

**Practicing what we preach: Cross-country teaching collaborations to support SMEs' internationalisation and students' real-life learning**

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**Abstract**

This paper illustrates how teaching itself and not only the content of teaching can be internationalised in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The INTENSE teaching approach, developed in an Erasmus+ programme, fosters student's international skills, entrepreneurial skills and innovation skills. The approach was developed by five HEIs. Besides the development of new teaching materials for interactive class room use in an international collaboration, an international consultancy network was set up. As part of their curricula, students from different countries and HEIs consult real-life SMEs in their internationalisation. Within the network, students from the home and the host country of the specific SME, and therefore also from different HEIs, are involved. They can offer country specific knowledge to the SMEs and the collaboration between students of different HEIs and countries benefits their learning. In this paper we describe how and why this teaching approach was developed, how it can be implemented, as well as the lessons learned and best-practices from the first four semesters of teaching the approach.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Internationalisation is the core topic in the field of international business. However, while we as lecturers often preach internationalisation in our teaching, we do not necessarily practice it by redeveloping our teaching approaches accordingly.

Most of us are aware of all the benefits that internationalisation provides, but many are reluctant to make use of our international network to support the learning experience of students. Research on the experiences in international teaching projects might create a better awareness among scholars to see best practices and be motivated to implement projects themselves. However, international teaching scenarios are hardly addressed to spread the word. Nevertheless, Minett-Smith and Davis (2019) state, that international joint teaching is common in EU funded education projects. Hence, we wonder why there is limited research on international joint teaching approaches and want to contribute to the literature with our experiences from the INTENSE (INTernational Entrepreneurship Skills Europe) project.

The INTENSE project was supported as a strategic partnership by Erasmus+ for three years. Within the INTENSE project, an initial team of five higher education institutions (HEI) conjointly redeveloped teaching modules that relate to international business, project management, and consultancy. The main driver of that decision was a discrepancy between the skills that practitioners seek in graduates they employ and the skills that we emphasised at HEIs in the past. This gap is described in detail in chapter 2 of the paper. The new teaching approach consists of multiple elements. The capstone of the teaching approach is a cross-country real-life consultancy project. In these projects, students and teachers from different HEIs support SMEs in their internationalisation endeavours. International collaboration allows that students from the host and the home country of the SME can work together and practice their previously gained knowledge. In order to prepare students for these demanding projects, they are instructed on the basics of international business, project management, and consultancy related skills

upfront with newly developed, partly interactive, teaching approaches that are open source. These teaching concepts have been developed together by the involved partner HEIs. The project therefore benefitted a lot from the international network and best-practices have been shared. The details on the teaching approach can be found in chapter 3. In chapter 4, we summarise our learning experiences that might be insightful for lecturers in the field of international business in various ways. These experiences relate to the improved employability of students and their skill enhancement, the benefits for SMEs, as well as the benefits for the lecturers' networks. We also describe organisational and administrative challenges in setting up the international teaching approach, strategies to make the co-teaching work and insights how to structure a virtual collaboration across countries.

Our paper provides the following contributions to the international business community. First, we illustrate how internationalisation can be integrated into our curricula and how the usage of our international scholar network can benefit student's learning and improve their employability. We hope that this sparks a debate on internationalising our teaching as such and not only the content of our teaching. Second, we show how the network between SMEs and HEIs can be strengthened by providing direct consultancy to firms for topics related to internationalisation. This might be beneficial for scholars that want first hand contact with firms. Third, we illustrate various lessons learned and best-practices that should be considered when implementing such a project.

## **2. DEMAND FOR DIFFERENT SKILLS**

Globalisation changed the ways we work and learn. As a result, the labour market expects graduates and staff of HEIs to competently interact in global settings. New technologies, increased international business dependencies and an emerging knowledge economy have posed a discussion on the growing gap between the skills and capabilities of graduates and

labour market requirements and how HEIs are expected to promote the employability of students and staff. Therefore, the purpose, the societal and economic role, and the structure of HEIs might need a redefinition. As a response, the concept of entrepreneurial universities was proposed, which seek to foster entrepreneurial development in teaching and learning, university-business relationships for knowledge exchange, and internationalisation (OECD & European Commission, 2012). These objectives are closely linked to the educational concepts of internationalisation, entrepreneurial education, and innovation pedagogy.

The internationalisation of HEIs contains two dimensions: The first focuses on increasing international skills of students at home by incorporating international and intercultural dimensions into curricula as well as extracurricular activities. The second dimension focuses on internationalisation abroad, and includes cross-national educational activities such as distance learning, student and staff mobility, credit and degree mobility, establishing networks among students, scholars, institutions, and off-shore campuses (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Saulich & Lehmann, 2017). However, Nilsson (2000, p. 40) found that „traditional approaches such as mobility are a start, but do not go far enough, in that they have a limited audience and little institutional impact.“

Entrepreneurial education focuses on task-oriented skills, e.g. for small business development and management, as well as behaviour-oriented skills, such as problem-solving, innovation, risk-taking, and persistence (Henry et al., 2005). Neck and Greene (2011) discuss that entrepreneurial education focuses on teaching a method and not on knowledge. Research has shown that entrepreneurial education leads to changes in students' behaviour (Rauch & Hulsink, 2015) and increases the employability of students (Kucel et al., 2016). Hahn et al. (2017) show that practice-oriented teaching has a positive influence on students learning from entrepreneurial education.

Innovation pedagogy emphasises the learning effects of group interaction (Kettunen et al., 2013).

Hence, we asked: How can we as European HEIs enhance students' internationalisation, entrepreneurial, and innovation skills in order to foster their employability?

Table 1 summarises the necessary skills and matches them with teaching and learning methods.

\*Table 1\*

### **3. THE INTENSE TEACHING APPROACH**

#### 3.1 Development of the teaching approach

According to Saulich and Lehmann's (2017) tools to teach the desired skills, we developed the INTENSE teaching approach. Within the "INTENSE – INTERNATIONAL Entrepreneurship Skills Europe" project, we aim to incorporate the mentioned skills into the curricula of HEIs. The aim of INTENSE is to develop and implement a cross-country teaching module on the internationalisation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) as an Open Educational Resource (Saulich & Lehmann, 2017; Jokiniemi, 2017).

In joint workshops with 5 partner HEIs across Europe we developed a teaching module of 15 ECTS. We decided to focus on internationalisation of SMEs as the core theme since international management seems to be a field with a lot of entrepreneurial and innovative potential and is specifically focused our main priority, the enhancement of international skills. Particularly SMEs struggle with the challenges imposed by globalisation as they are lacking knowledge and resources. Hence, we found practice-oriented learning in cooperation with SMEs both realistic for the HEI and value adding for all participants.

The requirements for the 15 ECTS teaching module were rather diverse, based on different demands of different HEIs. It should be: (1) usable for Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences alike, (2) easy to separate in different 5 ECTS components that are conclusive in itself,

(3) applicable to different levels within the study programme, and (4) easy to include in diverse curricular.

The five partner institutes developed the teaching material conjointly. Each institute contributed to developing teaching material that corresponded to its specific field of expertise. Throughout various meetings, quality criteria were discussed and developed. A first version of the teaching material was developed during the summer term of 2017. Lecturers were invited to comment on this version and the corresponding feedback led to a revision. A staff training on entrepreneurial learning and innovation pedagogy ensured a common ground for teachers across the different HEIs. The revised material was deployed in a pilot run during the winter term 2017/2018 that involved only small groups of students per HEI. After a second round of revision during the summer term 2018 and a final full run with 25 students per partner university during the winter term 2018/19, the teaching material was again revised based on feedback from lecturers and students and finalised in the summer term 2019.

### 3.2 The INTENSE Teaching Approach

As practice-based learning is vital in the INTENSE teaching approach, students work on cross-national student consulting projects. This is the core component of the teaching approach. Before starting the consulting projects, students are trained with the necessary knowledge and skills. The INTENSE teaching approach can be split into 3 modules of 5 ECTS: (1) Internationalisation of SMEs, which is a rather general introductory international business course with focus on SMEs. This course has several interactive components but has still a rather common focus on knowledge transmission. (2) Project Management and Consultancy Skills, is a very interactive course preparing students in self-organizing and soft skills, which are essential for the third component. Finally, in the (3) Student Consultancy Project, cross-national student teams consult SMEs in their internationalisation endeavours.

To foster international skills, the class is taught in parallel at the five HEIs that participate in the INTENSE project. To ensure a certain degree of consistency, each lecture consists of both a PPT file and a detailed teaching script with instructions for lecturers, further readings, learning objectives, workload, etc. The teaching script provides an overview of the topics, the learning outcomes, a detailed explanation of how the lecture is organised, the method, materials needed and the time needed for the activity.

A key part of the journey is the cross-national student consultancy, where the students put together all of the learned theoretical knowledge and use it in real-life situations. In each country, students provide advice to SMEs with the aim to promote the SMEs' internationalisation. Students work together in teams of five to seven students, each collaborating with one SME. The consultancy project is supplemented by a course that follows a blended learning approach; meaning that some lectures take place as regular lectures in the class room, while most sessions are rather individual coaching sessions between the lecturer and the student teams (Lehmann et al., 2018).

In order to prepare the consultancy project, lecturers have initial meetings with the companies before the semester starts to discuss the implementation and the specific topic of the consultancy project. The actual consultancy project starts with a kick-off workshop with companies and student teams. During the kick-off workshop, students interview the companies based on interview outlines that they prepare beforehand and agree on specific tasks. Afterwards, students are responsible to coordinate the cooperation with the company by themselves. Four to six weeks after the kick-off workshop, students present their preliminary findings to the company. The mid-term presentation served to clarify questions, gather additional company information and to further specify the tasks of the students. At the end of the academic term, students present their findings at an intermediary institution, e.g. the Chamber of Commerce,

and hand over their final consulting report. The final presentation serves as a multiplier event to attract companies for further consultancy projects (Lehmann et al., 2018).

An idiosyncrasy of the student consulting project is its transnational character. The teaching module is taught in parallel at all INTENSE partner institutions. In order to enhance the students' internationalisation skills, student teams cooperate cross-country as demonstrated in the example in Figure 1 (Wohlgemuth et al., 2019).

Team A in Germany collaborates with SME A, also based in Germany. SME A wants to internationalise to the Netherlands. Team B, based at an HEI in the Netherlands, supports team A. Team B provides Team A with relevant knowledge of the Dutch market. At the same time, Team A provides specific information on the German market to Team C. Team C is based in Finland and collaborates with the Finish SME C who sought to internationalise to Germany (Lehmann et al., 2018; Ammeraal, 2019).

*\*Figure 1\**

This system of providing and receiving support to and from other teams ensures that students acquire market-related knowledge in two European countries – their home country and the host country of their SME. Moreover, students gain insights into two different companies and products: first, the company they are collaborating with; and second, the company of the foreign team they are providing support to. Furthermore, each team has to cooperate with two other teams from different cultural backgrounds. This enhances the teams' networking and teamwork skills by fostering inter- and intra-group cooperation. The cross-country consultancy project supports intercultural learning among students, helps them to establish international networks, and increases their language skills. Inter-team collaboration partly took place at a one-week student meeting that offers students the opportunity to conjointly work on their projects and to participate in workshops on entrepreneurship and an intercultural training. Students also collaborate virtually and thereby train their distance learning and virtual team skills. In sum,

the consultancy project increases the students' ability to interact in international settings and enhances their understanding of international business (Lehmann et al., 2018; Ammeraal, 2019; Rantanen, 2018).

At the end of the project, the students develop a case study from their experience. These case studies are used to teach future INTENSE students and, in general, go through two rounds of revision before the final version. These case studies are used by the teaching staff for other classes, as well as in the first INTENSE module on internationalisation of SMEs in order to prepare the students. Teaching staff is particularly interested in case studies of SMEs since case studies in most academic literature refer to MNCs rather than SMEs. It is more likely that students will find a job in an SME than in an MNC (Hees et al., 2013).

## **4. FIRST RESULTS AND LESSONS LEARNED**

### 4.1 First Results

As the project is about to end, we cannot provide final results based on quantitative data yet, but can display first results in form of qualitative data, mostly based on observations and informal discussion with participants.

#### *4.1.1 Students' employability*

We did not only observe a general higher employability of our students in line with (Kucel et al., 2016), who report that students with higher entrepreneurial skills are better in finding a fitting job, but could observe direct employment effects. SMEs literally used the consultancy project as a recruiting platform. Several SMEs offered students a job as a working student or internship placement. Often long-term relationships developed. For instance, a German SME offered one student from its consulting team an internship opportunity. After the internship the student continued to work for the SME as a working student and got offered a job from this SME right after graduation. Seeing these benefits, the SME next door, participated in the

student consultancy in the following year, with the intention to find high skilled employees among our students. A similar case happened in Croatia and the Netherlands, where a SME hired a student from the consultancy team, and the following year this SME participated in the student consultancy again, with the former student being the contact point for the student consultancy team within the firm.

#### *4.1.2 Students' skills enhancement*

We faced difficulties in measuring the skill improvement of the students and lecturers. We tried to measure it with the FINCODA instrument (Peñalver et al., 2018), but this approach was not very successful for measurement related shortcomings and changed privacy and data security regulations. However, the individual feedback of the students points towards clear skill improvement. Students stated:

“The team enhanced their creativity skills. We used intuition and new ways to implement ideas.”

The enhancement of international skills was more obvious. For example, the students mentioned they improved their language and communication skills, intercultural skills, teamworking skills, and presentations skills.

#### *4.1.3 SME internationalisation*

The SMEs clearly benefited from the HEIs' knowledge and guidance through the internationalisation process. Most consulted SMEs implemented at least parts of the students' recommendations. The SMEs also benefit from increased international skills among their employees, as the following statements demonstrate:

“The students' work has certainly opened our eyes in terms of realising different approaches to internalisation for our franchise business.”

“The participation in this project helped our company to get a new perspective on cross-border businesses, how to operate and function in international markets, and what our next step should be, so we could say that the probability is very high.”

“This kind of project gives students and companies an opportunity to develop a set of innovation competencies. The results of the research give an opportunity for creative and critical thinking and proactive actions during the process of entering a new, international market.”

#### *4.1.4 Lecturers networks*

Lecturers developed their networks in two directions. First, concerning international teachers. Besides meeting and working with other lecturers within the project, lectures also became curious about the cross-national teaching approach and visited each other’s classes also outside of the project. Furthermore, through spreading project ideas, more universities became interested in joining our teaching approach. Yet, we already enlarged our teaching network to nine universities.

Second, lecturers created local business-university networks, as they offered direct and concrete value to the SMEs in form of the student consultancy. The lecturers could not only create relations with companies but also with intermediary institutions such as the Chamber of Commerce. One teacher summarised:

“We were also in touch with the companies from our partner network. Interesting to experience how those foreign SMEs work and how we could contribute to their internationalisation strategy. We expanded our business network.”

These diverse networks created learning and feedback loops for the lecturers with which they enrich other classes now. Finally, students benefited from more real-life and hand-on examples in the class discussions. Teachers stated:

“During the INTENSE module we worked very closely with SMEs involved in this project and by stepping into their shoes we managed to understand issues they face during the internationalisation of their businesses. This collaboration increased our knowledge of internationalisation and the performance of SMEs aiming to internationalise their business.”

“We found that the INTENSE project lectures were outside our normal routine and made us do things differently... We got insight into new ways of teaching which has helped us gain new ideas for future students’ assignments.”

#### *4.1.5. Intensive collaboration leads to a better understanding of internal processes*

During the INTENSE project lecturers collaborate intensively with lecturers from partner universities. Lecturers teach the same course, work on the same cross-national project and therefore advise the same company. This means a rather unique form of collaboration, much different than a teaching opportunity at a partner university or a joint academic paper (Wohlgemuth et al., 2019; Lehmann et al., 2019). This intensive collaboration opens doors to other forms of cooperation. For example, it facilitates the opportunity to get more insight in internal procedures such as the grading process, the functioning of examination board, the graduation process or the allocation of teacher hours. These additional learning opportunities are unplanned but are as important as the planned learning opportunities.

#### *4.1.6. Increased entrepreneurial profile of the academic programme*

During the three years that a partner institution has been participating in the INTENSE project on average 25 SMEs were involved. In traditional courses, this amount of company involvement is rarely the case. This means a much stronger link with the business community than in traditional courses, therefore the academic programme as a whole has become much more business-oriented and the entrepreneurial profile of the programme increased.

## 4.2 Lessons Learned

### *4.2.1 Organisational and administrative challenges*

Academic calendars and course requirements across universities varied greatly, which made the scheduling of the student work phase but also a proper pre-work team meeting difficult. For instance, cooperation between student teams was difficult as some students started their consultancy projects in early September while others started in November.

Furthermore, recruiting SMEs, scheduling meetings before the consultancy projects started, and organising the kick-off meeting and the final event make this an exciting but time-consuming course, which often demands extra- und unpaid efforts by the lecturers. Another challenge that we faced was steering the enrolment for the consultancy project. In Germany for instance, lecturers did not know how many students would participate in the course and what their background knowledge was until the first class meeting. Furthermore, students were – by university regulations – entitled to disenroll from the course throughout the first three weeks of the course, which lead to a rather late kick-off of the consultancy project.

In the Netherlands, the project was also open to incoming exchange students meaning that e.g. an Irish student was working on the project and had to interview Dutch wholesalers. For students not speaking the native language this was quite a challenge.

Even though students were eager to work on a real-life case, some were overwhelmed and expected more support or upfront instructions on how to be a consultant. Interestingly, many students expected SMEs to have a clear and detailed vision and workplan for their internationalisation process. They were surprised to learn that SMEs did not address them with a clear-cut task and as a first step they had to find out what the needs and expectations of their client were (Lehmann et al., 2018).

#### *4.2.2 Co-teaching*

While there is no need to rely on co-teaching for well-known theoretical concepts of internationalisation and project management, it is very valuable to add host/ home country collaboration if the content of the lecture is not standardised and ambiguous ad-hoc information is needed as in the student consultancy project. We find that teachers should establish and maintain specific areas of expertise (Austin, 2001; Minett-Smith & Davis, 2019).

We tried to emphasise that the home country teacher should generally be in charge and the host country lecturers and students offer support. While students and lecturers later confirmed that

multiple lecturers and team learning benefitted their learning, it created some frustration along the way and required additional effort. For instance, the workload expectations and the adherence to deadlines differed substantially and created a lot of misunderstandings between the teams. This was partly caused by varying academic calendars and course requirements across HEIs. Resolving those situations early on and discussing the progress of both teams and the quality of their work regularly is crucial to avoid misunderstandings (Wohlgemuth et al., 2019).

Like teachers before (Minett-Smith & Davis, 2019) we had to realise as well that the often assumed intrinsic motivation and like-mindedness of the faculty is not found everywhere. Furthermore, often the individual teachers still operate isolated and minimise collaboration as communication is perceived as too time demanding and difficult. We attribute this not only to a lack of motivation, but rather to a lack of time resources, as mentioned in previous literature. Most participating lecturers volunteered to participate in the international joint teaching approach but did not receive any (time) compensation.

In general, we found that most teachers were interested to participate in the project. However, the link with the business community was not developed in the same way at the five partner institutions. Some teachers had little experience with working in a real-life consultancy project. Therefore, the steering and coaching from the lecturers at the five partner institutions varied.

#### *4.2.3 Virtual learning and working*

Cross-country team communication relies mainly on virtual tools to reduce costs. The virtual work phase is often characterised by a lot of misunderstandings and frustration among student teams. Winn and Beck (2018) identified five challenges of working in virtual teams: challenges relating to language competence, relating to cultural differences, relating to the complexity of the project, relating to time, relating to technology. In this project we encountered all challenges except the challenges relating to time since there were not time differences in the five countries.

Students were free to choose the communication media. Various channels, such as e-mails, text messenger services, video-conferencing, phones, file sharing services etc. were used. Not all communication media were well perceived and the reliance on redundant information on various media helped the progress and the understanding. No specific medium is superior in all cases, but the diversity creates additional value (Tenzer & Pudelko, 2016).

We try to ensure one actual student team meeting in the frame on an international student week. Usually this improved relations between most teams. While weak forms of trust were present in the initial communication, the direct evaluation of someone's ability, integrity and benevolence (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999) led to a replacement of the initial swift trust by stronger forms of trust and distrust in the relationships. Most teams judged the others teams favourably in direct contact, which improved the collaboration in the third work phase, the virtual collaboration after the meeting. However, one team appeared less trustworthy than in virtual communication. This resulted in the opposite effect. Our experiences support previous work on 'swift trust' (Gilson at al., 2014) and the 'leap of faith' (Möllering, 2001) in virtual communication.

Overall, our experiences show that a combination of distance learning and face to face contact is beneficial. Distance learning helps to decrease costs significantly and is required by the nature of the project. However, at least one short face to face meeting creates a more realistic picture of your partnering team to justify the initial swift trust. In most cases, it supports the efficiency of future work and communication. If a physical contact is not possible, a reliance on multiple communication media might be supportive to avoid miscommunication and build at least weak swift trust. Lecturers and students need to take into account that virtual communication and building up trust in a virtual environment requires a high level of commitment and effort from all participants.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Our paper provides the following contributions to the international business community. First, we illustrate how internationalisation can be integrated into our curricula and how the usage of our international scholar network can benefit student's learning and improve their employability. The INTENSE teaching material helps students and staff to get more experience and knowledge in internationalisation, entrepreneurship, and innovation. Experience in these areas helps students to operate better in uncertain environments and broadens their horizons. By focusing on developing skills of the students, the INTENSE programme goes beyond the traditional content-focused curricula and makes use of teaching methods that foster deep learning (Bennet & Bennet, 2008), acquired through active methods and learning in real work situations (Saulich & Lehmann, 2017).

The student consultancy enhances students' entrepreneurship skills by training task-related and behaviour-oriented knowledge through active teaching methods. It also transmits innovation skills by encouraging students to create networks with SMEs and intermediary institutions.

Second, we show how the network between SMEs and HEIs can be strengthened by providing direct consultancy to firms for topics related to internationalisation. While it takes some effort to recruit SMEs for participation in the projects, the collaboration enables scholars and HEIs to develop a strong relationship with the firms. The SMEs directly benefit from the students' efforts and are therefore closely connected to the HEIs. These networks can be very beneficial for additional projects in research and teaching. Moreover, they help not only students, but also scholars to leave the ivory tower and become updated on current problems in practice.

Third, we illustrate various lessons learned and best-practices that should be considered when implementing such a project. Scholars that might be interested in joining the network or setting up a comparable teaching approach can learn from this and avoid unnecessary challenges.

We hope that this sparks a debate on internationalising our teaching as such and not only the content of our teaching. There are various alternative possibilities for further research and teaching practice that involve the usage of our international HEI networks to complement our teaching in international business.

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## Tables

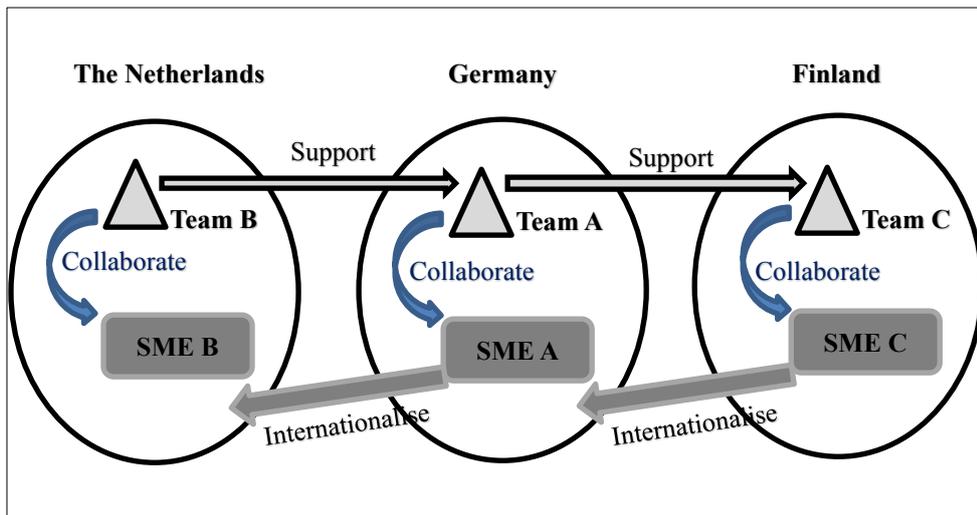
**Table 1: Relevant Internationalisation, Entrepreneurial, and Innovation Skills**

	<b>Internationalisation</b>	<b>Entrepreneurial</b>	<b>Innovation</b>
<b>Set of skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intercultural skills</li> <li>• Foreign language skills</li> <li>• Global awareness</li> <li>• Ability to interact in global settings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Task-oriented skills: small business development and management</li> <li>• Behaviour-oriented skills: personal traits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set of individual, inter-personal and networking skills needed in innovation creating processes</li> </ul>
<b>Tools/ Methods</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intercultural training</li> <li>• Distance learning</li> <li>• Student/staff mobility</li> <li>• Credit/degree mobility</li> <li>• International networks</li> <li>• Off-shore campuses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Entrepreneurship as a method</li> <li>• Learning by doing</li> <li>• Practicing skills in real life/work situations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of networks within universities and regional networks</li> <li>• Applied research</li> <li>• Group interaction</li> <li>• Entrepreneurial and international activities</li> </ul>

Source: Saulich & Lehmann (2017)

## Figures

**Figure 1: Cross-country Student Consultancy**



Source: Lehmann et al. (2018)