

Dealing with Students' Aversion in Global Virtual Teams: Evidence from Czech Republic and Estonia

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Abstract— The paper tackles with theories of virtual international teams and students' different perceptions on collaborating internationally in global virtual teams (GVT) based-projects. The study sheds light on managing virtual teams that involve students from some universities around the Baltic Sea and students studying at Tallinn and Helsinki branch of the Estonian Business School. It contributes to understanding how universities and schools deal with student unwillingness and co-operation barriers, when it comes to team-based projects on the cases of Estonia, Germany and the Czech Republic and what are lessons learnt from such projects. The article tries to explain what the key pillars for successful cross-border cooperation are regarding virtual teams among universities in different regions of Europe. At the same time, the study provides detailed analyses of students' aversion to different types of teamwork assignments, which need to be worked out and delivered by bachelor and master students in the above-mentioned countries. Furthermore, the study suggests strategies for dealing with cross-cultural differences, which affect the virtual collaboration among the students, who come from different cultural and geographic backgrounds and who perceive and manage differently such international virtual collaborative projects across Europe. The authors try to outline and show, how the communication and the interpersonal chemistry within the students' teams work as it is critical to the successful completion of the international virtual cooperation within the ongoing projects among the universities. Readiness to work in international virtual teams and obstacles to such work are also discussed in the broader context of globalization and innovative entrepreneurial orientations in order to explain attitudes that inhibit or support cross-cultural communication and joint project work with team members from different countries.

Keywords—students' aversion, global virtual teams

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, International Management and International Business courses are quite widely taught at business schools and universities across the Globe. Moreover, these courses are delivered not only in English but in the local language as well. The students involved in these courses often are assigned with versatile tasks such as individual assignments, group presentations and written assignments, peer reviews, critical thinking essays, etc. Parallely with that, the universities are putting a lot of efforts in internationalizing their curricula, which is inevitable process across the

business schools and universities worldwide. The students are getting connected with their counterparts from foreign universities mainly virtually through Skype, Facetime, What's App, Viber App, We Chat when it comes to Global Virtual Teams and their group assignments and tasks. It requires quite a lot of time not only for the students, but for the teachers to devote as well. International Management and International Business classes courses in general are very demanding when it comes to Global Virtual Teams (GVT) as the students need themselves to get acquainted with lots of instructions, to establish contacts with their teammates from across the globe and to maintain virtual cooperation at least for a semester. However, challenges of global virtual teams that can lead to aversion are not limited to pedagogic practices. In order to give guidance to students lecturers and tutors have to understand broader context of cooperation readiness of students and how it is influenced by online communication [1]. We also have to analyze implications of cultural values and practices on student aversion of cross-cultural teamwork and the role of trust building in virtual teams in creating commitment to perform in virtual teams and network [2].

A. Case Study of Czech Republic

In the paper there are case studies on students' aversion in GVTs from the Czech Republic and Estonia will be covered. These case studies are based on teachers' and students' impressions and experience gained from the period of 2017-2019. Thus, the study tries to explain and analyze why students' aversion in GVTs exists and what are the factors, which influence students' performance.

Historically, countries as Czech Republic and Estonia are trying to shift much of their international business to export, which requires solid foreign market knowledge and proactive broadening of International Business skills. Small and open economies in Europe need access to global markets and global online networking readiness of students is essential tool for discovering and using new global business opportunities. Respectively, the business schools from these two EU countries are putting lots of time and money for internationalizing their courses, boosting international relations through different international projects, which involve students, teachers, administrators and other stakeholders. At the same time, much of the student's work is done virtually through different e-

platforms and mobile apps, which enable online and offline communications among the students.

At Skoda Auto University GVTs are very recent trend in language and International Management courses, which makes the course quite exciting and attractive to the students. The university is cooperating with German, Icelandic and British universities in so called Blended Learning International Cooperation since 2017, where Czech students virtually cooperate with the counterparts in bachelor and master programs. Majority of the Czech students possess good command of English, so they relatively well understand and conduct the cooperation with their counterparts. There are around 15-20 percent foreign students from the total number of 40 students each semester, who take part in this project at Skoda Auto University. In majority of cases those are Russian speaking bachelor and master students, who speak English and Czech.

When it comes to students' aversion in the GVTs at Skoda Auto University, it is main triggered by fear of communicating out of comfort zone, low level of knowledge of foreign culture, working habits, lack of time to do GVTs work, laziness and in more rare cases discomfort in speaking English. The students from Skoda Auto University, who participate in GVTs are struggling with managing their study and work time as almost 90 percent of them are working. The students show aversion in GVTs mainly because it takes significant chunk of time according to them for tackling with their tasks in international cooperation. We need to underline that the Skoda Auto University students are burden with lots of teamwork load from almost each subject they are taught at the university. Therefore, the students often would ask the International Management teacher if X-Culture or BLIC are mandatory projects or optional. Also, there is relatively low-esteem especially among the Czech students when it comes to dealing with GVTs tasks and assignments accompanied with low readiness to cooperate with non-Czech students in class. Interestingly, the initial students' interest in X-Culture and BLIC is quite volatile throughout the academic year due to the fact that the students are constantly working, and they have many group assignments in each subject they study at the university [5]. Regardless, these facts the students often are afraid of cooperating virtually with other counterparts due to the fact that they need to read information online, to contacts and maintain virtual collaboration with students from far countries, to put much efforts on motivating other teammates from the GVTs, etc. For the last two years mainly limited time available for the GVT work and fail to motivate foreign teammates in achieving the common goal are the most frequent factors towards students' aversion in GVTs at Skoda Auto University.

B. Case Study of Estonia

At the Estonian Business School students have participated in the X-Culture global projects for three years. X-Culture global projects have been applied as exam project in the international business course. X-Culture has given to many student valuable experience of online communication

in multicultural teams that help growth-oriented enterprises to enter to new foreign markets. Particular authors already fifteen year ago explained that trust capital is the third force in entrepreneurship in addition to financial and human capital [3]. From the trust building point of view in X-Culture an important challenge is that team members cannot choose other team members based on their earlier contacts and co-operation experience, as online teams are formed by US organizers. X-Culture organizers allocate students to virtual teams following the principle of geographical and cultural diversity of each team. Organizers try to create teams, where each team member is from a different country, although sometimes there are more than one US student in some teams. Students have to build their team consensus on the international business opportunity challenge they try to solve together by working online over a period of two and half months. Cultural collision and resulting aversion risk have been higher in teams, where students do not start form discussing their own personal career aspirations and interests that can be linked to the project. Sharing some personal information is essential for understanding situation of each student, personal values and preferences that can be taken into consideration, when tasks are set for each team member and co-operation modes agreed.

Cultural stereotypes result in aversion if students assume already before the project has started that they are more learning and result oriented that representatives of some other cultures. In addition to trust, reputation of team members is also important in group decision making frameworks [4]. Estonian students generally perceive themselves as more hard working and better in time management and meeting deadlines compared to many other nationalities. Such attitude easily results in blaming team members that seem to be more relaxed to follow deadlines as bad performers. At the same time Estonian students are not used to regular feedback surveys that are used in very structured way in the X-Culture framework. They are more used to learning projects, where feedback is not given on weekly basis and teams are more independent to specify their cooperation timetable so long as the final deadline is met. One reason is that among students are many practitioners that try to align working for their employers and university studies. Sometimes they have to go on business trip and as the result they value flexibility to adjust their learning activities to job and family obligations [6]. In university practice it means opportunity to choose between two exam time option and opportunity to negotiate with lecturers to compensate missed face-to-face class discussions by contributing to online discussions by using e-learning tools. X-Culture team could also cooperate in such ways that multitasking and flexible time use by participants is supported but inability to agree inside teams on such arrangements can lead to aversion of intensive online teamwork.

Some students that already have practical experience of working in international teams created by companies, where they are employed, are hesitant to expand their experience through university training as they feel that their

international headquarters has not recognized their hard work in coordinating project team members from other countries and they are not interested to experience the same negative feelings during university studies. At the same time there are students without international business communication experience that for the first-time experience difference between cultures that focus more on structured written communication versus cultures giving higher value to rich real time communication that combines oral messages with visualization and non-verbal communication. In GVT implication of such communication preference difference is that some team members prefer synchronous Skype or messenger calls and others feel comfortable to comment texts in Google Drive or in some other cloud services. In practice synchronous communication preference means that some team members have to wake up at night to answer to Skype call from team member living in other time zones. Although majority of Estonian students have quite good knowledge of English, they often feel uncomfortable in intensive synchronous debates and prefer to make their point in writing. Mismatch of communication style and time differences can lead to dissatisfaction with the teamwork process and frustration.

Student aversion in X-Culture projects seldom, only 2-3% of students participating in X-Culture programs, has led to abandoning the project. That has happened mainly if several team members from different countries have not contributed. When Estonian Business School students have been rated as low performers by other team members, their self-explanation has been of two main types: need to perform urgent job tasks or different opinions inside the team about work rules and timetables.

C. *Managing International Virtual Teams*

There are two teachers in International Management and one teacher in English, who are having students participating in GVTs since 2017. When it comes to BLIC teams, we try to build teams, where at least two students know each other prior to taking up on BLIC project. Thus, the synergy in the team is very likely to occur thanks to the fact that these two students possess previous experience in conducting group presentation, work or assignment. For standard occasions they know their strong and weak sides, which makes easier the work between them. Also, we try to select one ambassador from each group, who is responsible coordinating the whole group of students. At the same time, we applied different HR tests such as Belbin, MBTi, etc. to the students, so they can find better the roles and the jobs in the GVTs.[7]

D. *Results and Discussion*

At Škoda Auto University students are provided non-stop 24/7 support by the teachers in order to make sure that the students are important part in the GVTs. Also, the students are provided with certificates, 20 points from the total subject grade upon completion of BLIC or X-Culture and even the students are invited to grade their counterparts in the GVTs. As per X-Culture experience in order to

decrease the student aversion towards teamwork and project content, the students are invited to carry out firstly readiness test upon the start of the project. Further on, they do so called meet and greet in order to eliminate the stress of not knowing the counterparts from the team. Then systematically, the students are encouraged and assessed weekly in order to find cohesion and synergy among themselves. As you can see in figure 1 the average score from the final peer evaluation in the X-Culture project is 3.8. The vast majority of the students taking part in X-Culture scored around "4=good", with only a few below "3=OK" (about 10%) and less than 5% below 2=Bad. However, although the percentage of "below OK" performers was only about 10%, it means that most teams had one such team member, and one in 5 teams or so had one complete slacker.

Estonian Business School Students that participate in X-Culture projects have international business classes, where they are introduced to the main international business concepts that are relevant for X-Culture. Before students start X-Culture teamwork, they perform assignment, where they analyze GVT challenges based on relevant literature and their own experience if they have such experience. In this homework they also present their vision, how to succeed in X-Culture and propose ideas how to overcome challenges in virtual teamwork. Special attention during the international business course that is linked to X-Culture is devoted to the PESTLE analysis. Students have a special homework assignment, where they have to apply lessons learnt in the X-Culture teamwork for choosing foreign markets to some comparable Estonian product or service that can be introduced at foreign markets. This task supports transferring X-Culture experience to practical tasks of developing Estonian exports in order to avoid GVT aversion based on seeing it as an extra task isolated from their employment or entrepreneurial ambitions. In order to overcome cultural stereotypes, synergy between representatives of different cultures is stressed, when studying cultural aspects of international business. Idea that X-Culture GVT could expand global network both for travelling and further own cross-border business initiatives of students is explained [8]. We suggest to students that base their aversion on frustration from earlier international teamwork related to their jobs to test their leadership skill in X-Culture teams if they really already have business experience. Challenge for further development of Estonian Business School is to involve EBS alumni that already have X-Culture teamwork experience to become commissioners in the X-Culture framework. When former EBS students propose meaningful tasks for global virtual teams, Estonian students understand more clearly value of such teamwork and there will be less reasons for student aversion of such online project activities.

II. CONCLUSION

Based on the Škoda Auto University and Estonian Business School experience in X-Culture, interestingly the students have become more critical and constructive with the

advancement of the semester, which confirm that in general the students are not objective in the majority of cases when it comes to peer evaluation, but then with the time they become more aware of student mates performance and more self-critical [9]. The case studies above showed that each university should deal differently with eliminating students' aversion in order to apply the most suitable tools and techniques on tackling students' demotivation to participate in global virtual teams.

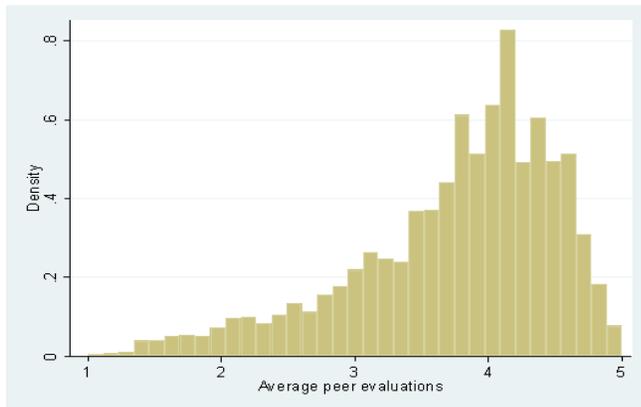


Figure 1: Overall students' performance evaluation by peers in X-Culture project for the Spring semester of 2019

Source: Own elaboration based on X-Culture report of 2019

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