

UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF ONLINE LEARNING IN THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Drawing on the experiences of teachers and coordinators
to identify good practices for online learning

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT4
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS5
FOREWORD6
1. INTRODUCTION7
2. RESEARCH TASK8
3. ONLINE LEARNING AS A TOOL FOR INTERNATIONALISING HIGHER EDUCATION . . . . .	.9
4. GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF ONLINE LEARNING . . . . .	.11
5. FINDINGS . . . . .	.13
5.1. Benefits . . . . .	.13
5.1.1. University level . . . . .	.13
5.1.2. Staff level . . . . .	.14
5.1.3. Student level . . . . .	.14
5.2. Recommendations . . . . .	.15
5.2.1. International Collaboration . . . . .	.16
5.2.2. Preparation and development . . . . .	.17
5.2.3. Design . . . . .	.18
5.2.4. Pedagogy . . . . .	.19
5.2.5. Teachers . . . . .	.21
5.2.6. Learning Materials . . . . .	.22
5.2.7. Flexibility, creativity and communication . . . . .	.23
5.2.8. Technical issues . . . . .	.24
6. DISCUSSION . . . . .	.25
6.1. Internationalisation at home . . . . .	.25
6.2. Professional development among university staff . . . . .	.25
6.3. The need for a mindful design . . . . .	.26
7. METHODOLOGY . . . . .	.28
REFERENCES . . . . .	.30
APPENDIX . . . . .	.31

ABSTRACT

In our increasingly globalised and interconnected world, universities have been tasked to integrate international dimensions into their teaching. While physical mobility programs such as Erasmus have succeeded in creating valuable opportunities for intercultural exchange, only a small percentage of students take advantage of these opportunities for intercultural learning due to factors such as tight schedules or a lack of interest. In this report, we discuss the potential of utilising international collaborations to organise online learning programs that enable more students to participate in intercultural exchanges. The report presents findings drawn from an analysis of data collected through phenomenographic interviews with seven practitioners selected from successful Nordplus cross-border online learning programs and an online student survey sent out to students participating in those online programs.

All participants found online learning beneficial at the 1) university level, 2) staff level and 3) student level. The participants especially highlighted working as part of an international collaboration which benefited their own personal development and helped reduce their workload in the long run. All participants found online learning to be very beneficial in general, but they emphasised the need for a mindful design that considers both the challenges and potential of online learning. Therefore, we share the participants' suggestions and recommendations on unlocking the advantages of online learning and propose questions to guide both its development and evaluation. The main guiding themes are: 1) international collaboration, 2) preparation and development, 3) design, 4) pedagogy, 5) teachers, 6) learning materials and 7) technical issues. A common topic across the themes was the need to activate the students and create opportunities for cross-cultural interactions by, for example, using a flipped classroom design.

We conclude the report by emphasising the potential of online learning in the internationalisation of higher education. Nevertheless, we also caution against seeing online learning as a quick solution, stressing the need for a mindful and careful design to be a successful tool for supporting internationalisation.

Keywords: internationalisation of higher education, internationalisation at home, online learning, virtual exchange, intercultural learning, university staff development

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FOREWORD

The digitalisation of higher education has been underway for decades and increasingly affects international education and collaboration. Many funding schemes supporting internationalisation have funded and are funding projects within digitalisation, digital campuses, online learning and virtual/blended mobilities for individuals.

In 2019–2020 the Nordplus Higher Education Programme, funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Baltic countries, had a special highlight on the theme 'Digital competence and computational thinking'. It resulted in an increased number of projects on digitalisation and online learning. As the primary administrator for this programme, The Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) commissioned a research team at the University of Oulu to conduct a study on this phenomenon based on the proposals and final reports of these funded projects.

The aim of the study was to canvass opinions and map experiences and good practical examples of digital/virtual implementations in online cross-border education from the perspective of the institutions, staff and students.

The change in the internationalisation of higher education is perhaps more present than before. EDUFI appreciates the possibility of perceiving and understanding the changes together and cooperating with higher education institutions. We want to thank Professor Elina Lehtomäki and her colleagues at the University of Oulu for their willingness to take up this task and doctoral student Andreas Rogler for conducting this study professionally and cooperatively.

1. INTRODUCTION

In our increasingly globalised world, Internationalisation is becoming increasingly important for higher educational institutions and has become an essential aspect of higher education policies, strategies, teaching and research. The idea is that integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the formal and informal practices of higher education is crucial as it can help prepare students and staff alike to navigate the complexities of our interconnected world, work in multicultural teams and face global challenges (such as climate change) in a cooperative and collaborative manner.

Traditionally, one of the main ways universities have tried to create intercultural learning experiences is via international mobility programs such as Erasmus. However, due to a variety of reasons, such as students' tight academic schedules, their financial situations (Verzella, 2018), a lack of available exchange programs or a lack of interest (e.g. Connolly et al., 2021), only a small percentage of students can join study abroad programs (Helm, 2015). As a result, in Europe, student mobility rates are at an average of 8% of graduates, and mobility programmes for teaching staff are even less frequent (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). Additionally, even if students join mobility programs, they can sometimes find themselves isolated on campus with little interaction with local students.

Online learning can address these issues by offering an alternative that does not require physical mobility. The use of digital technologies, such as Skype or Zoom, enables teachers to create spaces for sustained interaction and exchanges among learners from different geographical locations and different cultural contexts (O'Dowd & Dooly, 2020; Jager et al., 2019). Thereby, online learning can be a more equitable and accessible way to internationalise higher education, as it does not require students to get a visa or invest time and resources in travelling abroad. It also does not restrict or disrupt their timetables, and personal lives like physical mobility does.

Even if the students are separated by a screen when interacting online, the exchanges between students with different backgrounds can still be very beneficial. Previous research has shown that virtual exchanges can aid in the development of students' linguistic accuracy (Belz & Kinginger, 2002), positively affect their openness to different cultures (Schenker, 2013) and increase intercultural communication skills (Guth et al., 2012; Renner, 2019) and their intercultural competencies (Bassani & Buchem, 2019). Furthermore, by becoming part of a diverse classroom, exchange programs can support students to become more active, socially responsible global citizens (Lenkaitis & Loranc-Paszylk, 2019) who critically reflect on the complexity of our interconnected world.

It is important to notice that even if students participate in virtual exchange programs, the benefits are not guaranteed, as it can be challenging to engage students on a deeper level (Helm, 2015). Just like with physical exchanges, sharing a virtual classroom with international students alone does not ensure intercultural learning experiences for reasons such as a lack of opportunities for interaction, superficial interactions, or language and communication problems. Furthermore, online learning can be challenging due to factors such as limited access to technologies, teachers' lack of digital competencies or time zone differences (O'Dowd, 2018). Hence, implementing online learning programs requires organisers to select a suitable approach and mindfully design the program around the online learning environment.

2. RESEARCH TASK

Given the potential of online learning to support the internationalisation of higher education by creating more accessible opportunities for staff and students to participate in joint virtual events, we believe it essential to investigate and discuss how universities can benefit from online teaching. Nonetheless, since learning online comes with its own challenges, we also discuss what good practices in online learning can look like in the context of higher education. In this study, we will therefore investigate the following research questions:

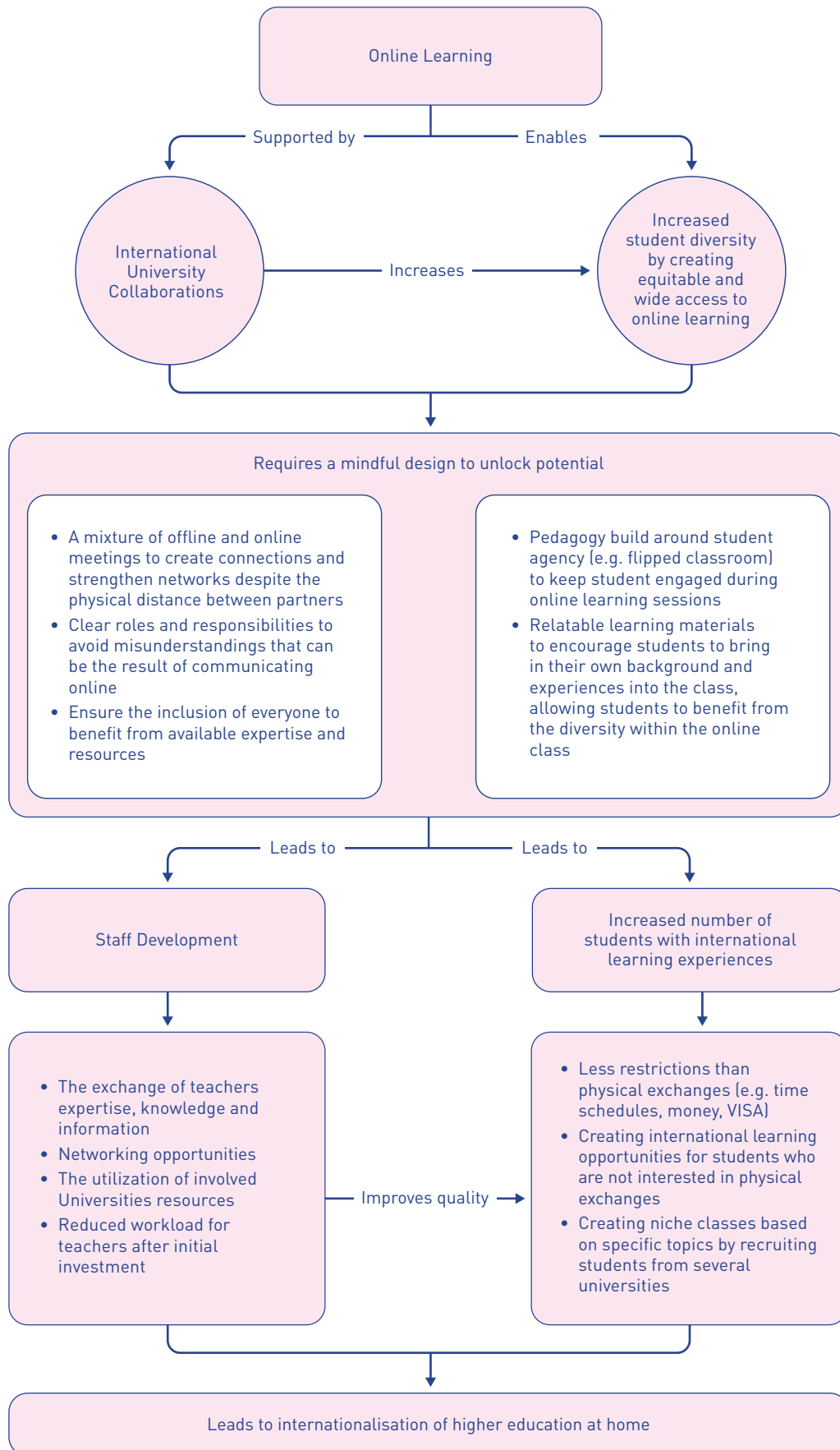
1. How can online learning contribute to the internationalisation of higher education?
2. What are good practices in online learning that help contribute to the internationalisation of higher education?

3. ONLINE LEARNING AS A TOOL FOR INTERNATIONALISING HIGHER EDUCATION

In order to support the development and design of online learning as a tool to internationalise higher education, we conducted interviews with coordinators and teachers of selected multicultural online learning projects (see methodology). In this report, we will discuss how our participants used online learning to create diverse classrooms for intercultural learning and how they personally benefited from that experience. As a result, we will show that online learning, specifically when supported by international university collaboration, can be a great tool in internationalising higher education for staff and students as it can make international learning more widely accessible and thus increase student diversity in online courses. However, we will show that both international university collaboration and the online teaching of diverse classrooms come with their own set of challenges that require practitioners to design and implement their online learning course mindfully. In this report, we will share advice and recommendations on the design of online learning and discuss how a well implemented online course can a) lead to staff development and b) enable more students to make international learning experiences (see Graph 1). When compared to physical exchanges, utilising online learning for internationalising higher education has the added value of the possibility of recruiting a higher number of students for three main reasons:

- Online learning has fewer restrictions, such as cost and time, making it a more equitable and accessible way of internationalising higher education.
- Online courses can reach students who find the course topic interesting but are not interested in physical mobility or intercultural learning
- By recruiting students from different universities, online learning allows universities to offer online courses on topics they could have otherwise not offered due to a lack of demand.

GRAPH 1: THE ROLE OF ONLINE LEARNING IN INTERNATIONALISING HIGHER EDUCATION



4. GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF ONLINE LEARNING

The participants identified the benefits of online learning for universities, staff and students. While they clearly recognised the potential of online learning, the participants also stressed the need for a careful and mindful design (see Graph 1) to unlock those benefits. Drawing from the results, we have identified seven main themes and suggest questions on each theme to guide online learning planning and evaluation.

We expect that the questions can be a helpful starting point that encourages us to think about online learning as its own unique way of teaching with its own benefits, potential and good practices. Furthermore, we share the participants' advice and experiences to provide online learning practitioners with a series of questions and practical recommendations that can help them reflect on their practices and further develop them. We hope that sharing their experiences can help unlock the potential of online learning to promote the internationalisation of higher education by creating more intercultural learning experiences and dialogue in higher education.

1. International Collaboration

- What is the common vision and goal of your international collaboration?
- Are the roles and responsibilities clearly distributed?
- How is information being shared in your network?
- How often are you having meetings, and how are they being organised?

2. Preparation and Development

- Did the project team conduct a needs analysis and discuss the project's feasibility?
- What kind of resources are already available?
- How will students be recruited?
- What are the course benefits for students joining the online course?
- Is the timetable of the class suitable for online learning?

3. Design

- Why is the class designed as an online course or to include online teaching?
- What are the expected benefits of using online teaching for the course?
- How and when does the course collect feedback?
- How is the feedback used?

4. Pedagogy

- How does the online course facilitate active interaction and discussions among students?
- How does the course create a safe learning environment and a sense of community for students?
- Does the course encourage students to share their experiences and backgrounds with the class?
- Can the online course integrate students' various backgrounds?
- Does the course vary in its pedagogical methods and offer clear discussion instructions?

5. Teachers

- Does the course include co-teaching?
- What kind of support do the teachers receive? Are there possibilities for in-service training?
- How is online learning framed and discussed among teachers?
- How can online learning be framed more positively?
- What are your own assumptions and expectations about online learning?

6. Learning materials

- Does the project use different kinds of learning materials?
- Are the learning materials created or tailored towards online learning, and how are they guiding the students learning?
- Can the learning materials be used for discussions and reflections during the class?
- How high is the student's workload?
- Where and when are the learning materials being shared, and are they accessible to all students?

7. Flexibility, creativity and communication

- Does your class encourage students' creativity? How so?
- How are you communicating with the students during the class?
- How are you encouraging the students' active listening during the class?
- How are you using the chat function during your class?
- Could the class utilise student peer reviewing?

5. FINDINGS

The questions and themes are derived from the interviews with our participants. They arose from their experiences with online learning and have been used as guidelines for developing their international online courses. In this chapter, we will first discuss the benefits for universities, staff and students in those carefully designed online courses and then further elaborate on the suggestions and recommendations for achieving those benefits using online learning.

5.1. Benefits

The benefits of online learning were one of the main themes in the interviews. Talking with teachers, administrators and coordinators allowed us to gain a holistic understanding of the advantages and possibilities of online learning. This approach enabled us to examine the potential of using online learning on three levels: universities, staff and students.

5.1.1. University level

'[University] Networks offer exchange possibilities, which bring people together. We need these individual contacts between people since we get to know each other through those connections, share knowledge and find areas where we can work together and further develop our education' (Participant 6).

All participants commented on the benefits of utilising university cooperation networks for organising online learning courses to internationalise higher education. By creating joint programs, universities were able to contribute to developing a sense of community between the staff involved in organising the online courses and participating students. These communities can be great places for the natural exchange of beneficial information such as available resources, peer feedback or the promotion of upcoming academic events at participating universities. One participant, for example, shared that working with the network allowed the staff to *'get together and just share best practices and (...) make some changes in our own practices based on the experience from other universities'* (Participant 3).

Additionally, the multicultural online classes provided easily accessible international learning opportunities for students not participating in physical mobility programs such as Erasmus, making online learning a vital tool for increasing internationalisation at home. In other words, online learning allows students from several universities to participate in the same course, which has important implications for universities. They are not only able to offer a wider variety of available courses, but they can also offer more specialised and specific courses (Participant 7). Even if not enough students are interested in studying one topic at a single university, the organisers can recruit students from different universities by offering the course online. In this way, universities may collaborate rather than compete. Similarly, online learning enables universities to offer year-round study opportunities such as summer courses, making it possible for students travelling or returning to their hometowns to join classes online.

Online learning can also be a more sustainable way to internationalise higher education by reducing the emissions from travelling. Sustainability was a topic that came up in the interviews and a common theme in the universities' internationalisation strategy papers we reviewed. Additionally, participants mentioned that online learning helps improve the digital skills of students and teachers (e.g. Participant 5).

5.1.2. Staff level

'It's been quite an intercultural experience for the teachers, and they've also stated that' (Participant 3).

Participants emphasised that the staff involved in organising the joint online classes benefited greatly from their collaboration experiences with international partners. By working in an international and often transdisciplinary team, the participants had intercultural experiences and improved their intercultural competences and communication skills. Additionally, facing and overcoming various challenges when designing the course curriculum and learning materials together inspired the participants to share their expertise for the mutual benefit of the whole team.

Another common theme among the participants was that creating the online programs required a significant initial investment of resources and time. This was due to various reasons, such as the need to coordinate the project with other partners, set up the online learning platform and learning materials and design the course for online learning. However, after this required initial investment for setting up the online course was made, many participants remarked that their overall workload was reduced due to the collaboration and co-teaching with other universities. *'Teachers don't need to work alone; the workload for one teacher is low'* (Participant 4), *'it kind of starts to save some time and energy because all you have to do is update'* (Participant 5). Therefore, continuity was seen as a key to unlocking the benefits of online learning for teachers.

Some participants also noted that online teaching allowed them more flexibility in their teaching. For example, they felt they had more options to choose from in assessing the course and what kind of instructions and tools they used for their teaching. This flexibility benefited teachers and encouraged students' creativity and agency as learners.

Furthermore, participants could deepen their existing cooperations and relationships by working together on joint online learning programs. As mentioned previously, this creates important opportunities for networking, which can lead to new projects and knowledge exchanges. Some of the participants, for example, were able to extend their collaboration and write an academic paper together. Others used the online program to jointly develop more learning materials that all network members could use for their personal teachings.

5.1.3. Student level

'All of us can see that the students are extremely grateful for the opportunity they are given to do this (online course), so we share a common understanding that this is really valuable to the students and that we together kind of managed to contribute at least to strengthen the culture of internationalisation in our programme' (Participant 2).

Teaching online may make international and interdisciplinary collaboration easier as it allows the teachers to coordinate and teach their online program from different locations using digital tools such as Teams or Zoom. Participants felt that they could improve the quality of the online courses by utilising the different expertise and experiences of the international staff involved in organising the project. For instance, *'the benefit of (the online course) would have been in developing it together and getting the points of view from other universities'* (Participant 3), which can increase the overall course quality for the students and aid their learning. This finding is in accordance with the survey result in which the responding students rated the online course they visited with an average of 4.6 on a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). Although this result holds no statistical significance due to the study's limited scope and the small number of participants, it is still indicative of the overall high quality of the online courses.

By utilising the increased accessibility of online learning, participants could create online courses with a diverse student population. This diversity of students who can participate in online courses from different locations can also create valuable opportunities for intercultural learning and improve their intercultural communication skills. Given our increasingly interconnected and globalised world, the ability to work in intercultural environments and adapt to different working environments becomes increasingly critical for students (Participant 3).

One participant noted that due to their often very international nature, online courses offer good preparation for students planning to do an exchange semester abroad (Participant 3). Furthermore, the experiences that students have in these courses may also encourage some of them to join exchange programs in the future. One of the students also shared in the survey that joining the online course *'made me appreciate the possibilities of online learning in an international context'* (Student). Using online learning to promote student mobility is especially important in study programs such as teacher education, in which students typically do not go on exchange semesters.

After the online programs, all participants collected student feedback through small surveys or reflection papers. In the interviews, they shared that the online program was well received, and student satisfaction was quite high. One participant elaborated on this point further and offered one example of a student who found it: *'so great to get to know the others in the group'* (Participant 2). Despite the physical distance between the students, the participants succeeded in creating an online learning environment where students could develop a closer relationship with each other. In our student survey, we could confirm this finding with students reporting that they successfully connected and interacted with their fellow students and the teachers of the program.

5.2. Recommendations

'Following online content is more difficult for the student, so you really have to organise your teaching in another manner' (Participant 4).

All participants felt that using online learning to create international joint programs benefited staff, students and the universities. The discussions around the benefits for staff were fascinating, considering that the majority of research on online learning is focused on the

students' perspectives. However, participants also highlighted that while online learning can be very beneficial, those benefits are not guaranteed if the online course simply continues to be taught like they would on-site. This point also came up in our student survey, where we asked students to rate their overall experiences with online learning. Whereas overall feedback for the online courses organised by our participants was very positive and rated with an average of 4.6 out of 5, their overall experience with online learning was less positive, rated with an average of 3.8. One comment by a student highlights this idea saying that while they are *'hopeful for the future and possibilities (of online learning). I saw that some problems still need to be worked out, but it could be a helpful tool'*.

Teaching online is not a quick fix or solution for internationalising higher education but needs to be implemented mindfully. Therefore, we also discussed organising and utilising online learning with our participants and asked them for concrete and practical advice. In the next chapter, we present the findings in chronological order, beginning with a discussion on setting up and working within an international collaboration, continuing with the design and pedagogical approach towards online learning and finishing by advising about learning materials for online learning programs.

Drawing from the findings, we provide the reader with questions for each category that can be used in practice to help evaluate and develop online learning further. We hope this report will be useful for designers, teachers/practitioners, evaluators, academics and universities.

5.2.1. International Collaboration

'Meetings between people are significant: when people know each other, they also start working and thinking together, and then it is easier to set aims for the work together. Setting aims is important: what do we want from the new network we are creating? Having a vision is important because it determines what we should be doing together — what kind of projects' (Participant 6).

All participants organised their online programs with the support of an international university network. The international collaboration was not only described as very helpful, but the participants also offered some advice on utilising these networks to create online classes. Many of these recommendations apply to all kinds of collaboration, but we still want to highlight them because they are vital for international collaborations that operate mainly online. Communicating online can be more challenging when the members are separated by a screen, and communicating via email or chat can lead to misunderstandings that might not have occurred in a face-to-face meeting.

The first step for any successful cross-university/cross-cultural collaboration is to define shared goals and ensure everyone is on the same page and feels involved in the project. Some participants highlighted the importance of having a clear shared vision for the network and the online class, pointing out that the network is built around: *'very important topics in teacher education, and I think that is one of the reasons why we still work together — because we all find it relevant to our educational programmes'* (Participant 2).

Another common piece of advice was to have clear guidelines, working structures and task organisation. The participants also recommended having one person or university take on a central administrative role and responsibility to make the network coordination easier and smoother. Similarly, it might be easier to start with a small network that is easier to coordinate in the beginning (Participant 3).

The participants also advised having regular meetings with a mixture of in-person and online meetings. Even though the online meetings allow for easier communication and enable participants to work together, participants stressed the importance of in-person meetings for community building and creating a sense of friendship among the network members. Creating opportunities for these more personal interactions also leads to learning experiences for the involved staff and has the potential to make international collaborations more sustainable:

'It (the network) is a kind of professional relationship between all of us, but there is also a sense of friendship among us. Newcomers are very soon integrated into the group. So I think it is also important to remember its personal aspect and involvement' (Participant 2).

While it is essential to have a main coordinator, it can be a good idea to regularly shift the responsibility of a course coordinator between the different universities. It ensures that everyone has a voice but also leads to the program having a slightly different focus each year, which is also a great learning opportunity for other staff (Participant 2).

Questions:

- What is the common vision and goal of your international collaboration?
- Are the roles and responsibilities clearly distributed?
- How is information being shared in your network?
- How often are you having meetings, and how are they being organised?

5.2.2. Preparation and development

'We're very enthusiastic about what we want to do and just dive into it. However, what you need is kind of a clear structure, a clear vision beforehand to have effective discussions, and I think especially mapping out the kind of resources you have, the kind of benefits you have. You know to what extent it is possible or not possible. And why not? I think that's definitely quite a good starting point' (Participant 3).

Before starting with the online course design, the participants stressed the need first to find some common ground. What is possible and what is not? When discussing the feasibility of the online course, participants also highlighted the importance of formulating clear goals and expectations for it.

For the course to be successful, it is important to address and discuss the different learning and teaching cultures that might exist at different universities. Similarly, the participants recommended mapping out the requirements for the class before starting to plan it. This need analysis, for example, should include aspects such as the different credit systems or academic calendars at the cooperating universities and a discussion about the expected course demand and interest at the different universities. Discussing the benefits that students will gain from the course can be a good starting point.

At the same time, it can be very beneficial to map out the different resources available within the network. This can, for example, include the available learning platforms, technologies, and already existing learning materials and expertise. These networks can also be used to recruit students. Drawing on the various resources from the involved partner universities not

only saves time and resources for the organisation of the online course but also improves the course quality:

'We also started mapping by asking, what do we already have related to this topic in each university? So that also helped. As we had materials, we didn't have to recreate them. We don't have to create all the material from our heads. We're trying to use what we have already' (Participant 3).

If possible, the participant recommended not having more than a two-week gap between the online meetings. This is important because online learning can make it more difficult for students to build a relationship with each other. Therefore, it is recommended to have regular meetings without more significant breaks in between so that students can get to know each other better.

There can often be a variance between registered and attending students in online learning. Requiring students to write a small motivation letter or fill out a survey before the course can be used to make students feel more committed to the course and give teachers a better understanding of the student's expectations and goals (Participant 2).

It was also recommended to start with a smaller pilot project that could be done within a single university at first to collect valuable feedback for implementing the online course.

Questions:

- Did the project team conduct a needs analysis and discuss the project's feasibility?
- What kind of resources are already available?
- How will students be recruited?
- What are the course benefits for the students who join the online course?
- Is the timetable of the class suitable for online learning?

5.2.3. Design

'I have basically flipped all my learning and assessments. I'm just the guy who runs the course and has written all the materials, but the students themselves kind of implement the actual course, so they do pretty much all the work. I just create the kind of framework and the surroundings for them, and I have written all the materials for them to learn so that they will do the learning' (Participant 4).

As discussed previously, online learning can be very beneficial for both the students and staff if the teaching is designed around online learning and is able to make the most out of the increased student diversity. Therefore, the participants stressed the need to design the class as an online class from the beginning and have a clear justification for why they opted to use online teaching rather than in-person teaching. Accordingly, if the class uses blended learning, it is important to design it as one class and not as two separate classes (with one part being online and one in person). In other words, teachers should ask themselves what works online and why? What suits your subject and your students?

When discussing these questions, the participants highlighted the importance of designing online learning around student agency and responsibility. This aspect is quite essential for

online learning as it is easier to become distracted when learning online, which can affect students' commitment to the class. We will discuss this point further in the pedagogy part.

Similar to traditional teaching, participants recommended developing assessment guidelines, connecting the assessment method with the course goals, and informing students about required assignments at a very early stage. In an online learning environment, oral examinations can reduce the risk of cheating (Participant 1). Recommended assessment methods were, for example, group presentations, learning diaries or essays.

In order to continuously improve the design of the online learning projects, the participants advised collecting feedback either during or at the end of their course. This is an important practice for both online and analogue teaching. Similarly, it is recommended that the networks involved in creating the program debrief after the course and reflect on ways of improving the class. It is generally important to view online learning programs as an ongoing process rather than a finished product. As the following quote shows, collecting feedback is helpful for the further development of the online program and can also boost the facilitators' confidence.

'I have these sessions outside the class; then I can ask them how it is going. Do you think you are having any difficulties? Any queries? How would you like to design it? I get that feedback, so now that's why I feel very confident. (...) The next summer course might be slightly different, but I know it works. (...) Of course, I can also change the next courses depending on the feedback. But I know what's going on, and it helps me a lot' (Participant 1).

Questions:

- Why is the class designed as an online course or to include online teaching?
- What are the expected benefits of using online teaching for the course?
- How and when does the course collect feedback?
- How is the feedback used?

5.2.4. Pedagogy

'My task was also to create spaces of interaction. (...) you need to activate them in different ways for the e-learning' (Participant 1).

One common consideration for many participants was how to make the most out of student diversity. As a result, the participants agreed that online learning requires a pedagogy that forces students to become active learners and take more responsibility for their learning. This is especially important because, with online learning, there is the risk that students can easily be distracted by being at home and on their computers and may switch off as they are not in the same room with the lecturers.

To achieve the goal of helping students to become active learners, the participants suggested selecting tasks that open up spaces for students' involvement. This can allow students to choose how they want to approach a task or what aspect of the task they want to focus on and invites them to share their background. One participant, for example, created a class where students could decide how to work together:

'In Groups through the practice of various formats, so these formats are then, for example, a presentation, so the students can choose how they present' (Participant 2).

This type of task gives the students enough agency to decide what aspects of the topic they want to focus on and how they want to present it while encouraging them to discuss and interact with each other. For some participants, the main goal of the online program was not to equip students with subject knowledge but rather to develop and exercise their critical and reflective thinking skills by providing the opportunity to work in multicultural teams and encounter cultural differences.

Another way to benefit from the increased diversity that can result from online teaching is to encourage students to share their experiences and background in the class, which can foster intercultural learning by creating more active discussions. Therefore, participants suggested making the class relatable for the students. We discuss this point further under learning materials. Another suggestion was, if possible, to include contemporary issues in the class or ask students to introduce their home university and home city. Another idea to involve students more actively was to collect their questions before the class and then pick them up during the class.

One participant noted that for him, the goal was to have as few lectures as possible to have more time for group work and discussions (Participant 2) because, if those discussions are moderated well, they can spark the students' curiosities and interests and encourage them to study the topic further. Indeed, several participants recommended using a flipped classroom design in which students are forced to take a bit more responsibility and agency in their learning. A flipped classroom is a type of blended learning in which students prepare the contents for the class at home to free up time for active discussions and interactions in the classroom. Even so, another participant (Participant 1) also cautioned against relying too much on one pedagogy and stressed that a variation of pedagogies is also quite important. What works with some groups might not work as well with other students.

Related to the use of a flipped classroom design, the participants stressed the importance of suitable learning materials (see Chapter 6) but also highlighted that for class discussions in the breakout rooms to be successful, it is essential to mix the students mindfully to ensure that all breakout rooms are diverse. This practice can also help prevent students from building smaller groups from the same university. Given the different experiences and backgrounds of the students, participants also emphasised the need for unambiguous instructions and tasks for their discussions.

Given that online classrooms can often be very diverse, it is important to create a safe learning environment (Participant 2). It is especially crucial in a classroom with many students who are not native speakers of the language of instruction. One student noted it: *'can be easy to lose confidence, because we are not used to online courses'*. Therefore, it is important to create a sense of community among the students by encouraging them to share their personal backgrounds and stories in class. Doing so can also influence the students to help each other out and overcome language barriers. One recommendation could be to open the Zoom room earlier or leave it open after the class so that students who have questions or concerns have the time and space to bring them up (Participant 1).

Questions:

- How does the online course facilitate active interaction and discussions among the students?
- How does the course create a safe learning environment and a sense of community for the students?
- Can the online course integrate the students' various backgrounds?
- Does the course encourage students to share their own experiences and backgrounds with the class?
- Does the course vary in its pedagogical methods and offer clear discussion instructions?

5.2.5. Teachers

'If I could give a recommendation, it is that Co-teaching, it's very good because then you could actually be able to come up with solutions that, as a single person, you know, trying to build up a course, for example, couldn't possibly come up with' (Participant 5).

For online teaching to be most effective, it requires the students to interact with each other and play an active role in the learning process. Therefore, it can be problematic to simply reproduce a lecture style of class that is often typical for on-site teaching. At the same time, there have been many approaches to traditional teaching, such as flipped classroom teaching, that focus on student involvement and their agency as learners. As such, practitioners of online teaching also do not need to reinvent the wheel but can draw and reflect on their previous teaching experiences and adapt them for online teaching (Participant 3).

As a result, one major benefit of international networks for teachers is that it allows them to share good and successful practices with each other, which was also highlighted in the interviews (Participant 7). Especially since, besides the recent pandemic, online teaching has not been a common practice in higher education. Thus it is essential to actively offer teachers support and inform them where they can receive further support if needed. As we have discussed, this is critical as this support can help teachers overcome the initial demands and challenges of setting up online classes. The benefits of which can lead to reduced workloads for the teachers in the long term, especially when co-teaching is involved in the class.

Another topic that came up during the interviews is the importance of teachers sharing their own interests and enthusiasm towards a subject with the students. This can, for example, be achieved by giving teachers more autonomy and encouraging them to share and introduce their research and develop their own learning materials. In one project, the members included short films for students to watch to show that also for them: *'Internationalisation is super exciting here. We bring these perspectives with us (...). We also look forward to hearing your perspectives and the topics you will bring to the course' (Participant 2).*

Whereas this advice is true for both online and traditional classroom teaching, it might be especially important for effective online teaching where the physical separation can make building a relationship between students and teachers more difficult.

A potential issue discussed during the interviews was that online teaching might not always be well received by teachers. To overcome this initial resistance, one participant highlighted the importance of *'framing it as a positive thing'* (Participant 5) and differentiating it from

traditional teaching by highlighting its potential benefits and unique challenges. Another participant mentioned that this could sometimes mean teachers must challenge their previous assumptions about teaching and learning. Ideally, online teaching should be seen as another tool in the teacher's toolbox that can be used in specific situations to achieve a particular goal.

Questions:

- Does the course include co-teaching?
- What kind of support do the teachers receive?
- How is online learning framed and discussed among teachers?
- How can online learning be framed more positively?
- What are your assumptions and expectations as a teacher of online learning?

5.2.6. Learning Materials

'I think the variation of e-learning is significant (...) the variation of materials, films, paintings, Open Access materials, texts and articles sometimes recommended literature for those who want to go a little bit further. So you can also have some different incentives' (Participant 1).

One of the strengths of online learning is creating diverse and multicultural classrooms, however, this also leads to challenges. Due to their various backgrounds, students might be used to different learning materials and teaching approaches. Therefore, common advice offered by the participants is to use several different kinds of learning materials such as audio materials, texts such as academic articles or news articles, videos or art pieces. Not only do those learning materials allow the students to study at their own pace, but the diversity of learning materials can also help some students who, for example, might struggle with particular academic articles to engage with the class topics. In many cases, the learning materials served two primary purposes. Firstly, to help familiarise students with the topics and secondly, to serve as a starting point for discussions and interactions by allowing the teachers to ask the students what they found most exciting, thought-provoking or interesting. One participant mentioned that starting a discussion with the students around learning materials such as quotes, art pieces, or films helped the students: *'to get to know each other surprisingly well during the online meetings'* (Participant 2).

Participants stressed the importance of actively engaging the students and encouraging them to bring in their experiences and expertise. Therefore, the learning materials should also aim to be relatable for students by addressing current contemporary issues or relating to the students' local spaces. This approach also succeeded in creating an interest in the students (Participant 1). One student, for example, noted in the survey that: *'It helps to make teaching and learning more concrete when topics and examples are seen and experienced through one's own senses'*.

Because online learning benefits from students' interactions, it is important to allow students to familiarise themselves with the learning materials before the class starts, which can help them participate more actively in class and group discussions. As such, participants advised making the learning materials available on time or before the course's official start, including some optional reading materials. The students who answered our survey agreed with this and recommended that online courses make learning materials more available. Additionally, this can help students with connectivity issues as it does permit

them to download the learning materials. Teachers should be cautioned to be careful not to overwhelm the students with too many learning materials because that can discourage the students (Participant 1).

Questions:

- Does the project use different kinds of learning materials?
- Are the learning materials created or tailored towards online learning, and how are they guiding student learning?
- Can the learning materials be used for discussions and reflections during class?
- How high is the student's workload?
- Where and when are the learning materials being shared, and are they accessible to all students?

5.2.7. Flexibility, creativity and communication

'It was nice to experience different teaching/learning methods. It makes it effective' (Student)

Online learning requires teachers to be creative and find ways to communicate effectively with their students online. One participant, for example, highlights that *'The role of reactions is crucial to create a feeling for the other person online, to create a connection, making it personal' (Participant 7)*. In other words, due to the distance between the students and teachers, giving them immediate feedback and integrating their points and suggestions into the class is especially important. Similarly, when students work together, it can be more challenging to create a feeling of connection between them. While the students need to be active, it is also essential for them to be attentive listeners and respond to each other during group work (Participant 1). If done correctly, the *'online course session helped [the students] to connect with other participants'* (Student). Teachers can support the students' listening by giving them tasks that require the input of all the students and, for instance, asking them to introduce their backgrounds and find communalities or differences. Another option could be the use of student peer reviewing.

Being flexible also allows the students to have more agency over their learning which, as evident in the initial quote, can encourage their creativity. Students also appreciate the less rigid structure of online learning that gives them *'the flexibility of being able to focus on topics in which the content is new/difficult while having the possibility to get coffee or stretch their legs as needed without disrupting anyone'* (Student). This is especially the case as technology is advancing and giving the teacher more tools such as Padlets, Kahoots or Jamboards that they can use in their teaching. Additionally, due to the pandemic, the increase of online learning in higher education is a rather recent trend, which can give teachers more space to experiment.

Additional advice on how to communicate in an online class and activate the students using the chat function was given:

'I like to activate the chat. A good technique that could be good to think about is that when they are listening to a lecture, I put some comments in the chat. You know, connect that to the lecture, or I could just, you know, add a question, so I activate the multi-modality. Be responsible for the chat, or if you want, you can assign a student to, you know, control or manage the chat' (Participant 1).

This could, for example, be helpful during (guest) lectures where one teacher or coordinator moderates a discussion in the chat to support students' active listening and reflection on the lecture content.

Questions:

- Does your class encourage students' creativity? How so?
- How are you communicating with the students during class?
- How are you encouraging the students' active listening during the class?
- How are you using the chat function during your class?
- Could the class utilise student peer feedback and reviews?

5.2.8. Technical issues

'The support for zoom, they had some information. I also had some documents for that. You know how to use it, so it was not a big issue, actually. You know people are having problems with the connection, that's why I opened the classes at 8:30 a.m. instead of 9:00 a.m. so that people could also test, you know, do you hear me? (...) These kinds of technical questions will be recurrent anyway. So you have to be able to test them so that you don't get stuck with them or irritated because, you know, they are unavoidable' (Participant 1).

The last point we discussed with our participants was technical matters, including the related difficulties and challenges in online learning and how to address them. The main advice for practitioners was to remain flexible and, for example, accept that you cannot control the student's internet connection. One suggestion for combating technical issues, for example, was allowing students to use WhatsApp for group work. One participant recommended opening the Zoom room before the class to allow students to test their equipment. Another important aspect is to ensure that all learning materials are readily available online so that students who might have connection issues can catch up to the other students by reviewing the learning materials. The participants generally preferred Zoom to Teams due to its better sound quality.

6. DISCUSSION

In our study, we were able to confirm the results of previous studies on the potential benefits of online learning. Both the interviews with practitioners of online collaboration courses and the student survey showed that online learning could have various benefits for higher education institutions in their internationalisation efforts. In this report, we have discussed many benefits associated with online learning, such as sustainability through reducing travel emissions, improving the course and content quality, international cooperation, and developing students' and teachers' digital and transversal skills. For this report, we want to focus on three main points of particular importance to the participants and us.

6.1. Internationalisation at home

As discussed in this report, utilising online learning in higher education based on collaboration rather than competition allows facilitators to make their courses available across national borders, increasing students' diversity within the class. This has important implications as it creates intercultural exchange and learning opportunities for students at their home universities. Moreover, the easy accessibility of online learning represents a more equitable approach to the internationalisation of higher education. It can provide intercultural learning opportunities for an ever-increasing number of students, create interest in international activities and prepare students for participating in physical mobility programs.

Ultimately, online learning has the potential to create intercultural learning opportunities for more students compared to physical exchanges because it reaches students who may not join a physical exchange program due to reasons such as inconvenient time schedules and financial or other personal reasons. Another reason why online learning can reach more students is that typically, only students who are already interested in intercultural exchanges in the first place will join student mobility programs. On the other hand, online learning is typically built around a specific subject or topic. Therefore, it not only approaches students already interested in intercultural exchanges but also invites those not particularly interested in exchange by offering courses built around specific topics or content. In other words, students who are not interested in doing an exchange might still be interested in joining a multicultural online course on a specific subject, such as music education or sustainability. This was also the case in our study, as many students have commented that they joined the online course because of their interest in the course topic. The mindful design of the online courses facilitated students' participation in intercultural learning experiences which otherwise would not have been possible. This further highlights the potential value of online learning for internationalisation at home.

6.2. Professional development among university staff

One of the main tasks of universities is teaching. Therefore, it is no surprise that many online learning discourses are centred on potential student benefits. However, our study indicated that online learning also benefited teachers and coordinators. In the same way as the students, the teachers and coordinators we interviewed found working in multicultural

and transdisciplinary teams beneficial for developing their professional skills and personal development as teachers and researchers. Working collaboratively on the online program created opportunities for the involved staff to build new connections, exchange expertise and develop their intercultural communication and digital skills.

Some teachers may experience cross-university collaboration as being an extra burden. As we have noted, it requires an early-stage investment of time and resources. Setting up the online course can be challenging as universities may have different academic schedules, course credit systems or online learning platforms. Therefore, it is crucial to have good staff collaboration with a clear division of roles at the initial stage. For instance, two participants mentioned that forming a team consisting of a pedagogue, who sets up a common online platform, academics responsible for the content, and coordinators who communicate with other universities made the early development smoother (Participants 2 and 3). Despite all these initial challenges, co-teaching can reduce teachers', and coordinators' workloads once set up since they can draw on resources and experiences from different universities.

Being able to co-create and co-teach online with partners from around the globe can be a very positive and valuable experience for staff. While we do not suggest that more university teaching should switch to online learning, we hope that reports such as ours can encourage teachers to consider creating online classes in collaboration with other universities to create intercultural learning experiences for themselves and their students.

6.3. The need for a mindful design

'Yeah, and the other thing I would like to underline is that you really have to think you're teaching differently. So, if you are trying to reproduce how you teach (...) when doing it on-site, it probably won't work. It might work, but probably not' (Participant 4).

Despite the potential benefits of online learning, we want to reiterate that online learning is neither a quick fix nor an easy solution for internationalising higher education. All participants emphasised that teaching must be adapted to the online learning mode for an online course to succeed. Online teaching comes with its own set of challenges that practitioners must face and requires a certain level of commitment.

The increased accessibility of online learning can bring teachers and students with different academic and cultural backgrounds together. While these differences are a significant asset of online learning, it also means that teachers and students need to navigate and combine diverse learning and teaching cultures. Therefore, online courses that are part of international collaborations require clear communications and a well-defined distribution of roles and tasks.

Another challenge of online learning is that getting students to stay attentive in class can be challenging since students are likely to feel more isolated. They are also open to more distractions in an online learning environment. Therefore, it is even more critical for online learning to engage the students actively, a point that the students themselves have also recognised: *'I am much more attuned to the fact the group tasks have to be carefully planned to keep learners engaged' (Student).*

In this report, we discussed different ways to achieve this goal, such as using a flipped classroom design, trying to create a sense of community, or using learning materials that encourage students to share their experiences and opinions. Motivating students and facilitating active discussion through the computer screen can be challenging, thus, encouraging students to take more responsibility for their learning is generally a good approach.

'There are so many variables that we really can't give you exact recommendations on how to teach' (Participant 5).

Ultimately, just like with on-site teaching, no single model fits all. Every class and every topic are unique and, thus, require a different approach suitable for the purpose. Therefore, it is crucial to create a strong vision for the online program by starting with a discussion about its goals and expectations. A careful and mindful design that starts from an initial need and a resource analysis is necessary to unlock the potential of online learning for internationalising higher education.

7. METHODOLOGY

This research utilises mixed method research and draws on data collected through interviews and an online student survey. The main body of the research consists of phenomenographic interviews. The interviews have been conducted with individuals in one-on-one settings and focus groups with up to three participants. Additionally, an online student survey helped us to validate our findings by offering students insights into online learning. This allowed us to take a more holistic look at online learning by investigating the students', teachers' and coordinators' perspectives.

For this research, we conducted interviews with selected practitioners and coordinators of international online learning projects. Teachers and coordinators of online courses are the ones who have experienced digital teaching on a regular basis and, based on their experiences, further refined their approach. Therefore, in this research, we opted for semi-structured interviews that gave teachers the opportunity and space to focus on aspects of digital learning that they have found especially beneficial in their work.

In order to ensure the quality of the online learning programs, we used the Nordplus database to select projects that have successfully received funding and organised innovative and interesting online classes according to their reports. The Nordplus programme offers funding for educational collaboration projects in the Nordic and Baltic countries, and by using their database, we were able to a) benefit from their original screening process to find high-quality projects and b) have access to both the applications and reports of the Nordplus projects to inform our selection process further. We identified criteria for good practices in online teaching based on a research literature review to narrow down the number of potentially interesting projects. Ultimately, we selected successful Nordplus projects that include digital teaching and at least one of the following:

1. Interdisciplinary collaboration
2. Lifelong learning
3. Collaboration with third parties (e.g. companies)
4. Intercultural learning/cross-border learning
5. Classes that will be continuously held online even though they were initially intended to be face-to-face classes
6. Focus on interactivity and soft skills
7. Focus on sustainability
8. Existing support systems (university, colleagues, international collaborations)

Before the interviews, we reviewed the literature using keywords such as digital learning, virtual exchanges or digital teaching. Additionally, we reviewed the digital strategy plans and quality assurance plans for digital learning from Finnish universities. Based on this literature review, we created our interview manuals that consisted of six categories (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF THE INTERVIEW MANUAL

Category	Themes	Example question
General Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student demographics • Organisation (e.g. course credits) • Learning goals • Use of digital tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the learning goals change due to the class being online? • What kind of digital tools did you use during the class?
Pedagogy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student agency • Student-teacher interaction • Student-student interaction • Assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How many possibilities did they have for discussions? How were the discussions facilitated and guided in an online environment?
Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student recruitment • Learning materials • Communication with students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did they have any previous experiences teaching in a digital learning environment? If so, how did they benefit from it/how did they prepare for teaching online? • What were the biggest challenges of teaching a diverse group of students online? How did you address them?
Cooperation and Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working in an international network • International and interdisciplinary collaboration • Available resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did the international cooperation look? How did you distribute the various tasks and communicate with each other?
Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From students and teachers • Challenges and coping strategies • Future adaptations • Advice and recommendations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kind of challenges did you encounter facilitating and teaching the class online, and what coping strategies did you use to overcome them?
Project Specific Questions	In every interview, we included project-specific interview questions based on the Nordplus reports, which allowed us to focus on the specific strengths and focus areas of the Nordplus projects.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e.g. How to utilise online learning as preparation for intensive courses • Intercultural communication in online classes • The role of experiences in online learning

Additionally, we sent out an online survey to the students who joined the online courses. Therefore, we relied on the help of our participants, who distributed the online survey to the students who participated in the online courses we discussed during the interviews.

Due to the limited scope of this study, we opted to focus on open-ended questions. This allowed students to elaborate on their experiences in joining the online course. We used their answers to highlight various points in our report. In the first part of the survey, we covered the student's general demographic information, motivation, expectations and familiarity with online learning. The second part of the online survey asked about the various teaching and learning methods used in the courses and their effectiveness. In this section, we primarily focused on how the teachers facilitated interaction between the students, how they experienced these interactions and how well they connected with the course's teachers and other participants. We asked about their general impression of the course and an overall rating in a fourth section. In the final section, students had the chance to comment on challenges they encountered during the class, the benefits of the class for their learning and development and offer recommendations for future online courses.

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APPENDIX

Project Partners:

We want to extend our thanks to the participants who joined our study and inspired us in interesting discussions. We are pleased that they agreed to us sharing their contact information which hopefully will allow readers of this report to learn more about their excellent projects. Please note that in order to secure the participants' anonymity within the report, this list does not correspond with the participants' numbers in the report (e.g. participant 1 is not the first person on this list).

Digi Arts

Vartiainen, Lea (Metropolia University of Applied Sciences)

Digi Music

Laukkanen, Jere (Metropolia University of Applied Sciences)

Enhancing Canadian Studies in the Nordic Countries

Premat, Christophe (Stockholm University)

Nordopera – Opera education network

Martinsen, Tuovi

<http://www.nordplmusic.net/index.php?id=162>

NordPath

Wähä, Anne (Vaasa University of Applied Sciences)

SPICA – A Nordic network for teacher educators and students:

Aamaas, Åsmund (University of South-Eastern Norway)

<https://spicanetwork.com/>

Detailed Interview manual:

This is a general collection of questions. During the interviews, we did not go through all the questions but selected them instead based on the project, the interviewee's role and the interview's progress. The questions are formulated in an open manner to avoid yes and no answers and encourage the interviewee to elaborate on their answers. Follow-up questions based on the discussion are always possible.

The goal of the question

CATEGORIES:

General information:

- How long was the class, and how many credits did students receive? **Overview**
- How many students joined the class? Were they from different faculties and universities? **Student demographic**
- What were the learning goals of the class? Did the learning goals change due to the class being online? **Learning goals**
- How were the students recruited, and who was eligible to join the class (were they successful in creating access for more students by offering an online class)? Did they experience any difficulties in recruiting students? **Promotion of the course**
- How was the class structured (e.g. blended vs completely online; synchronous vs asynchronous part); what worked well? **Class structure**
- What kind of course materials did they use and why? How were the learning materials adapted for digital learning? Is it possible to get access to them? **Learning materials (questions for courses that specifically created learning materials for online learning)**
- What kind of digital tools did you use during the class? (e.g. Zoom breakout rooms)? What Learning platform did you use to communicate with students? What else was the platform used for (e.g. students introductions)? Did you find the chat function useful (did you need a facilitator)? **digital tools**
- Were there any technical issues for the students or the teachers? What is important to avoid? **Technical difficulties (sound, video)**

Pedagogy:

- What did you do to make students feel part of a group even though the teaching was online? Did the students have opportunities for casual conversations to get to know each other? **Teambuilding**
- What were your expectations of the students? How did you encourage/support your students to meet your expectations **Teachers' expectations of students**
- What kind of tasks did the students have throughout the class? What were their responsibilities? **Students' agency** (What was the role of the students like during the online class?)
- How did you incorporate students' questions and feedback during the class? Did you create some extra space after the class for the students? **Teacher-student interactions**
- How many possibilities did they have for discussions? How were the discussions facilitated and guided in an online environment? Did you create a space where students could see each other's comments? **Student-student interactions**
- How was the class assessed? Did the students have a final task? **Assessment**
- Were there any other kinds of activities the students joined? **Extra activities**

Preparation:

- What were the main goals of the class? Why did you decide to do it online? What do you think is the added or unique value of doing the class virtually? **Conceptualisation of the class**
- Did they have any previous experiences teaching in a digital learning environment? If so, how did they benefit from it/how did they prepare for teaching online? **Teacher's background**
- What kind of support did you receive when organising the online class? Did you participate in any preparatory classes for online teaching? **Faculty support**

Cooperations/Collaboration:

- What did international cooperation look like? How did you distribute the various tasks and communicate with each other? **Practicalities**
- How many teachers oversaw teaching the course? What did communication and collaboration look like? What were the different roles of the teachers (e.g. was there a facilitator)? **Collaboration between teachers**
- How did the preparation for the class work when working with an international/interdisciplinary team? What were the main challenges, and how did you address them? **Class preparation**
- Did the class include interdisciplinary learning? **Interdisciplinary collaborations**
- How did the class manage to integrate students with different backgrounds? Did the program enable students to bring their own unique backgrounds into the class? Did the class encourage the students to learn from each other's backgrounds and experiences? **Collaboration between international/interdisciplinary students**
- What were the biggest challenges of teaching a diverse group of students online? How did you address them? What were the benefits of working with this diverse group? **Teaching in a diverse classroom**
- Were there any other cooperations in the class? Did the class utilise other resources (e.g. with companies)? **Outside resources**

Feedback:

- What kind of challenges did you encounter facilitating and teaching the class online, and what coping strategies did you use to overcome them? **Challenges and coping strategies**
- Did you collect feedback from the students, and if yes, how (also includes learning diaries)? What was the students' feedback like? **Student feedback**
- Did you feel like the interaction in the class felt authentic and genuine? How did you encourage authenticity? Could the students open up? What encouraged it? **Authenticity**
- What kind of changes would you make for next year's class? What kind of aspects would you definitely keep? **Future adaptations**
- What kind of advice would you offer to facilitators and teachers of virtual classrooms? **Advice**

Project-specific questions:

- In this interview section, we asked questions selected explicitly for the different interview partners based on their NordPath reports.

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