7 Exploring foreign entrepreneurial ecosystems through virtual exchange

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Abstract

This case study reports a Virtual Exchange (VE) between students at Cracow University of Economics (Poland) enrolled in business courses and students from the High Institute of Technological Studies of Béja (Tunisia) enrolled in an entrepreneurship course. The main aim of the project was to enhance students' awareness of similarities and differences between the Polish and the Tunisian entrepreneurial ecosystems. The goals also included improving language skills, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) literacy, teamwork, and increasing their self-confidence. The chapter describes the schedule of the project, tasks that students accomplished, and the technological and communication tools that were used. Finally, the study includes conclusions and suggestions for future initiatives.

Keywords: virtual exchange, business studies, entrepreneurial ecosystems, cultural intelligence, cross-cultural communication challenges.

1.   Context

When it comes to business studies in general and entrepreneurship courses in particular, it is important for students to acquire knowledge about business practices in other countries. That is how they can broaden their horizons and

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get inspired. Moreover, in the globalized and interconnected modern business world, it is of great importance that students develop their cultural intelligence to improve their employability skills.

Cultural intelligence is the capability of an individual to function effectively in situations characterized by cultural diversity (Ang, Van Dyne, Koh, & Ng, 2004). Thomas and Inkson (2017) defined it as "the capacity to interact effectively across cultures" (p. x). This is the context in which the VE project described here was developed, with the main aim of enhancing students' awareness of similarities and differences between the Entrepreneurial Ecosystems (EEs) of the two countries involved: Poland and Tunisia.

2.   Aims and description of the project

The VE between Cracow University of Economics (Poland) and the High Institute of Technological Studies of Béja (Tunisia) took place from April 29th till June 13th, 2019.

Twenty-two students took part in this exchange, 11 students from Cracow and 11 students from Béja. The participation was voluntary for students from both sides to ensure that we worked with highly motivated students who are eager to cooperate with students from other countries. At the same time, participation would count toward their final grades.

The students from Cracow were both undergraduates and postgraduates studying management, international business, tourism, and recreation, while the students from Béja were undergraduates studying computer system networks, and the exchange was part of the entrepreneurship course.

As teachers, we both took part in the training course provided by Unicollaboration in the context of Erasmus+ VE, which helped us become familiar with the world of VE and join the VE community. We therefore decided to develop a VE project together, with the support of the trainers. While Gosia Marchewka

wanted to do a VE to let her students experience work in an international virtual team, as usually they do not have such an opportunity during regular classes, Nadia Cheikhrouhou wanted to offer her students a cost-effective international experience which they lack in their studies. In fact, all the students in Béja are from Tunisia and have never experienced international mobility because of the absence of this opportunity in their institution.

As mentioned above, the main aim of the VE was to enable students to familiarize themselves with the EE in a different country to their own. That objective fits into the entrepreneurship course in Béja, since a part of this course is dedicated to exploring the EE in Tunisia. The VE was important because students cannot develop their critical thinking unless they know how foreign EEs function (in this case the Polish EE).

For students of Cracow University of Economics, the case was different as they were all participating in a variety of courses (with different learning goals). For them it was an extracurricular activity they could participate in for self-development.

It is also important to mention that, beyond achieving the above-mentioned learning goals, this VE aimed at improving students' employability skills. In the 2019 World Development report entitled *The changing nature of work*, the World Bank Group (2019) mentions that "three types of skills are increasingly important in labor markets: advanced cognitive skills such as complex problem-solving, socio-behavioral skills such as teamwork, and skill combinations that are predictive of adaptability such as reasoning and self-efficacy" (p. 3). That is important especially given that in Tunisia 28% of higher education graduates were unemployed in the year 2019 (National Institute of Statistics in Tunisia[3]), which is a relatively high rate.

By offering the students such an opportunity, we expected them to gain the following competencies required on the job market in both Poland and Tunisia:

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3. http://www.ins.tn/en/themes/emploi#horizontalTab1

- enhanced language skills, reflected in students' ability to speak English during conference sessions and to write messages in English to project partners;

- enhanced ICT literacy, reflected in students' ability to post content, images, videos, and different files on a virtual platform called Padlet;

- enhanced teamwork skills reflected in students' abilities to work on a cross-cultural project: sharing tasks, coordinating efforts with project partners, cooperating, helping each other, and respecting the deadlines; and

- increased self-confidence reflected in students' ability to communicate in an intercultural environment and to build an international network.

3.   Pedagogical design and tools

The VE between Béja and Cracow lasted one month and a half: it started at the end of April and ended by mid-June 2019.

All tasks and students' deliverables were posted on a private Padlet that was created by the teachers and shared with the participants.

Students were expected to accomplish five tasks.

- **Task 1**: Introducing themselves; posting a photo, and commenting and/or liking other posts. Of course, both instructors were the first to introduce themselves on Padlet and kick off the VE project.

- **Task 2**: Team building; the list of six teams (five teams of four students and one team of two students) was posted on Padlet by the instructors with the names and emails of each team member. The teams were formed heterogeneously in terms of gender and nationality to

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allow the maximum of diversity. Team members were asked to get in touch via email to set an appointment for a video-conference using a videoconferencing tool of their choice. During the video-conference they were supposed to get to know each other in a deeper way, choose a team name, and prepare a flower (teams of four) or a butterfly (team of two). In the center of the flower or the butterfly they were asked to put what the team had in common (personality traits, hobbies, interests…) then each student had to put what is unique about her or him and different from the others in the team, either on a petal (Figure 1) in the case of the flower, or on a wing in the case of the butterfly.

Figure 1. Example and instructions of team flower
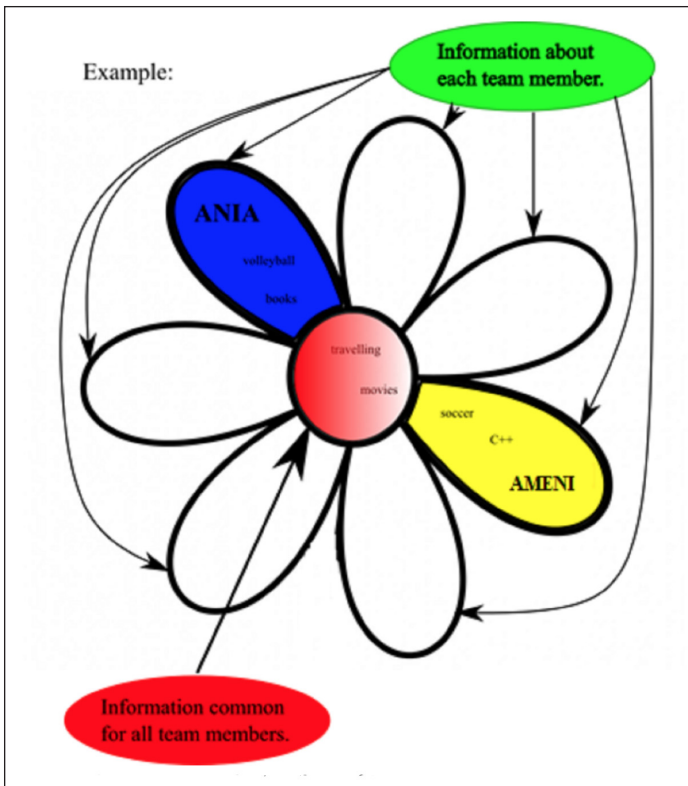
- **Task 3**: EE; each team had to work with the Isenberg model (Isenberg, 2010), which describes the EE of a country based on six interrelated aspects: policy, finance, culture, supports, human capital, and markets to discuss differences and similarities between the Polish and Tunisian EE.

- **Task 4**: Facilitated session; participating in a facilitated dialogue session. These are a form of intercultural conversation between the students in which a trained dialogue facilitator, provided by the Unicollaboration team, helps them overcome communication barriers and engage in a productive conversation. This facilitated session aimed to prepare them for the challenges of the next task related to decision making involving all voices and negotiating choices within an intercultural team.

- **Task 5**: Presentation of the results; preparing a poster or a video to summarize each team's findings about similarities and differences between Tunisian and Polish EE.

Table 1 below summarizes the learning goals of each task, the deliverables, the tools used to accomplish these tasks, and the targeted competencies to be acquired by students.

Table 1. Tasks, learning goals, deliverables, tools, and competencies

Tasks	Learning goals	Deliverables	Tools	Competencies
Students introducing themselves individually on Padlet	Breaking the ice between students	Introduction posts + Photos	Padlet	Presenting oneself in an international context

Students in groups share information about themselves	• The members of each group get to know one another in a deeper way • Establishing trust between the different team members that allows for collaboration in the next tasks	A team flower or butterfly with commonalities and differences between the different members of the team	• Team flower and butterfly templates • Videoconferencing tools: Skype, Zoom, Hangout, WhatsApp…. • Padlet	• Self-confidence • Networking • ICT competencies • Language competencies
Discussing similarities and differences between Polish and Tunisian EE	Students will be able to reflect on their own EE and compare it to that of another country	A screenshot of the videoconference	• Padlet • Isenberg's model • Videoconferencing tools	• Language competencies • ICT competencies • Critical thinking • Cross-cultural communication
Co-conceiving a poster or a video that summarizes the findings of the prior task	Enhancing students' cross-cultural teamwork and communication	A poster or a video	• Padlet • Videoconferencing tools • Online collaborative tools (Canva, Prezi, Google Docs…)	• Cross-cultural teamwork • Cross-cultural communication • Critical thinking • Problem-solving • ICT competencies • Language competencies

Participating in the facilitated dialogue session	Students share their thoughts and work toward mutual understanding despite cultural background differences	No deliverable but should have thought for example of a document with students' reflections on their facilitated session experience	• Zoom	• Cross-cultural communication. • Language competencies

Regarding General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and student privacy, when registering for the project, students were informed about the processing of their personal data to the extent necessary to participate in the project and were asked to give their consent.

4.   Evaluation, assessment, and recognition

Polish students who successfully accomplished the project got one grade higher from the workshop part of one of the courses they attended.

Students in Béja were graded for their participation in the project and this grade contributed to 20% in their final mark for the entrepreneurship course. This percentage of 20% is attributed in the Tunisian system to projects accomplished by students in the frame of their different courses. The grade earned by the students took into consideration the quality of the poster assessed based on its appeal (design, layout, neatness), richness of its content, integration of graphics related to the topic, and presence of the different requirements assigned in the task. Commitment of the students during the whole project and their participation in the facilitated session were also taken into consideration in this grade. Moreover, students who successfully completed all the tasks earned Erasmus+ VE badges.

Tunisian students were happy with their badges, and intended to display them on their LinkedIn profiles and in CVs. They do believe that such a recognition

is an added value to their CVs and they plan to mention this experience during their job interviews to stand out from the crowd. For the students in Poland, the badges are also of a great value in case of applying for international exchange programs at Cracow University of Economics since they gain extra points in their application process.

5.   Lessons learned and conclusion

After the VE, both teachers had informal conversations with their students to reflect on this experience. According to Tunisian students, this exchange opened their eyes to cultural differences and how these impact the way people perceive things and the outer world. They experienced challenges of intercultural communication, and learned new practices typical of the education system in Poland. For example, they appreciated the fact that Polish students work after school, which is rare in the case of Tunisian students. Additionally, they were happy with the new relationships they built. The greatest disadvantage for them was the absence of Polish students during the facilitated session. Indeed, Tunisian students did their best to be present even though they were busy preparing the final projects of their different courses and therefore felt that these efforts were worthless, which caused their frustration. In addition, the absence of Polish students was perceived as a sign of disrespect to their Tunisian partners.

The overall benefits listed by the students in Poland were similar. They believed that the project was a good opportunity to learn what real life cross-cultural communication may be like. For many of them, delivering tasks on time was extremely important and some were stressed that they could not meet deadlines. In some cases, they were disappointed with the lack of response from their Tunisian teammates, as they were expecting prompt reactions and, since the notion of time is perceived differently across cultures, a prompt reaction could take longer for Tunisian students especially during the Ramadan month because they had extra chores like preparing special meals and going to the mosques after breaking the fast to pray for the Tarawih. This conflictual situation put

their problem-solving competencies to the test and though both teachers had to intervene to clarify misunderstandings, it was a learning point for students: not to jump into conclusions and to set up ground rules from the beginning within teams to avoid conflicts.

Based on the feedback from students and a follow-up conversation between both instructors, we decided to implement our second VE, which is running at the time we are writing this case study, despite the very unusual circumstances due to the Coronavirus epidemic resulting in the reorganization of the work and social isolation.

We drew upon the first exchange to improve this experience for the students, implementing the following changes:

- students have more time for VE, and this year our project will last three months compared to the one month and a half of the first VE;

- tasks are as simple as possible, the value is in the process of collaboration, less is more;

- more tasks were implemented at the introductory stage to help in the development of the teams: this year, Tunisian and Polish students will be presenting their countries, regions, and institutions, as well as business etiquette, food, and important holidays/celebrations in their respective countries;

- different conflictual situations may occur, the difficulties encountered in the previous VE helped us discuss in advance with students how to avoid them and how to face them; and

- introduction of the e-portfolio provided by the Unicollaboration team: although we need to customize it, it is a useful form of assessment of the whole experience, as well as a record of the competencies gained by students throughout the project.

An additional benefit to organizing a VE for our students is the possibility of scientific cooperation. Working on the materials for students, we discovered topics that we are both interested in and we have expanded our cooperation at an academic level. Right now, we are working on the problems of EEs and their impact on start-ups.

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