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Reflections on an Industry-Sponsored Global Student collaboration project



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Abstract

The paper reflects on an industry-sponsored initiative that involved Master level students at Lancaster University Management School working on a globally dispersed collaboration project with students at another European university. It draws on the implementation of this initiative over two academic years with an emphasis on the role of the industry partner. Following these, the paper presents the pedagogical implications of such initiatives as well as the lessons learned.

Keywords

Global virtual teams, Online collaboration, Cross-university, Industry-academia partnership

Introduction

Within management education, setting up interactions and collaborations between industry and academia are seen as a route to ensuring relevance (Kohli, 2001), meeting organisational and societal needs (Harindranath and Panteli, 2022) and developing students' employability skills (Borah et al., 2021; Bhullar et al. 2019). Specifically, in the field of information systems, due to the acceleration of digital transformation and the rising of emerging technologies affecting work practices and business operations, practitioner perspectives play a crucial role in curriculum development providing opportunities for revisiting not just content but also redesigning teaching activities and assessment. This paper aims to reflect on the case of an industry-academia project to support students' learning and advance their employability skills.

With the aim to develop an effective learning environment, I have been involved in organising global virtual team (GVT) projects for several years as part of student assessment and the learning from these projects had been shared through publications and conference presentations (Panteli and Davison, 2005; Panteli et al. 2019). In this paper, I will focus on the

experience of organising this initiative during the academic years 2023-24 and 2024-25 when industry involvement was most prominent. The benefits as well as potential challenges of being a GVT member were discussed in the class and students were given guidelines on effective collaboration practices (e.g. team diversity, time-zone difference, language barriers, online communication and collaboration platforms).

Industry Sponsored LUMS-NTNU Global Virtual Projects

A GVT project was initiated with the aim to bring together students from the MSc Digital Business, Innovation and Management at Lancaster University Management School (LUMS) and students from the MSc Digital Transformation at Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) with Cisco as the industry partner. Collectively, over the two academic years, 38 LUMS students and 42 NTNU students took part in the project. The project was compulsory for NTNU students as this was part of their course assessment but LUMS students signed up on a voluntary basis. The deliverable was an 8-minute pre-recorded presentation on topics assigned by the industry partner. GVTs were assessed on this presentation with criteria including focus, originality and industry relevance, as well as on their ability to respond to questions.

The industry partner had several roles:

1. Hosted LUMS students to its regional offices and provided presentations and demonstrations on the increased digitalisation in workplaces
2. Identified the themes/topics for the GVT projects with these involving topical issues that the business world faced, and all were related to different aspects of collaboration technologies including the impact of digitalisation on work and organisations.
3. Offered access to CISCO web-ex system if students requested this.
4. Provided coaching sessions to students during the project.
5. Assessed the presentations, provided feedback and identified the winning team.
6. Presented 'Certificates of Attendance' to all students who took part, with prizes and certificates given to the winning team.

Clearly, the industry partnership was prominent, initially with a company visit, then with coaching sessions to each group and finally feedback to all groups and selection of winning team. According to the industry partner:

"These projects deliver an opportunity to share our vision of people being successful in disperse work locations & the use, privacy, security & adherence to standards is absolutely key, the chance to help educate on good & bad practices is crucial for our worlds next talent. The feedback, delivery & understanding of the students gives us new perspectives, ideas and areas we can focus on to help educate, share the knowledge & learn together."

This visible presence of the industry partner had a positive effect on students involved and especially the LUMS students whose participation was voluntary.

"We appreciate for connecting us to the opportunity to participate... The experience will go a long way to making our professional life much better" (LUMS student 23-24)

Overall, the performance of all GVTs was rated by the instructors and industry partner between very good to excellent and students were praised for their creative presentations, insights to relevant academic literature and links to real life business cases. One of the industry partners said of the winners:

“...The research showed an in-depth understanding of the challenges and solutions to the current situation facing the industry today, which made it very topical ... an impressive presentation, factually presented and highlighting current industry challenges.”

As per the pedagogical aim, working in an online group with students at a different university exposed students to the challenges of online communication and offered significant opportunities for learning. According to one of the NTNU instructors:

“The project gives students practical experience with virtual projects and practical experience with international projects with cultural differences, different time zones, etc. The fact that Cisco is the task provider is important to actualize the tasks and to show that these tasks are relevant in working life. Some of our students experience various challenges along the way, since it can be difficult to achieve contact, there are communication challenges, etc... However, when the project is completed, the students tend to emphasize that it has been a very useful international experience that they would not have been without.”

Reflections and Lessons Learned

First, despite the similarities between the two initiatives over the two years, there was a significant difference, notably the project duration. The 2023-24 project had a 4-week duration and this interfered with students' other commitments and deadlines. Most of the teams did not start the project on week 1 knowing that they had plenty of time to complete it. During this period, tensions had arisen, and different personalities were in conflict (e.g. those who wanted to get on with the project and those who preferred to work on this nearer to the deadline). The 2024-25 project had only 8 days duration and teams started working from day 1, remained focused and no conflict was reported. In some cases, students even reported developing new friendships and widening their international social networks. Accordingly, industry-sponsored projects do not have to be long for students to benefit from them. Short term GVT projects enable students to concentrate on the task, still providing opportunities for social interaction.

Second, though it is recognised that industry's active involvement in the partnership is crucial to build student enthusiasm and ensure active learning, this is not always possible due to different commitments. This may cause delays in communication and limit cooperation at the time of the project. The industry partner's role, availability and commitment need to be openly discussed and agreed upon prior to the start of the project.

Third, though students liked the role of an industry partner in the project and were motivated to work on the project knowing that they would be receiving a Certificate of Attendance by the industry partner to add to their CV, evidently, they developed more skills than they initially expected. The pedagogical purpose of the project was to deepen students' understanding of virtual team working and the technologies that support this. The project provided students with hands-on exposure to these topics which are directly linked to the programme curriculum. It was designed to provide students with the opportunity to expand what they had learnt during the lectures (Davison, Panteli, et al, 2017) whilst also enabling them to gain practical digital literacy skills that improve employability skills (Ehlers, 2022). Such projects align with pedagogic theory and practice which posit that active learners (those who are doing something with the lecture material whilst learning) are more effective learners (e.g. Drew and Mackie, 2011; Bonwell and Eison, 1991). Through this global, cross-university collaboration project, students developed valuable competencies skills such as online collaborations, teamwork and digital leadership,

whilst through the industry-academia partnership, they developed a greater understanding of business needs in the digital world. The experiences and the learning they gained from this collaborative project are important assets as they develop their own careers in the increasingly digitised, including remote/hybrid workspaces.

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Author Profile

Niki Panteli is a Professor of Digital Business in the Department of Management Science at Lancaster University Management School. She has carried out research in global virtual teams and online collaborations and had published widely on these issues. As an educator, she has led cross-university collaborations and industry partnerships to enrich students’ learning. She has also written on inclusive practices in HE.

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