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**Expanding experiential learning opportunities  
to alumni for the development of job-search skills:  
A case in a Peruvian university**

**Abstract:**

At Universidad ESAN in Lima, Peru, a blended workshop using videoconferencing technology, online forums and minimal local class discussions was carried out through the Global Partners in Education (GPE) network from August to November 2017. The workshop was voluntary and facilitated interaction between Peruvian students and students from the US, Mexico, and China over the course of three modules. Participants from Peru were a heterogeneous group consisting of undergraduates and recent graduates, some pre-professional students and some who were already working. Upon completion of each module, they were surveyed regarding their perspectives of this international virtual experience and how it could positively impact their professional lives. The students' diverse perspectives shed light on the ways in which intercultural interaction via information and communications technology (ICT) can be used to

increase participants' future professional success due to the principles of acquiring new skills and improving employability.<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

Educators and organizational leaders at institutions of higher education are concerned with the professional profile of their graduates and how well this profile matches the skills that companies and organizations are currently demanding in the labor market, as this has important implications for graduates' employability. However, in order to make sure students acquire these employability skills at the highest levels possible, it must be taken into account what pedagogical methodologies and learning experiences should be employed.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has stressed that higher education should do more to emphasize student engagement in interdisciplinary activities and immersive interactive real-time learning experiences (Link-you Report on Best Practices, 2017). The aim of these activities, according to the OECD, is to support students' learning of communication in an intercultural context and to prepare them for the requirements of the current globalized job market.

This exploratory case study discusses the results of a voluntary intercultural skills workshop in which both undergraduate students and recent alumni, some already working and some not, participated in videoconferencing sessions with students from universities in three other countries. First, the situational and institutional context is explained, followed by a review of the relevant literature. Next, the results of a post-module workshop survey are analyzed for relevant

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and applicable findings. These findings are then discussed and connected to a broader context, and recommendations for future educational application are provided.

## **Case Context**

Ever since 2009, Universidad ESAN in Lima, Peru has been a part of the Global Partners in Education (GPE) network. GPE is an organization that includes around 45 member universities from 25 nations around the world (Global Partners in Education, n.d.; Global Partners in Education, 2018). These universities participate in the Global Understanding (GU) Program, in which students participate in a semester-long course in which they videoconference with students from other nations about cultural differences so that, according to the GPE website, they can “develop intercultural communication skills, learn to value others’ perspectives and acquire strategies for effectively working together to complete projects” (Global Partners in Education, n.d.).

A typical GU semester consists of three videoconferencing “links” with three different partner universities. Each link typically lasts three to four weeks, during which students discuss various aspects of their respective cultures: university life, family and cultural traditions, the meaning of life and religion, and stereotypes and prejudice (Global Partners in Education, n.d.; Global Partners in Education, 2017). A link culminates with the presentation of collaborative projects carried out in groups of students from both universities. The weeks that the GU class is not linking with another university it typically spends discussing theoretical frameworks related to intercultural communication and interaction, international business, and the culture of the university’s home country.

By August of 2017, ESAN had been participating in the GPE program for eight years, and it was decided that the GU experience, called “Global Environment for Business” at ESAN, should be offered on an experimental basis to recent alumni as well as traditional undergraduates. With this end, the Monday-Wednesday evening section of Global Environment for Business was opened as a voluntary workshop instead of as a traditional course. The workshop would consist of three “modules,” which correspond exactly to the three scheduled GU links. In other words, workshop

participants would not take part in local, theory-based class sessions between the three links; they would only participate in the scheduled videoconferencing sessions and work with their international partners on their collaborative projects, along with fulfilling other minimal academic requirements: reading support articles about the country of the university being linked with, posting in online forums regarding lessons learned, and writing a short reflection paper after the link had ended. In addition, participants could opt to take only one of the modules, two of the modules, or all three of the modules offered. The workshop was then offered to both current undergraduate students and recent graduates of ESAN's undergraduate programs.

One of the interesting aspects of the heterogeneous population of this study is that it offers the opportunity to glean insights into the ways that recent graduates and working professionals can learn from intercultural interactions facilitated through information and communications technology (ICT), as well the ability to compare their impressions with those of traditional pre-professional, undergraduate students.

## **Review of the Literature**

In the current global economy, it is critical for recent graduates entering the job market to possess basic employability skills, abilities that employers deem necessary for them to operate as successful professionals. "Employability" is defined by Jeswani (2016) as "being ready to work," which includes possession skills, knowledge, attitudes, and business skills to meet organizational goals (p.8). According to the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), there are 16 basic employability skills that can be divided into six basic categories: Basic Competency Skills (reading, writing, and computation), Communication Skills (speaking and listening), Adaptability Skills (problem-solving, creative thinking), Developmental Skills (self-esteem, motivation and goal-setting, and career planning), Group Effectiveness Skills (interpersonal skills, teamwork, and negotiation skills), and Influencing Skills (understanding of organizational culture and the ability to share leadership) (Carnevale, Gainer, and Meltzer 1990).

However, according to Rosenberg, Heimler, & Motote (2012), recent graduates, university faculty, and company recruiters do not always see eye to eye about which of these basic skills are

most important or what skill level recent graduates have actually obtained in their time studying at institutions of higher learning. Indeed, it could be said that there is a lack of clear communication of expectations and perceptions between graduates, companies, and educational institutions.

See table 1 below

Table 1: Summary of the Literature Review

| Author   | Year | Key Points  | Seminal Works  | Argument  | Skills Associated   |
|--|------|---|--|---|---|
| US Department of Labor                         | 1991 | Industry and education. Community and school.   | <i>SCANS (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills) blueprint for action: Building community coalitions</i>                    | The report identifies the basic employability skills required for workers to create and retain competitive advantage.   | Basic literacy and numeracy skills. Critical thinking. Interpersonal skills. Information technology skills.   |
| National Association of Colleges and Employers | 2009 | Employability. Basic skills.  | <i>Job outlook</i>   | The results of the survey show that the most important, and most deficient, skill required are communication skills.  | Communication skills. Interpersonal skills.   |
| Rosenberg, Heimler, Morote                     | 2012 | Attitudes. Human Resource managers. Basic employability skills. Triangular design.                          | <i>Basic employability skills: a triangular design approach</i>  | There are considerable differences in opinion among graduates, faculty and human resource managers with regard to the skills needed for job performance.      | Leadership. Interpersonal skills. Management skills. Work ethic. Literacy and numeracy skills. Critical thinking. Information technology skills. Systems thinking skills. |
| Erasmus LinkYou Project                        | 2018 | Employability. Latin America. Crowdsourcing.  | <a href="https://linkyou.fahsbender.pe/en/home/">https://linkyou.fahsbender.pe/en/home/</a>  | The employability of young graduates in Latin America can be improved through crowdsourcing.  | Self-learning. Contact with enterprises. Problem solving. Networking. Information technology skills.  |
| Erasmus LinkYou Project                        | 2018 | Denmark. Portugal. United Kingdom. Employability skills.  | <i>Best practices case studies</i> <a href="https://linkyou.fahsbender.pe/en/home/">https://linkyou.fahsbender.pe/en/home/</a>             | European universities use different approaches in order to develop skills needed for job performance.   | Contact with enterprises. Self-learning. Networking. Decision making. Active citizenship. Respect for cultural differences. Creativity.                                   |
| Boni, Calabuig                                 | 2017 | Cosmopolitanism. Global citizenship. Internationalization of higher education. Cooperation and competition. | <i>Education for global citizenships at Universities: Potentialities of formal and informal learning spaces to foster cosmopolitanism.</i> | Both formal (i.e., university electives) and informal spaces (i.e., student groups) are useful in order to promote global citizenship in university students. | Self-learning. Critical thinking. Social awareness. Global perspective. Group work. Ethics. Active participation. Respect for cultural awareness.                         |

Source: Authors compilation

Table 1 presents references regarding employability and the skills associated with it. The US Department of Labor's 1991 report, together by the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), carried out research regarding the basic skills required for workers to

help US industries to be competitive and found that “students believed that employment skills were learned on the job, through participation in extracurricular activities or simply by osmosis” (p. 9); later, the results of the 2005 edition of this same study reported that inadequacies regarding employability skills were related to work ethic and explained negative business performance.

Additionally, the 2009 Job Outlook report from the US National Association of Colleges and Employers states that employers consider communication skills to be the most important skill for employability and, at the same time, the skill which was most lacking among recent university graduates. It can definitely be said, as Rosenberg, Heimler, & Morote put it, "the need for additional training of recent graduates appears to be a major concern" (2012, p. 15).

## **Research Method**

The population of participants in the Global Environment for Business workshop at ESAN included current undergraduates, recent graduates who were not yet working, and recent graduates who had recently started working. The result was a heterogeneous mix of perspectives and life experiences through which the videoconferencing experience was filtered.

Six alumni (four working and two not yet working) and three undergraduates (none already working) took part in the module on the United States. Two alumni who were not yet working and two undergraduates who were not yet working took part in the module on Mexico. Two alumni (both working) and five undergraduates (four not yet working and one already working) took part in the module on the United States.

After each link, a survey was applied to take advantage of lessons to be learned regarding the workshop’s perceived effect on participants’ employability skills (see Appendix A). The survey consisted of questions regarding both the content of the workshop and the technology used in the workshop. Once the survey data from all three modules was aggregated, qualitative content analysis was used to identify the major themes the students identified regarding the usefulness of the workshop experience.

## Results

One of the most prominent results highlighted in the surveys was the emphasis alumni and working students gave to the workshop's usefulness in terms of increasing their employability skills. As one working alumnus who participated in the China module explained,

“Understanding a different culture can help us in new business activities as well as in making new friends in other countries.” One recent graduate who was not working at the moment said of the United States module, “In the case of careers, it is essential to take cultural awareness courses. In all the jobs that I have had in English, it was very important knowing how to interact with foreigners. In marketing we work with all types of people so learning their customs and how to relate to them seems to me the most interesting part of the course.”

In contrast, pre-professional undergraduates, while many times noting in passing that the workshop would help them professionally in the future, gave much more emphasis to the social benefits and increase in general knowledge that the workshop afforded. As one undergraduate who was not yet working who participated in the Mexico module stated,

“[The workshop] helped me a lot, ‘cause [sic] I think I have learned about another Latin America country and realized that even though we are from the same continent we do have some differences in different terms, such as traditions, habits, etc.”

More specifically, the results of the survey show that there were five general ways in which participants identified that the workshop would help them grow professionally. First of all, four participants, all of them graduated and/or currently working, mentioned that it had helped them learn how to manage intercultural or international business relationships better. One recent graduate who was not yet working said of the US module,

“I learned how to handle different people from around the world.” Similarly, a recent, working graduate who participated in the US module said, “The importance of the workshop is to

understand the difference between American society and Peruvian [society], in order to manage relations. In my professional life I work in international banks.”

Another way that some participants mentioned that the workshop would benefit them in the working world was that it would improve their intercultural communication skills at work. One recent working graduate who participated in the US module stated,

“Understanding the culture helps me to know new ways of communicating with people from the USA. At the moment, I work with the USA [sic] office, and now I can understand more insights that are a difficult matter at work.”

In the same vein, another recent graduate who was not yet working and also an undergraduate student, both participants in the US module, said the workshop specifically helped them to know how to negotiate better with foreigners and that this could help them professionally in the future.

A third way several participants said the workshop had improved their professional outlook was that it gave them an opportunity to practice their English language skills. Peru is a Spanish-speaking country, and some people might not have many opportunities to practice English outside of a setting like that afforded by the workshop. One recent, working graduate said of the China module,

“I believe this workshop helped me to develop my skills to not only practice English but also learn how to communicate with foreign students, with different cultures, schedules and thoughts.”

Fourth, one recent, working graduate who was applying to master’s degree programs stated that having participated in the workshop would help her present herself to others as a more capable professional due to the credentials the workshop gave her:

“[I can adapt] a great workshop to my CV ... [this] says that I was interested in other countries and perspectives [and] would look good on my job application [and applications] for my postgraduate [studies,] and the best part [is that] I can take some parts [of the workshop experience] for my thesis work.”

In a similar but much more general way, an undergraduate who participated in the Mexico module identified a way in which the workshop helped her identify more professional opportunities for herself: *“[Mexico and Peru] are very similar, particularly in culture and values. I think that I wouldn't have problems if I worked there.”*

Fifth, a few participants identified that the workshop would help them professionally but in general terms of “sharing culture” and “increasing intercultural understanding.” For example, an undergraduate who participated in the US module said of the workshop,

“I consider that it taught me to have a more open idea about the intercultural context in the USA. The developed skills such as sharing of ideas and getting to know another culture [will allow] me to develop a more successful professional life.”

The sole working undergraduate who participated in the workshop, specifically the China module, stated,

“This workshop was very important for me, both for my job and for my university degree program, since although I already had knowledge due to my having worked in China for six years, this workshop served to help me understand the culture of this country more in depth, to understand other aspects than those I already knew, which will serve me in my professional life.”

Although these observations of how the workshop will help the participants professionally are general, they are grounded in careful thought and still focus on how the workshop will help the participants professionally in the future.

One final pattern worth mentioning is that every single one of the participants surveyed in all three modules stated that they would recommend this workshop to friends because they found it interesting and useful. One recent, working graduate who participated in the US module even went so far as to say,

“Honestly, I believe it is an excellent idea to offer [this workshop] to graduate students because we have been studying for so long, but this shows us how [intercultural communication] actually is at work. You learn more specific stuff about your career and what you specifically are doing at the moment.”

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Indeed, the participants of the Global Environment for Business workshop were able to identify key ways in which this intercultural interactive experience mediated by ICT was useful to them. More specifically, graduates and working people were much more mindful of the ways the workshop would help professionally, perhaps due to the fact that they were more focused on the

practical applications of the intercultural experience as opposed to the social and theoretical aspects. This lines up with the findings of Olivos (2016), who states that videoconferencing or synchronous interaction through international, interactive sessions conducted by expert faculty provides intercultural knowledge acquisition in students and also facilitates the development of social values, cultural values, and the appreciation of diverse cultures.

Regarding the skills that the participants believed the workshop experience would help them hone, one of the most prominent was the ability to effectively manage intercultural business relations. According to the ASTD categorization of employability skills, this would fall under the category of “Group Effectiveness Skills” (Carnevale, Gainer, and Meltzer 1990). This links to employability skill (Boni and Calabuig 2017), SCANS (1991). A second important skill the workshop increased, according to participants, was intercultural workplace communication skills, including negotiation skills, which are culturally dependent (Weiss & Stripp, 1998). A third skill the participants identified the workshop as improving was their English language skills. This links to employability skill and Intercultural Competence (Adler and Bartholomev 1992).

A fourth way participants stated the workshop had benefited them was the increased professional credentials with which the experience provided them. Finally, it is important to highlight that the participants all recommended the workshop, with its brief theoretical overview, its videoconferencing, and its international collaborative projects. This indicates that, in addition to being beneficial for the undergraduates the normal course is usually offered to, this kind of experience could be quite valuable to those who are no longer studying a traditional undergraduate degree, such as graduate students and working professionals.

In conclusion, it can be said that universities can improve employability providing students and alumni with international academic activities based on sustainable methodologies as it is the use of technological tools, this is in order to promote the acquisition of skills related to intercultural communication in an international virtual context. Further investigation should be done on this study and this topic of employability.

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## **Appendix A: Global Environment for Business Post-Module Survey**

1. Please mark the appropriate option: I am a \_\_\_student \_\_\_graduate.

Are you currently working? \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_No

2. About the content of the workshop: please explain how you think what you have learned can positively impact your professional life.

3. About the methodology and the use of the technology in the workshop:

Do you feel comfortable with communicating via the different media? \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_No

Which one is your preferred medium for the workshop?

VC  Social Media  Chat  Forum

Comment on your choice.

4. Would you recommend this workshop for others? Why or why not?