously, teachers have to withdraw from the traditional role of being the centre of all activities in the class. Their main activities concentrate on creating a fruitful learning environment by (Miller, 2011):

- clarifying basic conditions (e.g., type of exams) and setting boundaries;
- supplying and using different methods and settings;
- arbitraging between individuals and providing suggestions;
- describing and reflecting students' behaviour;
- noticing, observing, and clearly expressing observations;
- giving feedback.

Students' engagement through active learning methods is associated with numerous benefits including, among others, deeper learning process, development of communication skills, better preparation for classes, and the ability to work in teams (Burke & Fedorek, 2017). In addition, the use of this type of techniques encourages course participants to discuss and cooperate in order to work through the content, and not only assimilate passively given concepts. Interactive learning units and especially a variety of experiences in self-determination help students to discover that they are responsible for their own individual learning success (Rózsa, 2014). By encouraging positive emotions, overall motivation to learn is raised and by this learning success increases, too. Finally, the implementation of active learning methods helps to design activities and projects that simulate real life challenges that students will face entering the labour market and thus help to prepare them better to work in a professional environment.

It should be pointed out that active learning receives considerable attention among academic teachers, who are either supportive or skeptical about the method (Prince, 2004). The advocates of active learning emphasise its positive impact on students' understanding of the content, skill development, and providing students with opportunities for constructive learning as well as taking responsibility for their learning process (A-Rahmane & Al Rubaii, 2004). The sceptics doubt how active learning differs from traditional education that is already 'active' through laboratories or practical assignments (e.g., engineering education) and point out the confusion about how diverse forms of the method actually differ from each other and what is their effectiveness (Prince, 2004). The described projects are examples of using active learning methods in university classes in order to familiarise students with the growing challenges of the contemporary labour market, in particular working in a multicultural environment, under pressure, and in (virtual) teams.

## Cooperation description

The article describes two projects that have been carried out implementing the active learning pedagogical methodology. The first one is an example of a cooperation

project woven into course content, whereas the latter initiative was aimed at students who want to enrich their portfolio by participating in extracurricular activities.

## The first project: cooperation between SRH University of Applied Sciences, Heidelberg (Germany) and SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities (Poland)

A team of 4 coordinators was responsible for the cooperation: two instructors from Campus Calw of SRH University of Applied Sciences, Heidelberg (Germany) and the other two from SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities (Poland). The objective was to design a form of activity that would engage students and enable them to complete tasks when working in international virtual teams. The coordinators of the described initiative did not have any additional funds for this type of cooperation, which was perceived as a type of challenge. No need to incur costs enables easier project scalability and limits university administration involvement, which greatly simplifies the formula and gives the instructors an opportunity to focus on substantive and not administrative matters. Thus, no formal contract was signed, the cooperation was based only on the partnership relation and trust. Joint arrangements and responsibilities were discussed during several remote meetings. The initiators of this cooperation were Stephan Schöning and Jakub Brdulak, who previously had had an opportunity to implement another joint project in the field of quality education by accrediting the curricula of Lithuanian universities. The idea for joint classes arose after the accreditation project in Lithuania, which proved to be a challenging project, nevertheless, ultimately it could be implemented successfully. Build on these experiences, there was no particular need to meet in person in order to design the joint activities. In this case a face-to-face meeting would imply an additional burden, however, probably it would be necessary, if not the previous experiences of successful cooperation.

The cooperation was based on two courses taken by students in English: at SWPS University it was *Principles of Management* and at SRH it was the *Foreign Department*. Matching the learning outcomes was the first challenge when establishing the collaboration. The main learning outcomes were selected by the German side, due to the fact that for students of the *Foreign Department* module completing the assignment with Polish colleagues was the main course activity from the beginning. The guidelines for the learning outcomes, the module description as well as developing intercultural competences and language competences were defined. In the case of Poland, participation in the project was voluntary and students who took part in the project with SRH colleagues were exempted from the lecture module of the *Principles*

*of Management* course. SWPS University students had to achieve most of the learning outcomes of the class taken at their home institution.

The second challenge of the cooperation was strictly related to the class schedules. The subjects at SWPS University are carried out in the traditional formula: classes take place weekly throughout the entire semester. In contrast, SRH University runs a 5-week block-model within the CORE (Competence-Based Research and Education) Principle.[1] The blocks concentrate on one subject and have various forms of competence-based examinations at the end. As the *Foreign Department* module was implemented within 5 weeks (from mid-May to mid-June), Polish students took the *Principles of Management* class until mid-May and then instead of the exam they could choose an alternative form of completing the course – the project in cooperation with German students. Such an organisation of the project required a lot of discipline and good time management on the Polish side, as there was no room for any delay. The Polish students were asked to confirm their participation in the project 2 weeks before the course was launched by the German partners. A total of 8 students from SWPS University volunteered to cooperate, constituting a very diverse group in terms of nationality and representing a total of four continents: Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America. Only one person came from Poland. On the SRH side, for which the described task was compulsory, 19 German students took part in the project. It is important to mention that at the beginning the level of the English language of most of the students was not very high on both sides. Therefore, the project required effective communication from students, which turned out to be a major challenge to students. However, improving language skills by using written and spoken English was one of the learning outcomes, as mentioned above, and there was additional language training from native speakers.

As a result of the cooperation, the students prepared 8 reports on 8 contemporary topics selected by both groups based on dialogue and negotiations. The students formed teams of 3 or 4 people, ensuring that each team had one representative from SWPS University and 2 or 3 students from SRH. The teams received detailed instructions on the assignment requirements. The task was to prepare a presentation and report on the chosen topic, based on a literature review and research carried out in Germany, Poland, and one more selected country (usually the country of origin of one of the SWPS students was chosen). A principal objective was to emphasise diversity within the report.

During the first week of the project the students were responsible for contacting each other and for distributing their work. The coordinators from both sides

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[1]  For the main features of the CORE Principle of University of Applied Sciences see https://www.hochschule-heidelberg.de/en/core-principle/

monitored and supported this process. It is notable that some students had some difficulties and needed a little assistance to make the first step to get in contact with the foreign group member. Afterwards, no group had problems to find a basis for working together nor to deliver the reports within the deadline. At the end of the project, all groups had to present the results of their work simultaneously in Poland and Germany, via a Skype conference. In this case, the presentations were addressed only to the coordinators. Involvement of external experts (from e.g., Polish and/or German enterprises) would possibly increase the value of the cooperation. However, this time the coordinators decided not to introduce this element in order to gain experience with the acceptance by the students and the technical handling of the project. Nevertheless, this is an element that can be added in further editions of the cooperation as part of the continuous improvement steps.

At the end of the semester, all the students, regardless of their final grade, were awarded separate certificates confirming their participation and signed by the project coordinators. For the students this proved to be an important motivation factor – a certificate confirming their participation in an international cooperation that could be presented in their curriculum or project portfolio.

## Data collection procedure

After completing the project (presentations), the evaluation form was distributed via email among the SWPS University students who had participated in the project. The evaluation form included three questions:
1) *What did you like the most about the project?*
2) *What was the biggest challenge for you?* and
3) *What would you say to your colleagues to encourage them to participate in this project in the following semesters?*

In the case of SRH University, the instructors collected the feedback directly from individual students.

## Findings

Eight out of eight students provided the SWPS instructors with filled in online evaluation forms. An important goal that was achieved within this initiative was the students' involvement. This was confirmed with the feedback provided by the project's participants. Qualitative data was collected only from the SWPS University students. In the case of SRH University, apart from some individual feedback only aggregate

data is available, showing that 100% of the German students would recommend this type of cooperation. Below there are some selected students' statements[2] on what they valued most in this form of classes:

*It was exhausting and challenging, but it was a marvellous experience!*

(Female, 23 years old)

*I really liked the experience to meet other people and work together, I learnt a lot from them even if we had not known each other for a long time, I feel like we did a good job. It is really a good opportunity to know more about the world, with this kind of projects; apart from learning about certain business topics you can also experience new countries and you can see how interesting and different people are.*

(Female, 20 years old)

*On the different stages, I enjoyed testing my abilities, how well I can perform on different occasions. … I liked the opportunity to meet people from other countries and spread my networking. … All in all, for me the project was so interesting and I discovered so many things even about my country.*

(Male, 21 years old)

As the biggest challenges in the project, the students pointed out time management, remote communication and – especially for the students in Poland – the need to combine project work with other responsibilities at the university, as the project was conducted in the second half of May and in the first half of June, i.e., in the initial period of the examination session at SWPS University.

*My biggest challenge was that … I had this project, but I also had to go through my university exams and presentations.*

(Male, 21 years old)

Remote communication also proved to be a challenge. This fact was positively evaluated by the instructors, as it is a challenge that students will increasingly meet at their future work.

*I did not expect that online communication would be not very suitable, there were moments when I thought face-to-face meetings would be much more effective.*

(Female, 19 years old)

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[2]  The students' statements collected in the evaluation survey at the end of the semester. The quotes were edited only to shorten them or to protect the students' identity.

It was assumed that intercultural communication could also be perceived as a challenge. However, noone indicated in the evaluation survey that working in a diverse environment was particularly difficult. A possible explanation is that the students of the *Principles of Management* class are a very diverse group in terms of nationalities and did not perceive that their participation in this particular project stood out in terms of intercultural communication challenges when compared to other classes taken during their studies. When identifying the challenges, the students focused rather on time management difficulties and those challenges that strongly distinguished cooperation with SRH Hochschule Heidelberg in a characteristic way: working in virtual teams and no experience of projects of this kind done before.

Finally, according to the collected data, all the students expressed that they would recommend participating in this type of project to their colleagues. As benefits they highlighted:
– the opportunity to meet and cooperate with students from another country;
– the ability to test themselves in an unusual, new situation;
– the development of communication skills, including language ones;
– the possibility of carrying out interesting research.

For the instructors, conducting classes in such a formula turned out to be an interesting challenge. The relationship between the coordinators was based on partnership and trust, not on formal agreements between the institutions. In addition, it was built within the individual autonomy of each instructor. Thus, it was not necessary to either involve the university authorities or launch bureaucratic procedures.

## The second project: cooperation between SGH Warsaw School of Economics (Poland) and Athena School of Management (India)

A team of 2 coordinators was responsible for the cooperation: Jakub Brdulak representing the Polish institution (SGH Warsaw School of Economics) and Aditya Singh responsible for the project coordination in the India HEI (Athena School of Management). The objective was to engage students in cross-continental experience where they could learn how to work together in order to understand better their cultural backgrounds and diversity. The essence of the programme was to create project teams consisting of students from both universities – up to four students from India and from Poland in each group. It did not matter if they were undergraduate, graduate, or postgraduate students. The key element was that as part of the implementation of

their subjects, students complete projects that require substantive research. VP-RR enabled efficient exchange of data and information between the Poles and Indians.

The party initiating the project were the SGH students who invited their Indian colleagues to complete the project jointly by sending them a one-page invitation consisting of three sections: a brief description of the initiated project with a presentation of potential benefits for the Indian students, a desirable roadmap with specific dates, and short information about themselves often accompanied by a photo. Based on the invitations, the Athena students chose project groups. After that the students determined the final results of their project, which had to be approved by the coordinators. In particular, the results had to present research to be carried out by individual groups and be codified in the form of a presentation or report.

In total, 66 students participated in the project: 30 were from SGH and 36 from Athena. The participants prepared 10 reports and presentations on the contemporary cross-cultural management topics comparing Poland and India. The research done in both countries was an obligatory element of the project.

Meetings with the students were carried out twice. At the beginning of the programme during the kick-off meeting the students had an opportunity to get to know and talk to the instructors and get familiar with their expectations. The second meeting was held at the end of the programme, the main objective was to give feedback to the students.

Jakub Brdulak and Aditya Singh identify 3 key success factors of the project. The first one is the trust between the coordinators. Similarly to the cooperation between SWPS and SRH, no formal contracts were signed, nor any formal structure was created. The basis was the gentleman's agreement between the professors. A necessary condition was to check whether the programme would meet the interest of students – at this stage the invaluable help was offered on the SGH side by the Warsaw School of Economics Students' Union. The second factor of success was the involvement of all the stakeholders: students and professors. The programme required very strong attention to deadlines and quick responses, e.g., responding to emails. Both the professors and students had to be responsive. Thirdly, focusing on the positive sides of cooperation was crucial for the accomplishment of the project. Each cooperation is challenging, especially one that is implemented online only. Therefore, many things could fail or would not go as expected. For this reason, the team focused on the good of the project itself – not on problems, but on solutions. They had to respond flexibly to various challenges emerging along the semester.

## Data collection procedure

After delivering the presentation, the questionnaire to evaluate the project was distributed among the students via Google Forms. In the case of the second project, the evaluation form included the three open-ended questions as in the SRH-SWPS cooperation. Additional data was gathered from the participants through the questions listed below. The response options ranged between 1 (*not at all*) and 5 (*a lot*).

1) *Overall, how do you evaluate the project?*
2) *What is the degree to which this project helped you to:*
    a) *develop skills and/or competences demanded by the job market;*
    b) *improve your knowledge;*
    c) *establish network/contacts abroad;*
    d) *increase understanding of the business environment;*
    e) *learn about other cultures;*
    f) *get to know practical aspects of doing business in another country;*
    g) *learn about your own cultural background;*
    h) *get to know practical aspects of doing business in your own country;*
    i) *learn how to carry out projects working in digital teams?*
3) *Would you recommend this course to a fellow student or colleague?*
    Similarly, no limit regarding the time nor length of the answer was set for students.

## Findings

52 out of 66 students filled in the online evaluation form, 19 students were from SGH and 33 from Athena. The results are presented in Table 2. As the groups were not numerous, only descriptive statistics was presented.

In general, the initiative was evaluated positively by the participants ($M$=4.54). Evaluations of the Athena students ($M$=4.67) were higher than the ones from SGH ($M$=4.32), however, the difference was not statically significant ($t$(50)=2.193; $p$=0.606).[3]

The project helped the students in general primarily to learn how to carry out projects working in digital teams ($M$=3.73). This element was particularly highly evaluated by the ones studying at SGH ($M$=4.47). The second aspect was the opportunity to learn about other cultures ($M$=3.58). Once again the Polish students assigned relatively high scores ($M$=4.21). The third element that was helpful in the

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[3] Independent two-sample Student's t-test

eyes of the project participants was the possibility of establishing networks and contacts abroad (*M*=3.50). One more time, this aspect was evaluated higher by the students from Warsaw (*M*=3.95).

It is interesting that the Athena students evaluated the project relatively better than the students from SGH, but the perceived degree to which the project helped them to achieve particular goals was lower in their case with the exception of: 1) learning about their own cultural background, and 2) getting to know practical aspects of doing business in their own country. It is possible that the students from India enjoyed some aspects of the project that were not included in the evaluation survey. As both areas mentioned above focus on 'one's own country', more questions evaluating such aspects could be added.

**Table 2. Project evaluation by the students: descriptive statistics**

| | University | | | | | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | All students (*n*=52) | | | SGH Students (*n*=19) | | | Athena Students (*n*=33) | | |
| | *M* | *Mo* | *SD* | *M* | *Mo* | *SD* | *M* | *Mo* | *SD* |
| General evaluation of the programme | 4.54 | 5 | 0.58 | 4.32 | 4 | 0.58 | 4.67 | 5 | 0.54 |
| Degree to which the project helped the students to | | | | | | | | | |
| develop skills and/or competences demanded by the job market | 3.21 | 4 | 1.35 | 3.68 | - | 1.11 | 2.94 | 2 | 1.41 |
| improve their knowledge | 3.48 | 5 | 1.35 | 3.74 | 5 | 1.45 | 3.33 | - | 1.29 |
| establish network/contacts abroad | 3.50 | 5 | 1.35 | 3.95 | 5 | 1.35 | 3.24 | 2 | 1.30 |
| increase understanding of the business environment | 3.25 | 2 | 1.36 | 3.68 | 4 | 1.16 | 3.00 | 2 | 1.41 |
| learn about other cultures | 3.58 | 5 | 1.45 | 4.21 | 5 | 1.03 | 3.21 | 5 | 1.54 |
| get to know practical aspects of doing business in another country | 3.29 | 4 | 1.35 | 3.68 | 4 | 1.11 | 3.06 | 2 | 1.44 |
| learn about their own cultural background | 2.98 | 2 | 1.38 | 2.84 | 2 | 1.17 | 3.06 | 5 | 1.50 |
| get to know practical aspects of doing business in their own country | 2.88 | - | 1.54 | 2.53 | - | 1.50 | 3.09 | 2 | 1.55 |
| learn how to carry out projects working in digital teams | 3.73 | 5 | 1.33 | 4.47 | 5 | 1.02 | 3.30 | 2 | 1.31 |

*M* – mean; *Mo* – mode; *SD* – standard deviation

Source: own work.

Finally, all the participants (*n*=52) declared that they would recommend taking part in the project to a fellow student or colleague. Similarly to the first project, the students pointed out the value of:

1) working in a culturally diverse environment:

   *It is a truly great opportunity to meet people from other countries and see their style of work, learn about the differences between markets and gain some international experience that is highly valued by employers, especially big multinational companies.*

   (Female, 25 years old, SGH)

2) developing skills that are useful in business:

   *…improve your communication, improve your understanding of business and business requirements, learning about other cultures, teamwork, and meeting deadlines. So I would recommend you do these kinds of projects for improving yourself and have a good overall understanding of how businesses, how various start-ups work.*

   (Male, 23 years old, Athena)

3) networking:

   *I had a pleasure to collaborate with a highly dedicated students who share similar interests and goals in the project and life as I do. I am sure that we have built a long-lasting and international friendship, which will benefit us in the future.*

   (Female, 23 years old, SGH)

4) carry out the research and learning about the other country's market:

   *The collaboration with the students of Warsaw gave us an opportunity to understand … the Polish market."*

   (Female, 22 years old, Athena)

In comparison to the SWPS-SRH cooperation, the students from the second project did not perceive the situation as unknown or a new type of challenge. It is important to mention that, as they were generally older, they might have had a chance to conduct similar projects in the past. Two most commonly mentioned challenges were communication:

*Communication was a little bit difficult at first, but then we worked out the routine of meeting, which significantly improved the efficiency of our work.*

(Male, 22 years old, SGH)

and the data gathering process:

*Collecting the survey feedback from people across the world.*

<div align="right">(Male, 25 years old, Athena)</div>

## Conclusion

As the student mobility so far has to be transferred to the virtual space and online learning dominating at the universities, projects as the ones described might be interesting options to engage and challenge students. Especially taking into consideration that the implementation processes prove to be relatively uncomplicated. For instance, there is no need to dedicate specific tools for online work, because students organise themselves on their own – in the projects described most teams created groups on WhatsApp and thus communicated effectively. There was also no need to dedicate any financial resources to implement such cooperation – at the level of individual project teams there were no particular costs, although the programme required more than standard work on part of the instructors. The amount of work put in by the students was larger than standard, too.

What helped in establishing the first cooperation between SWPS and SRH was embedding the relationships in the EHEA logics – both sides knew exactly the assumptions and intentions of the Bologna Process, e.g., contrary to the often expressed opinion, learning outcomes give an opportunity to make education programmes more flexible. The cooperation between SGH and Athena was facilitated by the experience gained in the first project.

Compared to the traditional class formula, a requisite for launching such a cooperation is a greater involvement of instructors. The role of the lecturer changes from being the main source of knowledge to rather being a facilitator of the process – a person who supports students, ensures process quality, and verifies specific results are being reached within the established deadlines. Moreover, this type of project is characterised by a higher degree of uniqueness and requires a relatively greater commitment of instructors and students. It should be pointed out that all the instructors involved in the cooperation share the opinion that one cannot demand commitment from students if they are not involved as well. These examples show that the technology development and the EHEA formal framework can lead to an increase both in student and teacher engagement and to the creation of unconventional curricula at the level of individual classes.

On the whole, the projects are examples for using the benefits of the joint European Education policy on its way towards the European Education Area in 2025,

in which the free movement of learners will be guaranteed (European Union, 2019), especially that the framework of these projects might be attractive for HEIs outside Europe, of which the evidence is the cooperation with Athena.

What is the most important, the students themselves found the participation in the projects as beneficial and they would recommend it to their colleagues, which is an important indicator of the initiatives' success for the coordinators of both projects.

Due to the specific nature of the projects and the small sample of their participants, the results should be interpreted taking into consideration the context of both projects and should not be generalised. Besides, the two presented initiatives are significantly different, for example, in terms of the number of students, so they cannot be compared directly.

It is important to mention that the first project was conducted before the global pandemic and the second one was during its first months. Months later online education beaome a new reality. Students may not perceive virtual projects as such a novelty any more and their reception could vary. However, from the authors' perspective, similar activities are usually well received by students precisely because intercultural project experience is still a rarity in university studies. In addition, as previously mentioned, the projects' implementation was relatively uncomplicated, however, the groups were small and in the case of Poland the participation was voluntary. These factors definitely helped to maintain the students' motivation and, as a result, the management of the project did not present major difficulties.

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