Original Article (short paper)

Exploring the attitudes of students undertaking sports degrees towards online international learning

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Abstract — Aims: There is an increased focus on the internationalisation of the learning experiences of university students[1]. One way this can be achieved is through 'virtual internationalisation'[2], which can be promoted through the use of Online International Learning (OIL) programmes. This article on sport pedagogy investigates the attitudes of sport students to such a programme. **Methods:** This article uses quantitative and qualitative methods. 63 students completed a survey and wrote reflective reports. Data was collected from a survey of 16 targeted questions addressing the attitudes of students towards the programme. Students also wrote reflective reports on their experiences, allowing for qualitative responses to be analysed. **Results:** 62% of students surveyed found the internationalised module to have been a worthwhile experience in terms of learning new skills and working with a partner from an institution based in another continent. 65% suggested that they learned skills on the internationalised module they would use again in education and in future employment. Students from European Union countries gave high rates of positive feedback. 100% reported that the module was a worthwhile experience, compared to 60% of UK students and 38% of international students from outside the European Union. **Conclusion:** 62% of students surveyed stated that they learned new skills, and there was a perceived value to the programme in terms of enhancing employment prospects. Virtual mobilities projects offer a possible method for tutors to give students international experiences, which is important as sport is now a globalised industry.

Keywords: internationalisation, learning, student experience, higher education, learning technology.

Introduction

20 years ago, Masteralexis and McDonald[3] identified that sport has become a global industry, and this perception has only become stronger. The process and impact of globalisation is the focus of much academic attention, and literature on the globalisation of sport is extensive; selected examples from many available include Miller[4], Westerbeek and Smith[5], and Millward[6]. This increased globalisation is not restricted to sport organisations themselves[7]. Non-governmental organisations in sport such as management firms are also globalising; for example, agencies such as Octagon and IMG have offices in 22 and 25 countries, respectively. Given the globalised nature of sport, it is important for students who wish to work in sport in the future to be exposed to international networks as early as possible. This can mean attempting to embed internationalism into the university curriculum, and there is an increased focus on the internationalisation of university students, not just in sport, but across multiple disciplines[8].

Seminal work by Knight[9] identifies internationalisation within universities as being "the actual policies, programs and strategies that are used at the national, sector and institutional/ provider levels". Given this importance, it is of little surprise that many universities are recognising the need for graduates to be prepared for employment in a global market place[10], with Peterson et al.[11] noting that universities seek to expose graduates to new cultures, communication and experiences of global work. While Haigh[12] notes that many universities intend for their graduates to be "international" in outlook and experience, Brookes and Becket[13] argue that there has been little consideration as to what internationalisation actually means in practice within a university setting.

Salehi-Sangari and Foster[14] argued that there was a lack of support and discussion in the area. While available discussions of internationalisation are now greater in number than they were in 1999, and advances in technology are making programmes easier to run, much of the literature on the area surrounds the difficulties that exist in internationalising the curriculum within a university context. One key difficulty identified in the available literature is a lack of support for staff who choose to run such projects, who are often surprised at the time and effort that is necessary for a project to be successful[15]. This lack of support was identified in earlier work by Li, Ammon and Kanters[16], who noted that over a third of staff involved in such a project found that a lack of faculty interest was prohibitive.

Li, Ammon and Kanters[17] identify five typical types of internationalisation within the classroom:

1. International examples in classes.
2. Discussing international issues.
3. International case studies.
4. Assessment based on international issues.
5. Visits overseas.

While the final type of internationalisation is perhaps the most ideal, it can also be prohibitive in terms of cost, and thus less expensive ways have been identified to allow internationalisation to take place, related to the first four criteria identified. Further, while the sport industry may require graduates with international experience, students may not wish to travel[18]. Thus, 'virtual

mobility' models are developed, allowing students to gain an international experience through working with international peers without the cost and time involved for foreign travel [19, 20, 21, 22].

New technologies can enable sport students to gain an international teaching experience without leaving the country that they study in. This can be achieved in a university setting through 'virtual internationalisation'[23] within Online International Learning (hereafter OIL) programmes. Villar-Onrubia & Rajpal[24] discuss this strategy in detail, noting that:

> '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.' (p.78)

Projects are 'embedded in the curriculum' and there is 'a special emphasis on developing skills and attitudes that enable mutual understanding in intercultural situations' . Key facets of such projects are:

1. Students are encouraged to take control of their own learning, with the teacher acting as a facilitator[26].

2. Digital literacy improvement, as students are required to use technology to work with their international partners.

This article investigates the use of an OIL project to enhance the international experience of students enrolled on Sport Management and Sport Marketing courses. The students, who were based at a university in the United Kingdom, collaborated with students based at a university in the United States to complete a report on Corporate Social Responsibility in sport. This was achieved using a second year undergraduate module titled 'CSR and Sustainability in the Sport industry'. The module covers contemporary issues in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) using a sport context to examine the increasing significance of CSR strategies to sport businesses (this is discussed in detail by Babiak and Wolfe[27], Bason and Anagnostopoulos[28], and Giulianotti[29] amongst others). This article discusses the experiences of students who took the module, exploring their attitudes towards the module's objective of internationalising the curriculum, and assessing ways in which they chose to undertake the assessment set. The results are intended to be useful to anyone working in a university setting with an interest in developing international experiences for students.

The module required 64 Sport Management, 20 Sport Marketing, two Event Management and four UK-based students on Erasmus programmes (students studying at the UK university on an exchange programme from other European universities) to work closely with 20 US-based students during the Autumn semester of 2016/17, in an OIL project. In week one of module, the 90 UK-based students were asked to form 20 groups, each consisting of 4-5 students. The students were asked to select an international sports organisation from a prepared list on which their case study would be based. The students in the USA also chose an organisation each from the same list, with this selection determining which US-based student was paired with which UK-based group. In order to encourage interaction, the coursework brief was designed so that neither UK or US-based students could complete it on their own. During the second week of the semester, UK-based students were requested to initiate a Skype chat with their American partner, but aside from this were left to manage their own communication with the intention of allowing students to control their learning. In cases where either party felt that communication from the other was not forthcoming, the lecturers on the module spoke to the students and encouraged further communication.

In week six of the semester, each group submitted their summatively assessed case study, worth 50% of the module mark. The collaborative piece was submitted by students at both partner institutions. As well as the assessed work, students were asked to submit a reflective piece, containing a discussion of their experiences of taking the module. This reflective work did not contribute to their mark, but will aid further development of the module, as feedback can be employed to improve future iterations. Responses from the reflective reports produced are discussed within the results section.

A summary of the activities can be seen below in Table 1:

Table 1. Summary of Student Activities

Week	Activity
Week 1	UK-based students formed 20 groups and selected an international sport organisation from a prepared list. Each US students chose an organisation from the same list, determining which group they worked with
Week 2	Initial contact made between group of UK-based students and US partner
Weeks 3-5	All groups work on case study report
Week 6	Collaborative report is submitted for marking in both UK and USA. UK-based students also submit a reflection on their experiences of the project

The project sought to achieve two outcomes in line with the agreed learning objectives at both partner institutions:

1. To enhance the international experience of students at both institutions, through studying an international organisation and also through working alongside students at a university on a different continent.

2. To encourage students to develop the digital skills needed to work with global partners.

The second aim involved students utilising a range of technological options to engage with their peers.

While virtual mobilities may appear to be cheaper for students, Lee and Park[30] argue that the process can still be costly for universities to run, with classrooms needing to be equipped with technologies to allow students to communicate. However, this assumes that the communication will take place in

a classroom; given the international nature of programmes, time differences may not always allow this. Indeed, one of the key features of virtual mobility projects is that students take control of their learning, with the role of a teacher becoming more that of a 'facilitator'[31]. However, as the teacher's involvement in the process becomes more distant, it also becomes more difficult to assess the students' experiences[32] , a gap in the literature that this article seeks to fill.

A key facet of virtual mobilities is that students commonly interact via Web 2.0 technologies, which can move at a pace faster than research can be conducted into them[33]. In fact, it could be argued that it is the prevalence of easy to access and free technologies that allow these projects to occur. Bennett et al.[34] studied six uses of Web 2.0 aided learning experiences, using new technologies such as Flickr, WordPress and wikis. While Bennett et al.[35] found that the implementation of some technologies were more successful than others, and that using Web 2.0 is not without its flaws, Hew and Cheung[36] argue that the adoption of Web 2.0 technologies may lead to an enhanced student experience, but only when aligned with proper pedagogic practices. However, while academia is tentatively starting to study the implementation of Web 2.0 in management subjects, as Stoszkowski and Collins[37] note, there has been relatively little focus on the use of technologies in sport education. This is another gap in the literature that this article seeks to address.

Methods

This article uses both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data was collected from a survey of 16 targeted questions which aimed to address the attitudes of students towards the internationalised module. This was distributed by the lead author at the conclusion of the module under discussion. Questions also addressed the way that students used technology to complete the assessment, in order to ascertain their preferred methods and help the module develop in future iterations. The survey utilised can be seen in the appendix. Following the submission of their assessment and receipt of feedback, the UK-based students who partook in the project were surveyed on their experiences during the project, and asked for permission to use their reflective work in this article. This study was approved by the Coventry University ethics committee (P48911).

Students were also given the opportunity to provide more detailed written feedback in a reflective report on the module. These qualitative responses are also addressed within the results section, and provide useful points for the further development of internationalised curricula. While literature on internationalisation is growing (as discussed above), the focus of the available literature is not always upon student experience. The article aims to make a contribution in terms of assessing the views of students regarding the internationalisation agenda discussed by Li et al.[38] and Haigh[39].

While the module is predominantly taken by Sport Management and Sport Marketing students, two Event Management and four Erasmus students who chose to take the module were included in the project. As the reports all involved sport organisations, it was felt that students who are not studying sport-specific degrees may contaminate the results, and so these responses were removed from the sample. This left 64 Sport Management and 20 Sport Marketing students eligible to take part in the study.. Of these, 45 Sport Management and 18 Sport Marketing students completed the survey and provided permission for use of their reflective report, for a 75% response rate. These students were predominantly from the UK, with seven from countries in the European Union (EU) and eight from countries outside the EU. While this is a relatively small sample, it is nevertheless ecologically valid and the results are intended to be useful to other practitioners in a university setting who may be working on internationalising the curriculum.

Results

The feedback from the students on the module was mixed. 38% of UK-based students reported that they enjoyed working with the American-based students, while 44% stated that they did not. This is highlighted by the students' qualitative responses, with twelve citing issues with their American partner as the biggest problem. One student commented:

> "The experience was certainly challenging in terms of trying to communicate ideas to each other. Miscommunication happened on a few occasions but it was an interesting challenge. Furthermore there was clear cultural difference when it came to work: how it's laid out, the normal way of putting a report together and language and grammar used." [40]

Another response stated that:

> "It was logistically a bit different to our normal assessments, as having only spoken to our group member abroad once, I never really felt she was part of the team. However, the quality of work she produced was very good"[41].

One recurring theme from the responses was that the time difference between the partner institutions made completing the assessment logistically challenging. One response commented that:

> "This [the module] has been particularly challenging due to a number of variables. Time difference has been an issue on a number of occasions, technological issues, different grammar and actually not being able to meet up physically"[42].

However, the same student also said that:

> "Advantages have come from this experience. Challenges like these may occur in the future once I have finished university and entered the world of work. I feel that this has partly prepared me

> for such problems in the future. Overall I think that this has been beneficial even thought it was stressful[43].

As part of the quantitative survey, students were asked to name the biggest problems that they had with the project. 76% of the students who responded to the survey named the time difference, and related difficulties in contacting the American student in their group as being the most significant issue they faced. This is an important finding for future projects.

Fewer than a quarter of the UK-based students found that working with an international partner enhanced their work, and only 25% felt that it enhanced their learning. One student stated that:

> "Due to the difficult correspondence of the member abroad and making another team member rewrite his part of the assignment, I would not rate working with a group member abroad as a positive experience. If the member abroad would have been more proactive it would have been a good one"[44].

A recurring theme amongst respondents was that issues with the response time of students at the partner institution made the assessment more challenging. Another response commented that:

> "It [the project] became tedious and frustrating at points, as we could not directly talk face to face with the student, and the work did not seem to flow seeing as he had not attended any lectures here. If we ever needed something urgently we had to account for the time difference"[45].

However, while some of the students may not have enjoyed completing the assessment, a majority noted that there were benefits of taking part in the project, principally related to their perception of its likely relevance to their future employment. 41 of the 63 students (65%) believed that they learned skills that they will use again in future work, with only 17% noting that they did not believe that taking part in such a project would not make them more employable in the future.

Overall, 60% believed that the OIL project was a worthwhile experience, while the relatively low figure of 21% would not take part in a similar project again if offered the chance. One student commented that:

> "It was a good experience to work with a student from a different country, as it can be used as a source for networking"[46].

Similarly, another commented:

> "Working with group members abroad is a challenging but very beneficial experience as it provides an insight to a globalised team of individuals working towards the same goals"[47].

Results were not consistent through different nationalities. The seven students from EU countries were the most positive about the experience. All seven found the project to be a worthwhile experience compared to 60% of UK and 38% of international students from countries outside the EU. Similarly, 86% of EU students enjoyed working with the American student in their group, and responded that they would take part in a similar project again. Contrastingly, just 38% of UK students and 25% of international students from outside the EU enjoyed having an American student in their group, and 56% (UK) and 25% (International) would take part in an OIL project again if offered the opportunity.

While it was expected that students would use new technologies to communicate, the means of communication were left to individual students to organise themselves. Of the available technologies (a discussion of many of these can be found in Hew and Cheung[48]) it was clear that Facebook and Facebook Messenger was the form of communication used the most, with 56% of students naming this as the primary method of communication. 27 of the 35 students who used Facebook used the words 'easy', 'simple' or 'convenient' to justify its use. The time difference between the UK and the USA was also cited as a reason for Facebook messenger use; unlike a video call, it does not require all participants to be present at the same time. Instead, a group can be created, and if a participant cannot read the message at the time that it is sent, it can then be read at a later time. WhatsApp, which offers similar features but requires all participants to reveal their mobile numbers, was primarily used by 12 of the students surveyed.

The second most used technology was Skype, but while 56% of respondents used Skype, just 21% identified it as the primary method of communication. Of these thirteen students, eight (61%) suggested that the time difference was the largest problem they faced on the module, indicating the issues with using technologies that require participants to be present. Despite its use in everyday business life, fewer than 10% of respondents indicated that email was the primary use of communication, perhaps indicating a reluctance for students to use 'older' technologies. Instead 41% of students used GoogleDocs, which allows participants to edit documents in real time, with changes appearing on fellow participants' computer screens instantly. Despite the UK university providing students with Office365, which also allows shared documents to be edited by all participants, just 29% of students indicated that this had been used.

When reflecting on their use of technology, 70% of students believed that it was the use of technology that allowed them to collaborate with their group. 83% of students were happy with the technology that had been chosen, and would use the same again. A further 8% would reuse the technology used, but would incorporate other technologies into the project. Five students indicated that they would add Skype to their communications,

while two, who used iMessage and WhatsApp said that they would use Skype instead of these.

Qualitative responses generally focused upon the value of web 2.0 technologies and social media in making the project feasible. One student commented:

> "There wasn't anything particularly different [to a standard assessment], because the power of the Internet allows us to communicate straight away. The fact that [the other group member] weren't physically there particularly didn't really matter"[49].

Another stated that the module "taught us to not only work with people physically, which means we can work with people abroad with nowadays' technology, such as FaceTime and Skype. Communication is still the key aspect in this work, but flexibility and commitment are also crucial. With over 4 hours' difference between UK and US, we learnt that without an efficient communication, it would have been hard for us to synchronize our work"[50]. Many students responded positively to the need for different forms of communication on the module, and saw value in using the different technology available to them in order to complete the assessment. 49 respondents (83%) responded that they would use the form of technology they deployed again if asked to do another assessment of the type used on the module.

Discussion

There are a number of findings from the study carried out that may be useful and relevant to those who are planning or already engaged in virtual mobility projects. There is a marked negativity within the responses collected with regard to students enjoying the project that they were asked to complete. Only 38% of students surveyed stated that they enjoyed the project, while 44% stated that they did not enjoy it. As 76% of the students who responded to the survey named the time difference, and related difficulties in contacting the American student in their group as being the most significant issue they faced, it seems possible to suggest that projects that involve partner universities in different time zones should consider ways of mitigating the difficulties that can arise from working at very different hours. One possibility would be to run classes at times when both partner universities have scheduled sessions, and to dedicate classroom time to communication between partners. However, this might involve a more active role for tutors than that of "facilitator"[51].

A number of the qualitative responses recorded focused on the difficulties involved in working within a group. In part, this reflects a longstanding concern amongst students regarding the value of group work, particularly related to the weight of contribution of each group member[52, 53]. Any virtual mobilities project that involves group work may have to consider the possible perception amongst students that varying contributions within groups can make the project both more difficult to complete and less enjoyable. Where possible, tutors need to mitigate against greatly varying contributions within groups, or perhaps find a way of assessing work which takes into account the amount of work carried out by each member. Internal peer review within groups may be one method of achieving this.

It is notable that students did not necessarily link their enjoyment of the project to their perception of its value. 41 of the 63 students (65%) believed that they learned skills that they will use again in future work, both at university and in future employment. While only 36% of students surveyed stated that they enjoyed the project, 60% believed it was a worthwhile experience. This means that some of the students surveyed differentiated between enjoying the project, and finding utility in it. Those who lead virtual mobility projects may be reassured that students do find the skills that they learn to be valuable, even if the sample surveyed for this article found the experience of group work difficult. Digital literacy may be one area where internationalised projects are useful for students[54].

Students from European Union countries gave high rates of positive feedback on their experience of the module. 100% of those surveyed (from an admittedly small sample) reported that the module was a worthwhile experience, compared to 60% of UK and 38% of international students from outside the EU. It is possible that the latter group already felt that they had experience of international education and did not wish to extend it further, having actively chosen to study in the UK. 86% of EU students enjoyed working with the American student in their group, and responded that they would take part in a similar project again. 38% of UK students and 25% of international students from outside the EU enjoyed having an American student in their group, and 56% (UK) and 25% (International) would take part in an OIL project again if offered the opportunity. Although the sample size is small in this case study, differences in perception of the module between students of different national backgrounds is an interesting result and appears to be worthy of further investigation in future studies.

Qualitative responses generally focused upon the value of web 2.0 technologies and social media in making the project feasible. 70% of students believed that it was the use of technology that allowed them to collaborate with their group, while 83% of students would use the same technology again. Notably, free-to-use technology was the overwhelming choice of students surveyed, with the most used methods of communication being Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, and Skype. 41% of students surveyed also used free GoogleDocs software to write and edit their reports. It may be the case that despite the wide range of technologies reviewed by Hew and Cheung[55], virtual mobilities projects may be relatively cheap for universities to operate because students will utilise existing technology which is free to download and use. This is despite earlier work by Lee and Park[56] which suggests that classrooms

may need to be equipped with expensive equipment to allow virtual mobilities.

Conclusions

This research has sought to provide practical information for teachers considering running such a project. First, as noted by Li, Ammon and Kanters[57], these projects require a great deal of work from teachers, and often receive little faculty support. Thus, this research sought to investigate the students place on being involved in such a project. Based on the results received from 63 students who responded to the survey, 62% of students surveyed at the UK partner institution stated that they found the internationalised module to have been a worthwhile experience in terms of learning new skills and working with a partner from an institution based in another continent (in this case, North America). While a majority did believe that the module was worthwhile in terms of internationalising their experience at university, 38% did not believe that working with an international partner was worthwhile.

The aim of many universities is to provide an international experience. In this particular case study, a little under two thirds of students surveyed found the internationalised module that they took to be of value in terms of their future skills and employability. Of the students surveyed, 65% suggested that they had learned skills on the internationalised module that they would use again, both in education and in future employment. There was a perceived value to the module in terms of enhancing future employment prospects. While this indicates that value placed on this project was mixed, it should be recognised that the students were surveyed immediately following the project's conclusion. A direction for future research could be to conduct a longitudinal study to view whether being involved in such a project benefit students as they progress from university to being in the work place.

The second practical implication of this research is that teachers are aware of the technologies that students are using for collaboration. Respondents commented that the opportunity to use web 2.0 technology and social media in completing the assessment was positive. 83% said that they would use the form of technology they utilised again in completing another assessment. However, most respondents used forms of technology familiar from non-educational interactions, such as Facebook. Comparatively few (29%) used the expensive Office365 software purchased by the university. This provides a key practical lesson; while universities may invest in software, this is not necessary. The majority of students used free software and applications that they were already familiar with. If these projects can be completed without the need for significant investment in software, this lowers the barriers to involve students in such a project.

Notably, the globalisation of sport means that there is a requisite need for tutors to teach with a global outlook. Similarly, universities increasingly want their graduates to have had international experiences, so there is some congruence between the requirements of employers in sport, and the preferences of universities. Li, Ammon and Kanters[58] identify five typical types of internationalisation within the classroom, and it seems possible that utilising international examples in classes, discussing international issues, and using international case studies may fulfil the need to teach sport with a global outlook. Nevertheless, virtual mobilities projects ultimately offer another possible method for tutors to give students international experiences, and it is hoped that the findings in this article will be useful for the planning and execution of such projects by sport tutors.

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Appendix Survey utilised

1. What degree are you studying for:

2. Are you a home, EU or International student: □ Home □ EU □ International

3. Had you ever taken part in an international project such as this before? □ Yes □ No

On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being strongly disagree; 5 being strongly agree), to what extent do you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
4. I enjoyed working with the American student	1	2	3	4	5
5. Having an American student in my group improved the quality of my work than if I was just working with Coventry students	1	2	3	4	5
6. Having an American student in my group enhanced my learning	1	2	3	4	5
7. I learned skills during the completion of the report that I will use in future work	1	2	3	4	5
8. The use of technology allowed you to collaborate effectively	1	2	3	4	5
9. I believe that this experience will help me become more employable	1	2	3	4	5
10. If I had the opportunity to take part in such a project again, I would do so	1	2	3	4	5
11. I found the project to be a worthwhile experience	1	2	3	4	5

12. Did you use any of the following technologies during the project (*please tick all that apply*)

□ Skype □ WhatsApp □ Office365 □ Google Docs □ Other (*please list all that were used*)

13. What was the primary method of communication used between you and the American student?

14. Why did you use this?

15. If you were to take part in a similar project in the future, would you use the same technology? If not, what would you use instead?

16. What was the biggest challenge that you found working on this project?