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Central and Eastern European Experience of the X-Culture Project in Teaching International Management and Cross-Cultural Communication

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Our paper examines the X-Culture challenges and experience through the eyes of professors and students alike and draws attention to the significance of such projects in international business practices in addition to examining the key influencing factors of inter-culturalism and ICT technologies.

Methodology: The students were asked to share their experience with us in a report or at an interview. Most participants considered the program to be very useful. They made the greatest progress in understanding and communicating with others and also appreciated working and collaborating with the others from different working cultures. The research was carried out in the countries of Eastern Europe to present our experience.

Findings: One of the consequences of globalization is that the various forms of contact are becoming independent of place. Adaptation to the new dimensions can be eased if the students can take part in international cooperation. A lot of students have improved their chances of landing an attractive job on the labor market and extended their social and professional networks by participating in X-Culture International Student Collaboration Project. Challenges were posed mainly by differences in time, but also cultural differences and language barriers were frequent.

Value Added: The students of our universities have taken part in the X-Culture program. In addition to studying the course material and gaining special skills in writing business plans, challenges can be experienced, and best practices learned.

Recommendations: It is extremely important in shaping the business environment of future workplaces so that is why such programs should be included in the curricula of business schools and management development programs.

Key words: International Business Education, Cross-culture training, Eastern-Europe

JEL codes: F23, F50, F69

Introduction

The initial idea for X-Culture was rooted in an attempt to find a colleague abroad who would like to team up their students with students from a different country to develop a joint project team. Collaboration was announced via the Academy of International Business mailing list. Surprisingly, within a short time, a number of academic collaborators all over the world expressed their interest in joining

the project. So, X-Culture was born. The first time (fall of 2010), lecturers from seven countries took part with their students. A total of about 450 students participated. Since then the project has been growing each semester, reaching almost 4,500 students from 100 universities in over 40 countries to date.

X-Culture is part of experiential learning theory that dates back to the beginning of the 20th century, based on Jacob Levy Moreno and Kurt Lewin's social psychology experiments used in management education and training (Highhouse, 2002).

As Kolb (1984) states "learning involves transactions between the person and the environment" (p. 35). More specifically, experiential learning is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41).

More recent theories of experiential learning can be traced back to earlier theories of human development and psychology of learning (John Dewey, Paulo Freire, William James, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, Carl Rogers, amongst others).

According to the Experiential learning theory (ETL) the learning process consists of four dynamic modes involving action/reflection and experience/abstraction (Kolb & Kolb, 2009): concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC), and active experimentation (AE). The ETL model is based on three stages of human development: acquisition, specialization, and integration (Kolb, 1984). ELT suggests that the learning cycle includes experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting, and that concrete experiences are the foundations for observations and reflections (Kolb & Kolb, 2009).

Several studies have emphasized the positive effect of the practical component in economics (Herz & Merz, 1998), marketing (Gremler, Hoffman, Keaveney, & Wright, 2000), business communication (Saunders, 1997), entrepreneurship (Cooper, Bottomley, & Gordon, 2004) and other fields (for review studies see Cantor, 1997; Gosen & Washbush, 2004; Kolb, Boyatzis & Mainemelis, 2001).

Few empirical studies were written on the relationship between learning styles and cultural background (Joy & Kolb, 2009). Kolb (1984) discusses that experience plays a central role in both human adaptation and the learning process, rather than in acquisition, manipulation and abstraction (as other learning theories).

Experiential learning approaches can most challengingly be used in International Business and Management training and education as simulating multi-cultural global environment in the classroom is often a daunting or even an impossible task. There have also been studies evaluating experiential learning in the field of International Business and Management education (Taras et al., 2013).and using virtual teams as experiential learning vehicles (Gonzalez-Perez et al., 2014).

Experiential learning tools have increased in the recent years (Hawtrey, 2007). Several studies show that experiential learning is has a positive effect on learning in general business education (Alon, 2003). In our research we also hypothesized that X-Culture does actually assist in improving the general business skills, social awareness and communication skills of the participants.

Material and methods

The X-Culture consulting project (www.X-Culture.org) was used to collect the data. X-Culture is a large-scale international experiential learning project that involves over 3,500 MBA and business students from 100 universities from 40 countries on six continents every semester. The students are placed in global virtual teams of about seven, each student coming from a different country. Working with people from around the globe and dealing with cultural differences, time-zone dispersion, and global communication challenges, the teams complete a consulting project for a multi-national company.

This provides a context that is very similar to the real workplace, particularly with respect to the GVT environment. First, the cross-cultural international settings were very real. The study participants worked in international vir-

tual teams, each composed of about seven people with different countries represented on each team (sometimes two team members were from the same country while the rest of the team member each came from a different country). The geographic and time-zone dispersion, cultural and language differences were real. One hundred and eighty-three international teams took part in the study. Finding a large number of international work teams like this is simply impossible in the workplace. At most, an organization would have a few dozen international teams, and usually fewer than a dozen, whose performance could be observed to validate a cultural intelligence instrument with respect to behavior and performance in cross-cultural settings.

Second, the study task and environment were designed to resemble the corporate world as closely as possible. The team member interacted daily for 8-9 weeks, which is a typical project length in the corporate world.

Once the students enrolled in the course that participated in the project, they were required to take part in the project. The team assignment was random, and students had no choice over the countries represented on their teams. This is similar to how it works in the corporate world: accepting a job offer is voluntary, but once in a job, one has little choice as to what projects to work on and with whom.

The project involved development of a solution to real-life business challenges presented by real-life companies. The task involved market research, market entry plan development, and product design. The project was supervised by instructors with rich business consulting experience and managed as a regular business consulting project.

Just like in the corporate world, the teams were given significant autonomy in terms of the extent and type of communication methods. However, all participants were introduced to and were encouraged to use free collaboration tools, such as email, voice and video conferencing tools (e.g., Skype), document and collaboration platforms (e.g., Google Docs and Dropbox), and social media (e.g., Facebook and Google +), similar to what is commonly used in a corporate environment.

The stakes were very high, and the project was effectively a temporary employment for the client organization. First, the project accounted for 20 to 50% of the course grade. A failure on the project usually meant a failure in the course, with all resulting negative effects on future career prospects. The members of the best teams were invited project participants symposiums held once a year. Most attended received travel stipends. Additionally, organizations offered post-market commission, as well as prospects of internships and job offers. So, from every angle, the project settings and work design were not different from those in organizations and the threat that the findings of the present study would not generalize to the corporate employee population is extremely small.

1 Connections to the X-Culture Project

1.1 Key Influencing Factors of Interculturalism in the CEE region

Globalization is differently interpreted in different eras. After WWII in 1945 it meant the *Americanization of Europe and Asia* or the alternative of the *sovietization of Eastern Europe* (Szilágyi, 2002, p. 30). Currently, the aforementioned dual nature of globalization has stopped existing. Now globalization characterizes the market, culture and democracy. According to Meleg (2004, p. 104) globalization would make a hint that "the world is unified". This melting pot has various effects on societies.

Internationalization and globalization have become commonplace not only in corporate life but also in education. For instance, in the United States at the beginning of the 1980's there were only 36 accredited international management courses with a business degree. By the beginning of the past decade it approached 500 (Scherer et al., 2003). A further expansion is signaled by the publication of a handbook by Harvard Business School that

analyses the future of MBA (Master of Business Administration) courses (Datar et al., 2010, p. 108) and according to which "business schools strongly agree that MBA programs must be globalized" (Bőthe, 2011). However, differences can be noticed in the strategy of solution (Pettigrew, 2014 & Thomas, 2014). The possible answers can be classified into the following eight categories:

- There has been a significant rise in international students and professors.
- The global content of managerial subjects is increasing.
- The number of integrative courses with global context is on the rise.
- There has been an increasing demand for international exchange programs.
- Tracing international exchange students is more and more emphasized.
- The range of global projects and study trips has been rising.
- The establishment of global research centers is prioritized.
- Setting up overseas campuses is given a priority.

In the case of the examined region and also of Hungary and Slovakia the following factors are highlighted that contribute to the citizens and business students at our universities' tighter relationship with other peoples and cultures.

- **Foreign Direct Investment (FDI):** In the early days of the transition there were about 1,000 companies with foreign investment in the CEE region operating with approximately US$ 400m of foreign capital (Simai, 1989). At that time, authorization for foreign investment could be obtained subject to strikingly different conditions of economic control in the various countries of the region.

    - As mentioned before, foreign capital was insignificant in Eastern Europe including Czechoslovakia and Hungary in the socialist era. It is possible to set up a joint venture with foreign capital in Hungary since 1972. The first subsidiary owned by foreign capital was registered by Siemens in 1973. Between the period mentioned above and 1989 approximately 350 joint ventures possessed by foreigners were established in Hungary (Inotai, 1989). The prominent growth engines

of Foreign Direct Investment are the multinational companies. So far, these companies have invested foreign capital worth nearly 1,000 billion of which approximately 60 million dollars were invested in Slovakia that became independent in 1993 (National Bank, 2015) and 100 billion dollars in Hungary till 2015.

• From a global point of view, international companies employ more than 80 million people in their subsidiaries all over the world (UNCTAD, 2016). The proportion of people employed at subsidiaries of international companies varies significantly across countries. According to the representative data of the UNCTAD World Investment Report, 50.6% of the employees in the private sector work for multinational companies in Ireland. The same indicators were 22.4% in Hungary and close to 30% in Slovakia at the beginning of the millennium, according to the aforementioned report.

• **European Union (EU):** It is worth stressing the other tendency of encouraging and enhancing meetings with foreigners and other cultures in the countries of the region including Hungary and Slovakia. This is supposedly connected to the countries' EU accession.

• **Multicultural Characters of CEE/Europe:** Europe and more exactly Eastern Europe has always been characterized by linguistic variety.

• **Free Labor Movement:** According to most recent data nearly 7 million people migrated from the countries of the region to the western part of the EU of which both Hungary and Slovakia have a share of approximately half a million persons, respectively (Schuh, 2017).

• **New Technologies:** One of the most recent challenges of globalization is that business contacts have become independent of place and very varied and also changes have been accelerated. Adaptation to the new dimensions of business life can be eased if students have the opportunity of taking part in international cooperation (Punett, 2010a, b and 2011).

Figure 1. Key Influencing Factors of Spreading Interculturalism in CEE region
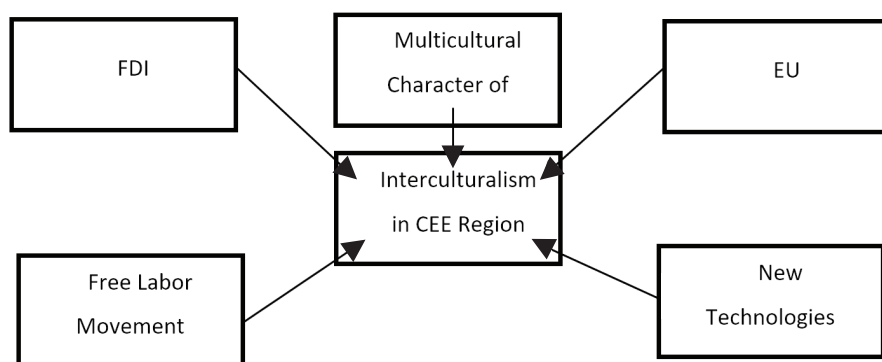
Source: authors' own research.

The milestone nature of the program is essential as with the help of *modern ICT (information and communication) technologies* our students can enter the global scenario within a minute. The program assists the students with getting acquainted with the *working and studying culture* of other university students. They can also face the challenges of different time zones when cooperating with the others by means of new info-communication instruments (e.g. email, Skype, Google Docs, Dropbox, Google+ and Facebook Groups).

1.2 Connections of our subjects taught with X-culture

For two decades we have been teaching International Management and IHRM at master level in Hungary and Slovakia. The objective of the course is to give a detailed account of the recent trends that managers and students alike have to face in the constantly changing world. It also makes some recommendations on the actions to be taken as well as strategic skills and competences to be developed which are of vital importance in cross-national interactions. Student participation in X-culture is not mandatory. They can choose between home assignments or X-culture project options.

International Management

The objective of the International Management course is to assist students in coping with the dynamically changing environment. Moreover, they are also taught how to manage organizational, strategic and interpersonal issues as well as how to cope with challenges. Recommendations are also drafted on actions to be taken and core competences that are vital for strategy making, design and implementation and also for intercultural interactions. In addition, an insight is also given into transitional and developing countries.

Key course topics are as follows:

• Presenting typical influencing factors of international and multinational firms (enterprises). It includes the following discussion topics: globalization, FDI (Foreign Direct Investment), regionalization, similarities and differences in national cultures and communication.

• Reviewing typical managerial areas/functions of international/multinational firms/enterprises. They include international strategy, marketing, organization& management, production and logistics, finance-taxation, HR, knowledge management

• Outlining important roles of professional services (management consulting, headhunting and selection, training & development, audit firms, outsourcing etc.)

• Introducing specific characteristics of internationalization of Hungarian, Slovakian and other CEE big and SME companies.

The students in both Hungary and Slovakia can opt for one of the two project tasks:

Case Study Analysis (in mother tongue – in Hungarian or in Slovakian)

At present they can select one of the 48 cases whose list is attached to the syllabus. The length of the written assignment is maximum 20 pages (normal page size, Times New Roman 12) and 9+1(cover pp) about the case. A case can be opted for and presented by maximum 1-2 people. The following points must be met while dealing with the case study:

• Description of the case (evolvement, development).

• Presenting the cultural, political, economic and management culture features of the home countries of the cooperating companies.

• The similarities and differences of the management cultures of the participants (companies) of the case study.

• The issues of market entry, investment and operation.

• Highlighting and introducing some specific conflicts.

• A great emphasis placed on the effects of recovery from the ongoing economic and financial crisis.

• Analyzing the corporate (story) web-site based according to the points (criteria).

Table 1. Example of a Project Task

Title of Short Case Description: VW (Volkswagen) makes Skoda a Czech success
'Along with very sorry Trabants, Ladas and other relics from the Soviet era, it's enough to make most of us look at cars anew -- and relish the state-of-the-art double cupholders and seats that heat themselves. But in the Czech Republic, Skoda is looked at very differently. The company, even though it fell on some very miserable times during the eastern bloc days, is still viewed with something approaching wonderment.' (CNN – Richard Quest)

Source: Quest, R (2004). VW makes Skoda a Czech success http://edition.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/europe/04/27/european.quest.skoda/index.html.

Case Study Analysis (in the mother tongue-in Hungarian or Slovakian)
Assignments will be carried out individually**.** Each person will be assigned to be the discussion leader for a review of a selected reading from a CEE research monograph to put all their effort into the oral presentation.

Case Study Analysis in English
The student can take part in X-culture international case solving program on a voluntary basis. Who takes this chance, takes part in international teams of 5-7 members in the program coordinated by Greensboro University in the U.S. (Note: Participants are rewarded with 10 extra points.)

International Human Resource Management

International Human Resource Management (IHRM) takes a closer look analyzing how multinational companies can manage in today's turbulent environment, the effects of globalization and internationalization and also HR issues such as staffing, wages and salaries, remuneration, competences, performance appraisal, training efficiency and industrial relations.

The subject also familiarizes students with any other important concepts of IHRM while implementing a business plan in an international scenario with a focus on case studies, hands-on problem solving and discussion.

This course is developed around three major topic areas:

1) Introducing the similarities and differences of influencing factors of International Human Resource Management in different parts of the world (Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Southern-Eastern Europe, Russia, Asia and Middle East).

2) Managing different Human Resource functions (HR planning, recruitment and selection, performance management, training& development, pay &compensation, industrial relations, etc.) at local subsidiaries of multinational firms from developed (U.S., Western Europe) and emerging (China, India, Russia) world.

3) Learning about the implementation of different tools (strategic IHRM, performance evaluation, people development, competency modeling etc.) of International Human Resource Management in transitional environment.

2 Student and Teacher Implications
2.1 Participation

In the case of both courses (International Management and International Human Resource Management) participation in X-culture program is voluntary. On the average, 5-10 % of students (5-10 persons) take this chance.

One of the consequences of globalization is that the various forms of contact with our business partners are becoming independent of place. Changes

take place extremely fast and to teach how to adapt to them successfully at school tends to be very difficult. Adaptation to the new dimensions of business life can be eased if the students of economics and management can take part in international cooperation. It is when the students of our universities **have taken part in this program coordinated by** Greensboro University in the USA. In addition to the existing Erasmus student exchange program, X-Culture serves as a very modern cooperative form of studying for all the students who would like to improve their business knowledge, social skills as well as their English knowledge. The table below illustrates the changes in the number of students participating in the project between 2011 and 2017.

Table 2. Students' participation dynamics in X-Culture (2011-2017)

Academic years and se-mesters	students of "University One"	students of "University Two"
2010-2	0	0
2011-1	0	0
2011-2	11	0
2012-1	22	0
2012-2	3	18
2013-1	9	13
2013-2	4	4
2014-1	4	0
2014-2	3	0
2015-1	3	0
2015-2	3	0
2016-1	4	0
2016-2	2	5
2017-1	7	12
2017-2	2	13
2018-1	1	8
Total	78	66

Source: Authors' own research.

2.2 Support

Professional and technical assistance is provided by X-Culture instructors or PhD students who previously took part in the program.

2.3 Grades

• Grades of class participants will be based on three performance criteria: assignment, participation, and final exam. Each of these criteria is explained in greater detail below.

• **Assignments (40%):** Assignments will be carried out individually**.** Each individual will be assigned to be the discussion leader for a review of a selected reading put all their effort into the oral presentation. X-culture participants have to make their oral presentation in English. X-culture participants are entitled for their successful report submission and final presentation extra 10% of performance reward.

• **Class Participation (20%):** This is a 3rd level seminar, so attendance is at your discretion, but you are expected to read the assigned materials prior to class and be prepared to make thoughtful contributions during discussion – and teachers will take notice of the individual participation. Attendance will be taken during each class meeting. Students will lose points for each absence.

Final Exam (40%): The purpose of the questions has been to cover both the theoretical backgrounds and the focal areas of this course and giving a freedom to the students to choose. The final exam is based upon essay questions.

With the advent of *modern ICT (information and communication) technologies* students can enter the global scenario and get acquainted with the *working and studying culture* of other university students. They can also face the challenges of different time zones when cooperating with the others by means of new info-communication instruments (e.g. email, Skype, Google Docs, Dropbox, Google+ and Facebook Groups).

The following part summarizes some aspects of communication and interculturalism together with building virtual teams in the digital era as all these phenomena can be noticed in the X-Culture project, as well.

3 The importance of communication
3.1 Introduction

In our globalized world with the advent of state-of-the-art technology we can no longer expect to live without communicating with other people a long way away from our communities.

In our global village IT devices are used to support homogenization (Chaney, 2005). However, Dahl (2004) and De Mooij (2003) found out that in marketing and advertising this is not the case.

One thing is certain: we must all communicate in our homes, in our workplaces, in the groups we belong to, which can sometimes pose some challenges.

„Culture" is sometimes regarded to cause some misunderstandings. „Culture" stands for a special group of people or part of community whom we share our experiences, or they influence our attitude to or understanding of the world. Avruch and Black (1993) noted if people are confronted with interactions they are not familiar with, these interactions are labelled as "abnormal", "weird", or "wrong."

In short, communication, similarly to patterns of human behavior, is governed unconsciously by deep cultural values, and preferences for particular value sets. In today's multicultural work environment, we have to develop communication as a conscious skill.

The ability of communicating with people from different cultures will certainly mean a great benefit in the future. Moreover, through channels of communication we can break down stereotypes, foster respect and acceptance, and build strong relationships.

X-Culture is such an international project that has the ability to do so.

X-Culture is not only a great example for international student collaboration but also for communication.

The concept of X-Culture stems from experiential learning and the project is embedded in an international business scenario. It also serves an instrument to develop and improve cross-cultural competencies via communication, among others. In addition, cross-cultural interaction also results in the development of cultural intelligence (Earley and Peterson, 2004).

X-Culture shows a great resemblance with other platforms such as Global Marketing Management System Online – GMMSO (Janavaras, 2012) and GEO (Thavikulwat, 2007a, 2007b). The task of GMMSO shows some degree of similarity while GEO primarily focuses on international trade.

X-Culture makes use of publicly available IT resources (e.g. the aforementioned Skype, Dropbox, Google Drive, Google Docs, Facebook, Skype, Viber, and WhatsApp among others) for communication, while other platforms rely on specially designed platforms or simulators.

X-Culture is an excellent opportunity for experiencing communication in the form of international cooperation and collaboration (Gonzales-Perez et al, 2014) as students are divided into Global Virtual Teams (usually about 7 students per team).

In addition to virtual collaboration, X-Culture also serves as a forum for personal meetings of the best students at semi-annual X-Culture symposiums. The ultimate goal is to give students and opportunity to experience the challenges and learn the best practices of international collaboration while gaining business knowledge and communication skills.

But how can they communicate effectively and develop their communication skills? The following part provides the students with some basic knowledge and tips on effective communication.

3.2 Challenges and benefits

Effective communication is of vital importance in developing relationships with people. However, we must instantly note that in return, communication calls for constant attention, energy, and skills.

The way cultures communicate can vary widely. One aspect of communication is sharing a common language. The choice of trade language is normally a matter of convenience, reflecting the competencies of the parties involved (Lewis, 2005). There are some basic differences even in the different use of words, voice pitch, intonation, dialect and nonverbal communication (body language); the directness with which we speak, how much emotion we express in various situations, the rules for turn-taking, the use or avoidance of silence, for instance.

Misunderstandings and offenses can also be commonplace. We may be afraid of having a negative experience with people. We are afraid of being judged or miscommunicating that can cause unintentional damage to others. On the positive sides of communication, a note must be made on learning new things, making friends, and understanding differences. The concept of "time" also differs in cultures. Punctuality is an important issue in Edward T. Hall (1959)'s monochronic cultures, where people are normally engaged in only one activity at a time while in polychronic cultures several tasks are dealt simultaneously. Punctuality is a generally accepted standard in some relationship-based countries such as China and Japan (Hooker, 2003, 2008).

The networks of personal influence and red-tape or bureaucracy play a great role in Hofstede's "uncertainty-avoiding cultures" (2001, 2004) where life is seen with uncertainty and predictability as well as low-risk is appreciated.

The importance of relationships and individual roles in decision-making is also various. Communication styles vary around the world, which results in a variety of communication and business styles. Hall's distinction of low-context and high-context cultures (Hall, 1976) explains how negotiation proceeds, how agreements are specified, and also how workers are managed.

Awareness of the differences and similarities can also count a lot in the effectiveness of communication as well as understanding and respecting each other.

Different cultures and ways of communication give us the opportunity to discover new ways of problem solving or just accept the difficulties and differences as "just the way things are."

The biggest challenges of intercultural communication include being able to find common interests without being to intimate and breaking into the personal sphere of the others, overcoming language barriers by even knowing slang, idioms, jargons, and a sense of humor. Being tolerant and understanding etiquette are also fundamental values.

3.3 Some tips to effective communication

1) Learn from generalizations about other cultures, but do not use them to stereotype.

2) Practice to perform better at cross-cultural communication.

3) Do not assume that there is one right way (yours!) to communicate.

4) Do not assume that breakdowns in communication occur because other people are on the wrong track.

5) Listen actively and empathetically.

6) Respect others' choices and opinions.

7) Be prepared for a discussion and open to learning more.

8) Remember that cultural norms may not apply to the behavior of any particular individual. We are all shaped by many, many factors such as our ethnic background, our family, our education, our personalities, and are more complicated than any cultural norm would suggest.

Lastly, if we are open to learning about people from other cultures, we become less lonely. Prejudice and stereotypes separate us from whole groups of people. Many of us long for real contact. Talking with people different from ourselves gives us hope and energizes us to take on the challenge of improving our communities and worlds. Openness, caring, and mutual respect for the dignity of individuals

4 Pay-offs for Students
4.1 Student Feedback on the Program

Our students summarized their experience in connection with the program in table below.

Table 3. X-Culture experience of Slovakian and Hungarian students

Number	Students' opinion
1.	A correspondent student: It was most interesting to work together with my team members who came from different parts of the world. At first, I did not even know on the basis of the names, except Brianna, whether it is a boy or a girl :) As far as team work is concerned, I can say that everyone had an equal share of it, except Cheng Yang, who did not take part at all. It was not obvious at all that our team was made of totally different cultures. Everyone kept promises and we helped one another. We also talked about private issues in addition to work and we are still friends on several social media platforms. We promised to advise the others should we travel to their country. Despite of the initial fear, primarily due to language barriers, I can say that I can assess the program only positively and thank you for the opportunity to have gained such precious experience.
2.	A full-time student: During my participation in X-Culture program I gained a lot of experience. There were many challenges and we had to find the solutions. We also had to face cultural differences, language barriers and different time zones, as well. We were trying to find the best solutions to the problems with my team mates. To this end, we were negotiating regularly, almost on a daily basis. Due to this, not only our English improved but also our communication skills and our cooperation with people from different cultures. All in all, I can say that my participation in the program was very advantageous.
3.	A full-time student: X-Culture program made it possible for me to participate in an international program with students from different parts of the world. So, the program significantly contributed to getting to know different cultures, customs and traditions to extend my knowledge. In addition, I also gained experience in international management as we had to work out a successful business plan for a company. Of course, there were hardships but fortunately, they could be managed It was difficult to make appointments as in certain cases there were 10 hours' difference in time. To cooperate more efficiently, we tried to keep in touch and talk every day. I think X-Culture served as an excellent opportunity for making friends, so I can recommend it to all young students who wish to gain experience.

Source: authors' own research.

4.2 Key Results of the Program

The following points summarize the main benefits of the program.

• *Students***:** The most recent research on international collaborations suggests that the student who took part in X-Culture International Student Collaboration Program could have high hopes in their professional and personal advancements and can also improve their chances of finding a job and networking (**Last et al., 2000**; **Last et al., 2002**; **Teichler & Jahr, 2001**), as they add value to succeed in career development and enhancing their performance. Although there were some reports on skipping some occasions to participate (free riding) and miscommunication most students could identify with the program as reflected by their follow-up evaluations. While getting acquainted with the cultures of their group mates, students could allegedly make friends and some MBA students also had the opportunity to collaborate in business. Even at this initial stage a great number of X-Culture International Student Collaboration Program participants have enhanced their professional and personal success and made themselves more attractive on the labor market as well as extended their social/professional network.

• *Instructors*: As teachers of business management, the instructors have found the program extremely useful to make their students acquainted with this hard but enjoyable work that goes beyond great distances and cultures and make them write a business plan simultaneously. However, the added value for educational purposes to students only marks the beginning of potential benefits. While participating in X-Culture program the instructors enter into a greater community of academic professionals with similar objectives and interests. Ideas are openly shared on how the program could be improved, how the interest of teachers in literature used in higher education, business management, marketing or other disciplines could be raised; new principles can be born and there might be a possible rise in the number of publications, as well.

The X-Culture International Student Collaboration Program is very useful for both students and instructors. Chances for students taking part in the project are that they enhance their professional and personal prospects can also improve the chances of working together with other students and networking (Last et al., 2000; Last et al., 2002; Teichler & Jahr, 2001) while they also add value to their career management and performance. Due to X-Culture project the instructors have a teaching aid in the classroom and also due to networking possibilities they are in contact with others, which can result in an increasing number of publications.

5 Team-building within virtual environment
5.1 Introduction – the traditional approach

Prior to the digital age team work was evidently realized in the material world. Together with or under the control of the team leader the team members prepared the project plans, marked the most important milestones, appointed the people in charge, allocated resources to single activities, decided on their order of implementation and also discussed which activities can run in parallel and then set on implementing the project plan (Görög, 2001; Kerzner, 2017).

The practice of corporate project management has appeared/appears in (higher) education (Hegedűs, 2002, 2007; Ginevri & Trilling, 2017). The main point of project pedagogy is that great part of knowledge to be acquired does not directly derive from the teacher, rather, while working out the project plan similarly to learning by doing method. This takes the following form: the instructor holds lectures in the first couple of weeks (2–3 occasions) of the 14-15-week-long semester for undergraduate students, outlines the theory, highlights relevant literature and then divides the students into small groups who have to work on a task and at the end, on 1–2 occasions they present their findings. The most frequent problems with forming student groups and team work include:

• Students did not understand the task properly and that is why they did not complete the task, or it is below the standard;

• Students did not select a leader (or the instructor failed to appoint one) so sub-tasks (project activities) are not properly distributed;

• The project task was not evaluated/interpreted carefully so they miss milestones. people in charge and deadlines;

• The team did not complete the task by deadline;

• Internal tensions were not properly treated by team members or the team leader, which hindered the job or could even result in the team's falling apart;

• The project task required data from a company that was unwilling to disclose them.

As can be seen, in spite of the fact that project-based thinking with proper organizational skills and leadership experience could be a very resourceful and efficient method, it can only yield results in (higher) if enough care was taken and the classical role of the teacher is supplemented as usually the selected/appointed team leader does not possess the necessary leadership/ management experience. Mikonya (2003), Radnóti (2008) and Wurdinger (2016) drafted the following expectations for teachers who apply project pedagogy.

• Teachers and students act in accord in the process of teaching-learn-ing, so teachers take part in the process even after assigning the project tasks. They follow the process of solving the project tasks with advice and recommendations as a mentor.

• An important aspect is exploring the previous knowledge of the students and it is inevitable when tackling new issues. This objective is fulfilled by the several theoretical sessions held at the beginning.

• Presenting the findings and the finished product is also a must as for most (undergraduate) students this project task has been the first more serious professional challenge into which more than average energy, time etc. was invested. It is quite understandable that they would like to present it to the others so the last few occasions are devoted for this purpose in project pedagogy.

• Participants continuously collect additional material and modify the internal processes of the project if necessary. It is the instructor's task to assist them. As a mentor or coach (or by just using the methods of coaching) instructors are not supposed to tell the right solution, rather, they make the team find it.

5.2 Digital Era
5.2.1 New Challenges

As in the last ten-twenty years companies have supported more and more of their work processes by means of digital technology, idea, notions and recommendations on digital pedagogy have also appeared in education (Sadowski-Rasters, Duysters & Sadowski, 2007). Digital board, digital learning materials, the possibility of keeping electronic contacts between teacher-student and computer assisted distance education (e-learning) have become part of the everyday routine at almost all higher education institutions. The internationalization of education has resulted in a multicultural environment of students where the teacher has to take part in assimilating students of different cultural backgrounds in addition to imparting professional knowledge even if the distant education student hardly ever or does not at all turn up at classes. The success of the distant team work depends on how the project pedagogist manages to harmonize the team. Hunya (2009) names the following competences by referring to Oracle Education Foundation.

Table 4. Success competencies in a digital environment

Critical thinking	Examining problems and situations from different points of view; preparing a plan for intervention; evaluating the results of intervention
Creativity	Creating new ideas and thoughts
Team work	Cooperation with others toward a common objective

Understanding other cultures	Realizing the situations when cultural differences might lead to misunderstanding; proper reaction
Communication	Exchanging information and ideas
Technology	Using several technical equipment to produce, store, analyze and forward information
Self-management	Initiative, proactive employee behavior

Source: Hunya, 2009, pp. 75–96.

In the case of the e-learning team methods in higher education the instructor decides which competencies to improve before the project starts. In a multicultural student environment, it is practical to improve work efficiency by communication (1) and successful completion by team working competencies (2).

There are new competency requirements of the digital age – or, as termed by Hess and Ludwig (2017, 33) Smart Machine Age (SMA) – such as „Quitting Ego, Managing Self or Reflective Listening and Otherness (emotionally connecting and relating to others)."

5.2.2 Communication

There are several opportunities to connect students who are physically a long way away (Strawser ed., 2017). It is practical for the project pedagogist to indicate or create the compulsory platforms through which students can keep in touch. It is important as the teacher's role is extended (mentor, coach) and has to participate in the discourse that takes place on these platforms and interfere in the course/subject of communication if necessary. If the topic/company of the task and the information on them are not confidential (students only use OSINT source) the proper services of Google and Facebook can be offered.

• **Closed group**: It can be created at *groups.google.com* among others. It is practical if the teacher creates it and invites the students on the basis of their email addresses. In an international, multicultural environment it is practical

to select English as the language of the group and it holds true for the other applications. When creating the group, it is practical to set as one of the basic permissions that only users with a valid invitation can join. In addition to Google group services *Facebook* also offers an opportunity for creating groups where accession is also regulated (closed but rather a covert group).

• **Consultation with the teacher and team members:** the most traditional online form of consulting with the teacher is e-mail. Teachers are advised to discuss with the students what the subject of the e-mail should be as most corresponding systems are able to divide the incoming mail into folders by their subject, so it becomes much clearer from which member the message was received. In addition to e-mails, *Facebook Messenger* and *Google Gmail* can also be an efficient method of communicating with the teacher or group members. The aforementioned services can be found both landline and mobile environments similarly to *Skype* or *Viber.* By means of these applications not only texts are transferred but also sounds and individual or team-based video calls and conferences can be organized.

5.2.3 Teamwork

Searle & Swartz (2015) organize the work into four key steps:

1) "establishing guidelines and protocols, including drafting agendas and timelines;

2) managing and resolving conflicts, including giving honest feedback and building team morale;

3) refining decision-making skills, including creating win-win situations and improving flexibility and efficiency;

4) building team capacity, including evaluating and sustaining teamwork."

• **Calendar and project**: The team members can construct their own calendars at *calendar.google.com* and they can also share the events listed there with one another. In addition to sharing events group calls can also be scheduled by inviting one another for the event and reply about accepting/

refusing it. Scheduling of the project task can be carried out on ***doodle. com***. An online easy to-reach project management application is also an important part of team work. Duffy (2017) has a short, comparative study on it. There are several platforms for online project management and online cooperation like ***Asana***. When browsing among online applications, it is practical to choose one where the scheduled tasks and people in charge in the Gantt diagram can be synchronized with Google calendar.

• ***Storage and editing***: During the project work students create several documents online (usually texts, tables). If the objective is only storage, then ***Box***, ***Dropbox*** offers free solutions among others. However, if the task is real tie group editing of documents, it is more practical to choose a service from drive.google.com. Google Drive can also offer the following services in addition to storing files:

- creating and editing documents,
- creating and editing tables,
- creating and editing slides,
- creating and editing spreadsheets.

When creating documents, tables and slides the teacher can set and manage access rights (editing, only notes, view). The content modifications of the online edited documents can be traced down or the teacher as a mentor can make comments on team work.

Business projects usually contain primary research. Team members can relatively easily create online questionnaires by means of Google and the link can be shared e.g. with the relevant Facebook groups. Answers to the online questionnaire can be monitored real time and first releases are also available.

Discussion and conclusions

The efficient project work of students physically a long way away from one another can be assisted by several applications free of charge or for a fee. How these resources can optimally be combined for the team to reach the

best results depends on the digital competences and software or application knowledge of the teacher. Due to the abundance of applications the teacher must decide which communication and cooperation platforms are worth using or have to be used. The redundant share of information, the processes running in parallel and student initiatives as well as the use of the most recent applications can lead to a chaos. The project pedagogist should check the communication platforms and make it clear for students, which applications are recommended for certain communication activities and must consequently be used in addition to professionally completing the project task which was planned online.

As our students have been participating in the International Student Collaboration Project since 2011, they are asked to share their experience with us, what they think the challenges are and also what knowledge and skills they gained while working with other team members from different parts of the world.

To sum up, the following points were made:

- Most participants considered the program to be *very useful*.
- The following points were stressed in connection with acquiring tacit knowledge competencies:

   1) The program assisted in developing *these competencies* most.

   2) They made the greatest progress in *understanding and communicating* with others from different cultures.

   3) They also improved their skills in organizing and managing *non- hierarchical team work.*

   4) The students also appreciated working and collaborating with the others *from different working cultures*. In some cases, they had to cover or replace their slower teammates or the dropouts but generally, they could succeed in doing so, as well.

   5) Of the labor market competencies projected by the *Institute for the future* in their study „Future work skills 2020" X-Culture improved some, among others, *virtual work.* (http://www.iftf.org/ uploads/media/SR1382A_ UPRI_future_work _skills_sm.pdf)

- As far as *explicit* knowledge competencies are concerned, the participants highlighted the following ones:

1) Using new *social media platforms*, mostly e-mails, Facebook and Google Doc.

2) Deadlines were met in most cases and project tasks could be completed.

Within the framework of a program of such nature, it is natural to experience not only positive things but also some hardships such as different cultural background or the significant differences in time due to the time zones. Our hypothesis and research question according to which X-Culture does actually assist in improving the general business skills, social awareness and communication skills of the participants was finally proved.

X-Culture is still very much work in progress. Every semester changes are made, and the format of the project is modified together with the task, policies and procedures.

Our immediate plans include experimenting with a few new features of the project.

First, we are considering running X-Culture in languages other than English. There is a regular request to have a Spanish language track for Latin America and Spain, and possibly a French track for French-speaking countries.

Second, we are considering adding a non-business track. At this time, pretty much all X-Culture participants are business students and, hence, the task is very much business related. However, international collaboration is equally important in arts, engineering, natural sciences, and humanities. We are exploring opportunities to add a group of students from non-business disciplines with a task that is more suitable for their areas of studies.

Third, we would like to expand our collaboration with real-life businesses. Our initial experience with our corporate partners has been extremely positive. Not only do the companies receive valuable input and ideas from our bright students. Involvement of real business and work on real-life business challenges makes the project more practical and educational for the students. Furthermore, working with a real company, students

get a chance to impress their "clients" and possibly get a chance of an internship or a job.

Fourth, we would like to devote more attention to exploring funding opportunities. At some level, volunteer time is not sufficient to run a successful project. Even Wikipedia has a small group of paid staff. In addition to exploring grant options, we are also considering soliciting sponsor funding.

Finally, in our spirit of open collaboration, we are experimenting with opening up our immense database to the public and inviting researchers of all background and interests to download our data and use them in their research. While it is common in the publish-or-parish academic community to closely guard one's own data, we believe open data sharing and collaboration will speed up knowledge creation and ultimately benefit all parties.

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