

Students' Perspectives on Digital and International Virtual Academic Cooperation

Introduction

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The project Digital and International Virtual Academic Cooperation (DIVA) took place in 2020 and 2021. It brought together academics and students from Israel, Australia, and Germany to learn together and develop individual and joint skills in culturalized difference and digital collaboration. The DIVA project, in particular, aimed to expand existing learning opportunities and create new collaborations in the area of digital teaching formats at the participating universities in connection with international networks of scholars and students. We explicitly drew on the extensive experience of individual scholars and their many years of collaboration in different international research and teaching contexts. The project was directly linked to the universities' internationalization and digitization policies and aimed to promote the development of intercultural and teamwork skills between students and scholars.

Thus, with DIVA we developed and tested two comprehensive course components (synchronous/asynchronous and virtual/physical) and embedded them in the respective curricula and administration procedures. Co-teaching and peer learning as well as courses offered jointly with the international cooperation partners were the central building blocks of this project. The courses were developed in direct cooperation with international partners and were generated according to the needs of the students and their learning and social circumstances. All parts of the project were based on four guiding principles: digitization of teaching, methodological anchoring in the curriculum, fostering virtual and blended mobility, and promotion of intercultural competence.

This approach implies that students are deeply involved in the development, implementation, and evaluation of the project and its teaching compo-

nents. It is therefore logical that the students should also be involved in the reflection on this project here in this volume. Two of them – Ms. Tipura Sundari and Mr. Wang, both Master students at Charles Darwin University – were kind enough to share their experiences and pedagogical reflections with us. You will find their reflections below.

Two of their ideas will be highlighted in this introduction: the importance of digital learning (Tripura Sundari) and intercultural collaboration (Wang). Both aspects are definitely crucial for the success of the international virtual academic exchange, as the program line of the project funding is titled¹. As both students show in their texts, digital learning and intercultural cooperation are closely related in higher education, if not in every aspect of education. There is now a kind of »new normal« in applying digital platforms, tools, and processes in international learning (see also Bolaji's chapter in this volume).

In this way, virtuality and collaboration reinforce each other by developing a culture of collaboration even when students do not know each other at the beginning of the course and may only meet online. The digital environment seems to offer so many opportunities for co-operation that, if they are used properly, they can support experiences of intense and fruitful collaboration.

Nonetheless, there are some cultural and technical challenges in this kind of learning collaboration. As can be seen from the students' texts, there is always a need for some form of support from the scholars. This is also the case in higher education, as can be taken from the account in the following section. The students' experiences and suggestions are therefore of immense importance for the understanding of the DIVA project, as well as for digital learning in intercultural cooperation in general. This is also the reason why we are so grateful for their contributions.

¹ IVAC – International Virtual Academic Exchange by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).