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INTERNATIONALIZATION AT HOME AMONG TOURISM STUDENTS FROM PORTUGAL AND SLOVENIA: COIL BASED ON QUALITATIVE METHODS

ABSTRACT

Traditional mobility programmes seem to be insufficient to fulfil the desired internationalization of higher education programmes. For this reason, other forms of internationalization need to be explored and addressed, such as 'internationalization at home' (IaH), a concept that has attracted the attention of a significant number of researchers over the years. Considering this, the aim of this paper is to present an example of such practices by focusing on the implementation of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) in the context of Tourism degree programmes offered by two institutions: the Polytechnic Institute of Beja, Portugal, and the University of Maribor, Slovenia. Furthermore, the paper intends to highlight the role played by qualitative methods in the design of this COIL programme, titled: "Integral Rural Tourism experiences: lessons from the Alqueva Lake, Portugal, and the Dolenjska region, Slovenia". To achieve these goals, the paper focuses on: (i) the definition of internationalization at home and COIL, (ii) the topic and structure of this COIL programme, (iii) qualitative methods used in activity design, and on (iv) the evaluation of this initiative. This COIL proved to be a positive experience, as it helped to consolidate an international partnership and to increase the number of students involved in internationalization activities in both Tourism degrees involved. Furthermore, it encouraged students to develop a wide range of skills, such as digital, language and intercultural skills, which are of crucial importance, particularly in the case of Tourism degree programmes. Moreover, qualitative methods were found to be a suitable approach for the design of the tasks proposed. Finally, the limitations identified, related mostly to language difficulties and to the discrepancy in the perception of the proposed activities by students from the two institutions, hinted at the challenging nature of COIL to all involved – both students and teachers.

Keywords

Internationalization At Home; Collaborative Online International Learning; Qualitative methods; Tourism degrees.

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, the world is connected in many ways. Global enterprises distribute products from all over the world, and media content informs us of cultures from the other side of the planet. Higher education (HE) is not immune to this phenomenon, and internationalization is regarded as one of the key values of universities. The European Union (EU), with its Erasmus+ programme, encourages youth to visit other countries, study or work there, and in this manner, gain new skills, knowledge, and acquaintances. The number of students involved in the Erasmus+ programme is rising – in 2014, there were 176,522 participants from HE institutions, and the number rose to 492,297 participants in 2023 (European Commission, 2024). However, despite the high number of students involved in Erasmus+ (and other mobility programmes), many more students are still not involved in the mobility scheme. For example, Portugal and Slovenia are actively involved in the Erasmus+ programme, yet the percentage of students participating in Erasmus+ mobility was relatively low in 2023, at around 4% and 5%, respectively (DGEEC, 2024; European Commission, 2024; PORDATA, 2024; SiStat, 2024).

Most students are thus not fully involved in the internationalization process. However, internationalization can be integrated into the curriculum in various ways. An effective method is promoting "Internationalization at Home" (IaH) through Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). Drawing on the question "How can COIL programmes enhance IaH?", this article focuses on the example of COIL in Portuguese and Slovenian HE Tourism degree programmes, in which global knowledge, cultural awareness, and the understanding of other countries are particularly valuable. The main aim is to highlight the importance and effectiveness of a COIL programme within a Tourism Degree as an example of the promotion of IaH.

Furthermore, this work also aims to address the question: "In what ways can qualitative methods be useful in the design of a COIL programme?" For that reason, it also seeks to illustrate the benefits of using a qualitative approach in the design and implementation of such a programme as a way of helping students to explore learning experiences and to study sites in their natural context, allowing specific details and nuances to emerge for deeper analysis (Banks, 2018). Qualitative methods – based on participant and nonparticipant observation, complemented by visual learning tools – enhance student participation and engagement in the COIL programme. COIL offers enriched learning experiences that encourage students to interact, collaborate, and take ownership of their learning, broadening opportunities for participatory and active learning.

Through qualitative methods, COIL facilitates meaningful exchanges between academics, students, and peers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds in geographically distant locations. The article is structured as follows: Sections 2 and 3 review relevant literature on internationalization in HE, by focusing specifically on the concept of IaH and describing COIL as an example of IaH. Section 4 outlines the qualitative methodology used in this COIL programme, including participant and nonparticipant observation, visual data, and the benefits of utilizing digital tools.

Section 5 discusses the main findings from the COIL programme implementation at the Polytechnic Institute of Beja and at the University of Maribor, regarding the two research questions indicated above.

2. Internationalization of Study Programmes: COIL as an Example

2.1. "Internationalization at Home" as a concept

Traditional student mobility programmes are nowadays only one of the many internationalization opportunities offered in HE. In fact, internationalization is no longer something experienced by a limited number of students who receive a grant to take part of their degree or do an internship abroad; instead, it has become accessible to HE students in general. This has been partly enabled by the growing importance and the visible diversification of initiatives and practices associated with 'internationalization at Home' (IaH), a concept defined by Beelen and Jones (2015) as "the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments" (p. 69).

IaH practices related to the formal curriculum include all opportunities framed within the context of credit-bearing modules and courses, such as internationally diverse reading lists and case studies, guest lectures, and initiatives like COIL. On the other hand, IaH practices associated with the informal curriculum include international experiences providing intercultural learning opportunities which are not explicitly integrated in credit-bearing courses and modules — for instance, the promotion of activities aimed at bringing together home and mobility students, initiatives with the goal of increasing intercultural awareness and global citizenship, and internationally themed festivals and events (Universities UK International, 2024a).

Over the years, the importance of IaH in HE has been highlighted in several studies (e.g., Allen, 2021; Soulé et al., 2024). In fact, there are several advantages of IaH to be pointed out: IaH can contribute to the shaping of global citizens without travel, as it promotes internationalization opportunities among all students, and not only among those with the time and financial availability to study/work abroad for several months; moreover, it helps provide students with a curriculum that truly prepares them for the diversity of today's communities; it also encourages the development of a wide range of key skills in today's world, and it fosters international collaboration and understanding (Universities UK International, 2024b). These are also some of the advantages of the COIL programme discussed in this paper.

2.2. Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)

The term Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) was first introduced by the State University of New York in 2006 as a designation for a specific type of virtual exchange (Hackett et al., 2023), and since then it has been widely used in the context of HE worldwide.

According to the Global Learning Conference (2017), “COIL is used to refer to any pedagogical activities that use technology to link classrooms and students in geographically distant locations through coursework.” The first initiatives before COIL were named ‘globally networked learning’, ‘global connections’, ‘virtual mobility’, and ‘telecollaboration’ and were typically created through a team-teaching approach, in which professors from two or more universities collaborated to design a joint or partially integrated syllabus (Rubin, 2017). However, as mentioned by Rubin (2017), while these first initiatives enabled the enrolment of students from around the world, they were primarily structured to deliver knowledge in a one-way manner and were seldom designed to foster intercultural learning or interaction among students from diverse cultural or national backgrounds.

According to Gow (2023), COIL is based on four dimensions: (i) a **collaborative** dimension, in which staff co-teach in an equal position; moreover, students need to cooperate to produce the required outputs of the activity; (ii) an **online** dimension, since all the interactions between the students and staff take place online; (iii) an **international** dimension, as interactions between staff and students take place in two (or more) different countries, contributing to the development of intercultural competences; (iv) and a **learning** dimension because it is a learning activity and should be an integral part of the curriculum. The main goals of COIL are well identified: (i) to create a global learning environment where students can share projects and develop academic activities together; (ii) engage in virtual exchanges; (iii) and learn more with each other while building cross-cultural competencies and intercultural considerations (Gow, 2023).

Literature also focuses on the benefits of COIL in HE (e.g., Liu, 2023), as it helps expand partnerships, reduce material costs, foster students’ collaborative skills and an international mindset, enhance digital literacy, and as it encourages the use of modern information technology for independent learning. While connecting classes from two or more countries around the world, COIL provides additional learning experiences in which students can interact, collaborate, and take ownership of their learning, extending opportunities for intercultural and transnational learning (Naicker et al., 2022).

3. The use of COIL in Tourism Degree Programmes

3.1. Case study from Portugal and Slovenia: topic and scope

The first step in the preparation of this COIL organized by the Polytechnic Institute of Beja (IPBeja) and the University of Maribor (UM) consisted in the identification of a tourism-related topic of interest for the territories in which these two HE institutions are located, namely the area surrounding the Alqueva Lake in the Alentejo region, Portugal, and the Dolenjska region, Slovenia.

Alqueva is a man-made lake which stems from the closing of dam gates on February 8, 2002. The establishment of a new reservoir in that year resulted in a lake resource, comprising several attractions related to the nature, culture and community surrounding the lake.

This has generated new possibilities for tourism development. At present, Alqueva is still an emerging destination with 250 km² of water surface in a region that is known for tourism experiences based on a tranquil and rural landscape, wine tourism, astrotourism as well as on tangible and intangible cultural resources. Alqueva is considered a lake tourism destination, under the “umbrella” of slow tourism, with the potential to create unique experiences.

The Dolenjska region, Slovenia, consists of a central town, Novo Mesto, and a vast countryside, where agriculture is still an important economic sector. Farmers breed livestock and cultivate the fields with varieties of grains, potatoes, and tuberous plants. Moreover, the region is known for its vineyards, orchards, herbal fields, and honey production. All this is an excellent foundation for developing rural tourism, as in the case of the product “Tourism in vineyard cottages”, an example of slow tourism, which can be a role example for other rural experiences in the region.

Considering the importance of rural tourism in both regions, this type of tourism was selected as the key topic for the COIL programme, carried out under the title: “Integrated rural tourism experiences: lessons from the Alqueva Lake, Portugal, and Dolenjska, Slovenia”.

The programme involved two course units of the Tourism degree programmes of each institution (IPBeja: Professional Practice II and New Technologies in Tourism (3 teachers involved); UM: Introduction to Destination Management and Destination Management (2 teachers involved). Prior to the beginning of the programme, held between March and May 2024, the teaching staff of these course units and the Representative for International Mobility of IPBeja’s Tourism degree collaborated on the design of a work plan, detailed in the section below. In total, this COIL involved 26 students (18 students enrolled at IPBeja and 8 students at the UM).

3.2 COIL structure overview

The COIL programme was structured in four stages: (i) introduction to the COIL programme and to its topic, (ii) field work aimed at data collection, (iii) collaborative work between students from the two institutions, and (iv) presentation and discussion of students’ findings.

The first stage, the project kick-off, was an online session held on the Zoom platform in March 2024. The topic of the programme and a work plan overview were shared with the students. This was followed by theoretical input aimed at providing students with key concepts related to the topic (rural and slow tourism) and to the methodologies and techniques to be used (visual methods, participant and nonparticipant observation, and benchmarking). After that, time was allocated to group formation and ice-breaking activities. To help achieve the goals of the COIL, all groups were required to include students from both institutions. Considering the dimension of each of the classes involved, six groups were formed – each group included 3 students from IPBeja and 1 student from the UM.

At the end of the kick-off session, students were grouped in Zoom breakout rooms, where they were encouraged to get to know each other and to exchange contacts for further collaborative work.

In the second stage of the programme, held in the second week of April, field visits to the regions under study were organized. This was the only component of the COIL programme that was not carried out online – however, its purpose was to enable data collection in each of the regions under study in order to enable collaborative work online in the remaining stages of the process. Considering the two selected regions, Portuguese students and their mentors visited examples of good practices in the Alqueva Lake region, while Slovenian students and their mentors explored best practices in Dolenjska.

During a one-day field trip, IPBeja students visited various providers in Alqueva. First, they visited the Alqueva Interpretation Centre, with an overview of the Alqueva Project, its infrastructures, and the surrounding territory, and the Alqueva River Beach. Students also visited the Alqueva Nautical Station, where products symbolizing the nautical activity in the region are designed, as well as the Alqueva Rural Eco Camping Park, where they could observe the camping experiences provided by this business in a rural space with an ecological farm and a biological pool.

The fieldwork at the UM was organised in two days. On the first day, Slovenian students visited a beekeeping and apitherapy centre, a herbal centre with thematic trails, different natural sites and Kostanjevica na Krki local destination management organization (DMO). On the second day, participants visited an eco-tourist farm, a spa hotel with thermal water, the Cviček wine fountain, Šmarjeta DMO, and a natural thermal spring.

In the third phase, the working groups were encouraged to keep in contact and to work autonomously outside the classroom with resort to selected online communication channels (e.g., Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, Zoom, Discord) as a way of strengthening collaboration and enabling further work.

During the final Zoom meeting in May 2024, students were asked to present the results of their joint research to the teachers and to their colleagues from IPBeja and UM. To accomplish this objective, students used digital presentation tools. All activities were supported by the use of qualitative methods, which were an essential component of all stages of the process, as discussed in section 4.

4. The use of qualitative methods and digital tools in COIL

Qualitative research is a valuable tool in the field of HE, particularly for the exploration of complex educational phenomena and the provision of a comprehensive description of experiences and perspectives. The aim of this section is to highlight the qualitative methodologies underlying the various COIL activities based on tasks carried out by the working groups.

Observation methodologies, in their various typologies, were privileged, as well as visual data, through photographic and video recording, following predefined criteria.

4.1 Nonparticipant and participant observation

Observation represents a central method for identifying and understanding the phenomenon under investigation and for perceiving the examined objects in their natural environment (Dźwigot & Barosz, 2020) or in a controlled setting (Wade-Berg, 2022). The major advantage is its directness since it allows the recording of behaviour as it occurs (Cargan, 2007).

Observation raised to the rank of a scientific method should be carried out systematically, purposefully, and on scientific grounds, even if curiosity and fascination may still be some of its very important components (Kumar & Sharma, 2023). Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the data collected may be subject to a degree of interpretation and the researcher's perspective; it is essential to select an appropriate observation approach and to select the appropriate technique to record the phenomena observed (Wade-Berg, 2022).

According to various classifications, the following types of observation are distinguished: (i) categorised or uncategorised observation – depending on the level of how the method is pre-structured or spontaneous (Mintzberg, 2019 cited in Dźwigot & Barosz, 2020); (ii) undisguised observation – when subjects know that they are being observed (Mintzberg, 2019 cited in Dźwigot & Barosz, 2020); (iii) direct or indirect observation – depending on whether the behaviour is being observed as it occurs or after the action (Pardal & Correia, 1995; Ciesielska et al., 2018); (iv) participant or nonparticipant observation – depending on whether the researcher chooses to be part of the situation he/she is studying or not (Mintzberg, 2019 cited in Dźwigot & Barosz, 2020; Pardal and Correia, 1995).

In this COIL programme, students used both participant and nonparticipant observation and categorized, direct and indirect observation in the different phases of the learning methodology, as shown in the diagram of the data collection procedure (Fig. 1). The purpose was to introduce tourism students to a variety of basic skills in research design and data collection through observation exercises in tourism research fields. It is a fact that tourism curricula must include the use of observation, since this method plays a crucial role in tourism research, allowing researchers to gain deeper insights into tourist behaviours and experiences (Rosseti, 2024).

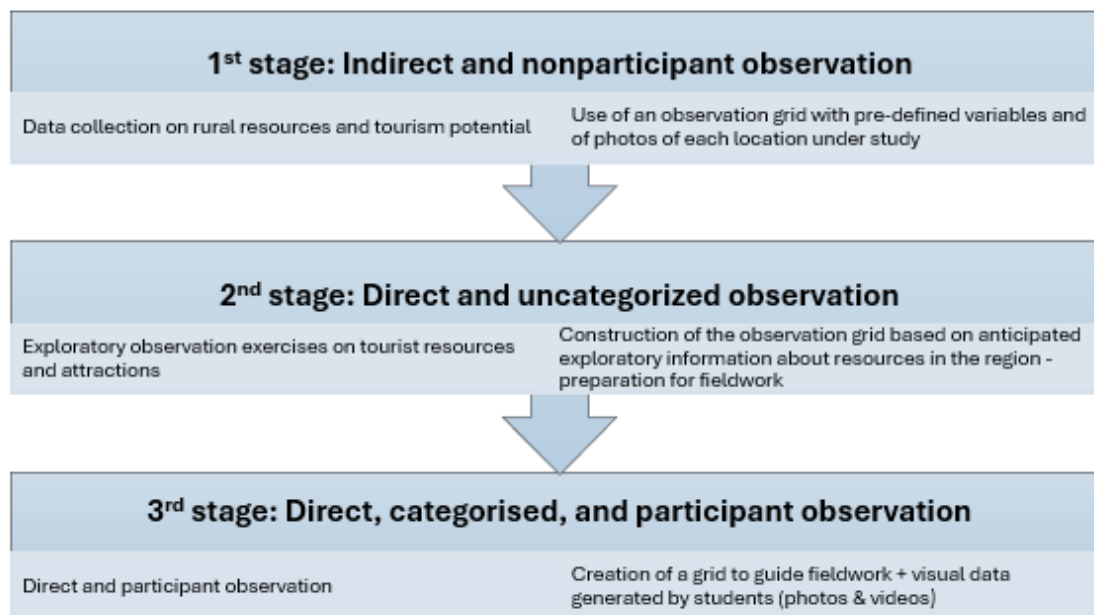


Figure 1. Diagram of the data collection procedure

Teachers from both institutions proposed several observation exercises. This process allowed a more structured data collection for the COIL activities. As regards the object of observation, the objectives of the exercises included:

- (i) Indirect and nonparticipant observation – Students collected data about the rural resources and tourism potential of both studied regions (Alqueva Lake and Dolenjska) under the umbrella of integrated rural tourism. To do this exercise, a set of pre-defined variables was used, supported by a previously created grid.
- (ii) Direct and uncategorised observation – Students did exploratory observation exercises about tourist resources and attractions.
- (iii) Direct, categorised, and participant observation – As preparation for field trips, students previously prepared a grid to guide their fieldwork and their direct and participant observation. An example is provided in Fig. 2.

Dimensions of observation		What to observe?
Write down your impressions. Take pictures/record videos.		
Quality of the tourism products		e.g. authenticity and cultural representation, variety and uniqueness, quality of touristic services and experiences, sustainability and environmental impact, value for money, customer satisfaction and reviews, infrastructure and organization.
Hospitality from the residents		e.g. friendliness and approachability, willingness to assist, attitudes toward tourists/visitors, community engagement, respect for diversity and inclusion, non-verbal cues.
Accessibility		e.g. physical accessibility (ramps, elevators, or accessible pathways for people with reduced mobility), public transportation (availability and proximity of bus/train stations, taxi stands), signage (clarity and visibility, multilingual support, directional guidance).
Cleanliness/Hygiene/Space conditions		e.g. general cleanliness (garbage, visible maintenance), hygiene in facilities (restaurants, public spaces), water and air quality.
Price		e.g. price transparency, fairness and local vs. tourist pricing, affordability and accessibility, value for money, seasonal price variations.
Tourism promotion		e.g. visibility and marketing strategies, availability of information, branding and identity, use of technology.
Networks		e.g. existence of networks/partnerships, reference to partners.
Others		Other aspects worth mentioning

Figure 2. Example of an observation grid

4. 2 The use of visual learning tools

Image-based pedagogical tools can effectively stimulate learners to engage in knowledge discovery while simultaneously helping them develop essential skills through various visual approaches. This premise was established by previous work by Rodrigues (2020) and Rodrigues and Amaral (2020) and is further tested and reaffirmed in this study. This line of thought aligns with Kara's perspective on the use of creative methodologies in social sciences, as she states that "the early 21st century is a dynamic and exciting time for research methods" (2015, p. 3), with methodological boundaries expanding across all social science disciplines.

Therefore, educational environments offer excellent opportunities to test more creative and participatory experiences with students, encouraging fresh and diverse perspectives grounded in visual dimensions (both static and dynamic). In this regard, drawings, photo images, collages, photo stories, documentaries, and videos emerge as 'immediate visual texts,' as Mitchell (2008, p. 367) terms them, enhancing the use of more creative approaches with students.

The application of visual and creative methods and data also serves as a collaborative tool for exploring complex and challenging areas, transcending boundaries to reach spaces of innovative action (Childs, 2020). All these diverse learning methodologies, framed by the qualitative paradigm and using visual tools to produce reflective thought, have the potential to generate what Van der Vaart et al. (2018) describe as 'multifaceted knowledge' (p. 25), with the goal of gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. The adoption of visual methods and data is framed by the visual literacy movement (Avgerinou and Ericson, 1997), according to which students should improve skills that enable them to understand and use visuals for intentionally communicating with others.

In this COIL activity, students were encouraged to use a variety of visual tools. Visual data served as a means of gathering information and complemented both participant and nonparticipant observation exercises, primarily using static and dynamic images (photos and videos):

- (i) Indirect Observation and Nonparticipant Observation (pre-existing visual data): Students gathered information from websites to prepare their observation grids prior to the field trip. They analyzed photos and videos available online about the study sites, enriching their preparations with additional visual data for a more thorough analysis.
- (ii) Participant Observation (visual data generated by students): During the field trips, students took photos and recorded videos to complement their notes on the observation grid, creating material for their final presentations.
- (iii) Final Oral Presentation: Students incorporated their photos and videos as supplementary data alongside textual information, using visuals to convey their reflections and critical insights more effectively.

This experience demonstrates that visual learning tools are vital for supporting diverse learning styles, enhancing engagement, fostering reflective thinking, and promoting critical analysis. By enabling multimodal learning experiences, these tools help students connect with content in ways that align with their individual learning approaches. In some cases, they bridge communication gaps, fostering mutual understanding and even collaboration among team members.

4.3 Digital tools

Information and communication technologies provide a wide range of tools, methodologies and functions, facilitating collaborative work, particularly at an international level. Digital tools have been important for education professionals for a long time now, as they allow them to store, process and share teaching material through multiple electronic devices, and even create new content in a more attractive way. Nowadays, this is also the case for students, as they also participate in the creation of teaching and learning materials, even more when qualitative methods and techniques to achieve their results are applied. The qualitative approach used in this COIL was supported by digital tools, as required by the concept of COIL itself. Furthermore, integrating technology into qualitative methods has become essential, as it can foster collaborative thinking, shape students' identities, build new analytical and technical skills, and reshape interpretive frameworks (Grzegorz & Costa, 2023).

This COIL included students from Portugal and Slovenia, so the use of communication tools was needed for them to be able to develop their work. However, communication was only one of the reasons for the use of technologies, as specified below:

- Videoconferencing – Zoom was used for the group meetings between students from both countries).

- Texting – Instant communication was needed during the COIL, so students would keep in touch through SMS, WhatsApp, Messenger and Instagram.
- Still and moving image recording – As visual methods were used, students resorted to their mobile phones to take pictures and record videos of the places they visited. This enabled the preparation of collaborative analytical work carried out online.
- Word processing – To prepare the different documents the students used common word processing tools (mainly Microsoft Word); although some used shared documents, most preferred to work locally and later combined all the contributions in a single document.
- File sharing – As students were collecting different information, file sharing was also a mandatory tool; apart from some shared documents in cloud services, most students used email and WhatsApp for this; some even used Instagram (particularly for image sharing).
- Online polling software – Students were invited to evaluate their experience throughout the COIL programme on Mentimeter.

After the programme, the Portuguese students did a practical exercise in their New Technologies in Tourism class to assess the usability of the interfaces of the different digital platforms they used. They evaluated the positive and negative aspects of each platform/system/app used. Most of them reported mainly positive aspects and only minor problems.

5. COIL evaluation – discussion

Evaluation is a crucial part of the teaching process, as it gives teachers feedback on what was learned and what can be improved in the future (Antoci et al., 2021). This COIL programme was organised for the first time in the academic year 2023/24. Therefore, evaluation was a vital part of the project itself. The aim of this section is to present the main results from the evaluation of this COIL programme and to consider them in light of the two research questions formulated above.

The first part of the evaluation took place at the end of the last online meeting with students from both countries. Mentimeter was used as an online polling tool, and students were asked to share their thoughts by answering two questions on their mobile phones: 1. Please write your positive experiences in COIL; 2. Please write your suggestions for improvement. As a positive experience, students highlighted new connections and friends, teamwork and shared work, the field trips, getting to know students from a different country, learning about new territories and cultures, and realising how life situations in those two countries are similar or different regarding specific issues. On the other hand, the negative experience was reflected in their suggestions for improvement. Students would like to have more precise instructions and guidelines, better organization, trips to more locations, and to use more digital tools.

The second part of the evaluation was conducted in separate groups, in which students talked to their teachers and shared their impressions of the COIL experience.

Here, one of the main conclusions was that language was a significant barrier, as English was challenging for all students. However, students also expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to use visual methods since they are used to taking photos and recording videos. Besides, the first-hand visual material presented the other country more insightfully and was perceived as more reliable than general material found on the Internet.

This leads us back to the two research questions formulated above: 1. How can COIL programmes enhance IaH?, and 2. In what ways can qualitative methods be useful in the design of a COIL programme?

Regarding the first question, one can say that this COIL programme served as an adequate tool for a “virtual exchange” and as an example of “internationalization at home”. Students from the two countries connected and collaborated in a study process through which they gained new knowledge and a better understanding of different cultures. The digital tools helped them to overcome the issues of geographical distance, did not affect their everyday schedule (the programme is not time-consuming), and did not require any financial effort. Hence, students from all backgrounds could participate.

Although COIL, as an example of IaH, is integrated in the formal curriculum as part of a credit-bearing course, it may also have an impact of the informal curriculum, as it promoted a closer contact between students from different countries also outside the academic context. Students learned about a different country and culture, exchanged contacts, and expressed their interest in keeping in touch, even making promises to visit each other in the future.

Nonetheless, several challenges emerged during the COIL programme, affecting both the overall effectiveness and satisfaction. Some of these challenges were related to:

- a) **Communication:** one of the main issues impacting collaboration was the difficulty in maintaining regular and responsive communication. Delays in replies created obstacles for dialogue between the team members. Despite the use of multiple platforms, achieving timely coordination remained challenging. Additionally, differing levels of familiarity with collaboration tools added complexity to the process and slowed the workflow.
- b) **Academic and methodological differences:** groups demonstrated varying approaches to academic work, particularly regarding structure and expectations. The Slovenian students adhered to a more formal, structured approach, while the Portuguese students tended towards a less formal methodology, which at times led to misalignment in project deliverables.
- c) **Language proficiency and presentation dynamics:** language differences also impacted the efficiency of collaboration, especially in presenting and communicating ideas. Some students faced language barriers, which extended the time needed to complete tasks and resulted in lengthier, less focused presentations. This dynamic led to variations in presentation styles and timing, creating discrepancies in expectations for project content delivery.

- d) **Coordination and expectations:** variations in coordination and expectations across student groups and HE institutions led to inconsistencies in project execution. Differences in academic guidance and project expectations, especially regarding format and content, resulted in uneven workload distribution. Furthermore, occasional discrepancies in activity reporting led to misunderstandings between the groups.

However, the limitations identified by both students and teachers can also be perceived as an enriching component of the overall COIL experience. In fact, by having to deal with the challenges mentioned above, students were encouraged to develop relevant skills while collaborating with peers from other countries, which is in fact one of the most relevant components of IaH.

As regards the second question, one can state that the design and implementation of this COIL programme benefited greatly from the use of qualitative methods. Students used qualitative methods and techniques, such as participant and nonparticipant observation, complemented by visual learning tools (photos and videos), which have become more and more common in the teaching and learning processes over the past years. Younger generations are known for being more visually sensitive and responsive, for example, through their generalised use of photos and videos on social media. Hence, using visual tools to express students' views and opinions proved to be an appropriate approach. This is in line with the rational presented by Mitchell (2011), according to whom the visual might create a generative space and a liberating experience.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, it can be stated that, despite the challenges, the presented COIL achieved most of its goals, and the insights collected during the evaluation process highlighted areas for improvement. For the implementation of COIL programmes in the future, addressing the initial challenges through the preparation of more detailed work guidelines is recommended. Additionally, greater emphasis should be placed on the use of digital tools and on the improvement of language and presentation skills.

The use of a qualitative approach, including multiple data collection techniques, such as participant and nonparticipant observation with visual tools, proved to be a suitable methodological option in the design and implementation of a COIL programme in Tourism. Not only did it foster a stronger interpretative analysis of different types of data, but it also encouraged Tourism students' reflection on the various experiences provided. Moreover, this approach effectively highlighted remote territories, helping to bring a foreign country and culture closer to students at home. Considering all this, the implementation of a COIL programme proved to be a valuable experience within the context of Tourism degree programmes, mainly as an effective way of promoting internationalization at home and, thus, of enhancing the benefits provided by the opportunities of a more inclusive and diverse higher education system.

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