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Designing International Online Degree Programmes in Finnish Higher Education

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Internationalisation is an important part of higher education. An increasing number of higher education institutions offer online degree programmes that enable studying in intercultural, global online contexts. This design-based research paper focuses on the holistic design of international online degree programmes. It investigates how students in a culturally and linguistically diverse online degree in Finland experience international and intercultural aspects. The approach was a mixed methods of electronic survey (N = 59) and thematic semi-structured interview (N = 7). Whilst studies seem to develop students' intercultural communication skills, results reveal training needs for teachers in culturally diverse online contexts in terms of materials, tools, communication, groupwork, and leadership, and support needs for organisational and online culture. As a conclusion, design principles for international and intercultural aspects in online degree programme design are presented. Results can be utilised by administrators and educators that wish to design degree programmes in international and intercultural online contexts.

Globalisation, advances in technology, and, most recently, the transformation of education to fully online due to the global pandemic are some of the major forces that are making online degree education a more viable option to many organisations in higher education (HE). Students are looking for options to study from their own locality with the opportunity to gain international experiences alongside professional competences. More research is needed to understand how an entire HE degree can be designed online to support culturally aware practices and internationalisation opportunities in a global online context.

Although there are degree programmes (DP) offered fully online in Finland, international online DPs in English are not yet common. Therefore, information on culturally aware practices for designing international fully online DPs in Finnish HE is lacking. The focus of development in Finnish HE should be on the quality of internationalisation activities (de Wit et al., 2015), and intercultural and international perspectives should be included in Finnish higher education institutions at the program level (Crawford & Bethell, 2012).

This paper examines how students in an international fully online degree programme in Finland experience HE studies conducted in multicultural global online study teams. More specifically, the paper explores their experiences as students in an international, culturally and linguistically diverse fully online DP in three categories: (a) international aspects of higher education online degree studies, (b) intercultural aspects of online degree studying, and (c) international and intercultural aspects of online degree teaching.

The methodology utilised in this paper is design-based research (DBR; Collins et al., 2004), and this study discusses the results of Cycle 3 to further develop the holistic design of online degree programmes created in previous DBR cycles 1-2. DBR aims to approach theoretical questions in real-life contexts (Collins et al., 2004) with cycles of design, enactment, analysis, and redesign. DBR involves developing theories that have

been tested in real-life contexts and bring outcomes and that can be shared with the research community (Design-Based Research Collective, 2003).

In this paper, the term "online degree programme" is used to describe a bachelor-level degree programme (DP) where the entire life cycle of education leading to a degree is completed fully online, where the instruction includes interactive elements, synchronous online meetings, and guided study (Joshi et al., 2018), and where access to all services and support is provided online by the organisation (Sener, 2002, 2015). The term international online degree programme is used in this paper to describe the above-mentioned degree studies that take place in multicultural global online study teams.

The purpose of this paper is to reveal how students experience HE education designed to be implemented in a fully online context where both students and staff are from various locations and cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The answers are sought to develop holistic design of online DPs in HE. The research questions are as follows:

1. How is internationalisation and interculturality experienced by students of an international online degree programme?
2. How can their experiences inform the holistic design of international online degree programmes?

This paper reports on the third cycle of a DBR process to develop the holistic design of online DPs by adding international and intercultural dimensions to the design. DBR can be used to address real life situations and contexts together with practitioners. According to DBR, the researcher is an active part of the research process, and the development work is done in a local context to develop pedagogical processes (Collins et al., 2004).

The context is the first fully online international business degree programme in applied higher education in Finland, where all instruction is conducted in English in a culturally and linguistically diverse study group.

The degree was established in 2017 and the empirical data of this paper was collected from all year groups of this degree to date (2017-2020). Student views can enhance design and ensure avoiding design mistakes (Brooman et al., 2015; Mihans et al., 2008), thus students are an important source for collecting information on the contextual experiences.

This paper adopts a holistic design approach. According to Hermansen (2020), programme design is closely connected to its surrounding organisational, epistemic, and political practices. A whole-of-institution approach in the design can ensure reaching full benefits of the selected approach (Harper & Vered, 2017; Kek & Huijser, 2017). Although disciplinary differences have been identified as an important part of instructional design and learning design (Carragher Wolverton & Guidry Hollier, 2019), the focus of this paper is on an organisation-level approach to internationalisation and interculturality and does not discuss disciplinary-specific approaches.

This paper creates new knowledge on the holistic design of fully online international DPs and quality enhancement in international online DP education. By placing it in the context of Finnish HE, the research expands understanding of creating new online international DPs in Finland. In addition, the knowledge can extend from fully online to blended education in the systemic integration of international and intercultural elements in curriculum design and teacher training, for example.

Results of the paper may be of interest to any HEI managers, administrators, or educators planning to offer fully online international DPs, where both students and staff are from various locations and cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The results can be used in the holistic design of international online DPs. In addition, the results can be used by online teachers to increase their awareness of how students experience studying and teaching in an international online DP.

International and Intercultural Aspects of Online Education

Many higher education institutions (HEI) already offer fully online degrees programmes, giving students an opportunity to study in an international context from their own locality (Chipere, 2017; Obexer, 2018). Internationalisation of the HEI, culturally diverse student groups, intercultural competence of teachers, and an applied HE context all pose requirements for the holistic design of international online DPs. In applied HE, studies are typically closely connected with working life, and the primary role of the applied HEIs is to prepare the students with the competences required to be successful in their careers.

Internationalisation of Higher Education

Globalisation has become an integral part of higher education (Bourn, 2011; Rovai & Downey, 2010; Vaira, 2004). Globalisation poses new challenges for holistic curriculum design and calls for transformative learning approaches to become global citizens (Clifford & Montgomery, 2017). Traditional ways of educating may no longer work in a fast-changing education and society where the aim is to prepare students for digitalised global work and society (Konst & Scheinin, 2018). Also, future students' expectations for HE are different (Márquez-Ramos & Mourelle, 2018).

Internationalisation has traditionally been considered an academic activity, such as student exchange or curriculum planning, but as an element of organisational internationalisation it should be included in the "culture, policy, planning and organizational process of the institution so that it can be both successful and sustainable" (Qiang, 2003, pp. 257-258). Clifford and Montgomery (2017) presented criticism against just study abroad periods as possible academic tourism and advocated for a holistic programme approach for supporting interculturality throughout the programme. Internationalisation at home can be an important alternative for countries such as Finland, where international degree programmes are not as common, and thus international and intercultural elements should be integrated into learning processes (Crawford & Bethell, 2012).

Globally networked learning environments with partners enable globalisation with technology, placing focus on staff and student participation and considering pedagogical approaches to design learning environments beyond traditional degree programmes (Starke-Meyerring, 2010). Hudzik and McCarthy (2012) defined the concept of comprehensive internationalisation (CIZN), which refers to the integration of internationalisation activities by including it in the values and culture of the higher education institution. Whilst they have not included online activities in the concept and implementation of CIZN, their findings can support the holistic design approach presented in this paper.

Internationalisation in this paper refers to extended competence that includes various attributes, such as the ability to work with diverse groups of people regardless of language or location (Hidden Competences, 2014). These attributes are used in addition to traditional views of internationalisation, such as having worked or studied abroad. However, whilst studying from a distance internationally can enrich educational activities (Cohen & Soffer, 2015), it does not mean education itself has been designed to include international and intercultural elements.

Green (2005) suggested that amongst strategies to increase international skills and knowledge is the use of technology. Cultural dimensions have an impact on the usability of an e-learning system (Downey et al., 2005), on the use of technology (Srite et al., 2008), and on the acceptance of technology-based education in different national cultures (Nistor et al., 2013). Pillay and James (2015) suggested that more research is needed to integrate technology in a multicultural setting to develop intercultural competencies. Additionally, Varhelahti et al. (2017) found that media synchronicity theory can be used to support choice of media in intercultural virtual environments.

Intercultural Aspects of Online Studying

Study abroad or global interaction does not require physical mobility anymore but is made possible by virtual encounters between different cultures, regions, and people, which could even refer to having intercultural experiences in their own country (Deardoff et al., 2012). Internationalisation should be supported throughout the programme (Clifford & Montgomery, 2017) and be included in the holistic processes of the organisation (Qiang, 2003).

Palloff and Pratt (2003) stated that intercultural student groups need support in online learning environments and recommended being culturally sensitive to online learners' differing cultural obstacles. Students value internationalisation activities or international aspects to learning brought by their teachers in class (Green, 2005). Indeed, culturally diverse online environments may affect students' learning, communication style, or teaching concepts, to name a few (Mason & Rennie, 2008). It is known that international students studying in an international DP need support on campus (Härmä & Joshi, 2013; Rasi et al., 2014), but it is important to understand the support needed in a fully online international DP context.

Intercultural Competence in Online Teaching

Byram (1997) divided intercultural competence into five parts: (a) attitude, (b) knowledge, (c) skills of interpreting and relating, (d) skills of discovery and interaction, and (e) critical cultural awareness, where also linguistic competence is an important aspect of intercultural competence. In this paper, the term "interculturality" is used to refer to intercultural competence as suggested by Byram et al. (2001), where they refer to technology in IC education through internationalisation and globalisation and suggest that teachers' role is to facilitate interaction with other cultures. Intercultural competency development is considered an ongoing process that is related to the

extent and quality of the student's engagement with other cultures (Hammer, 2015).

Collier (2015) reminded that evaluation of intercultural competence needs to include macro, meso, and micro contextual factors, where competence refers to more than just national or ethnic identities. Interaction is a process through which intercultural competence is constructed, and it is important to study how group members position themselves in relationships, as well as whose guidelines in competence are followed (Collier, 2015).

High skills in intercultural competence (IC) will bring career-related advantages like job performance (Shi & Franklin, 2014) and wellbeing. According to Schalkwyk et al. (2015), teachers are influenced by their culture and personal priorities, and their culture affects their understanding of quality teaching. Teaching staff need training opportunities for creating meaningful intercultural experiences online (Villar-Onrubia & Rajpal, 2016).

Huang's (2017) tripartite model includes dimensions of knowledge, action, and reflection for intercultural competence training programme design. Teachers seem to balance between maintaining their identity as experienced teachers as well as educators of culturally and linguistically diverse groups (Warren, 2018). Haas (2019) argued that there exists heterogeneity in the extent and methods to achieve intercultural competence in HEIs.

English used as a lingua franca in intercultural teams working virtually may influence how knowledge is shared, and lead to clustering between those who share the same linguistic background (Ahman, 2018). However, due to high awareness of linguistic differences, team members put in extra effort during interactions, leading to positive outcomes (Ahmad, 2018). Ethical and practical implications of using English as a lingua franca should also be considered (Hoye, 2016).

Also, media choice for communication in global virtual teams may vary according to language level (Klitmøller & Lauring, 2013). Spoken language and communication tools support constructing shared meaning. For example, in virtual meetings coping with the diversity is facilitated by the ability to operate not only with language but also with embodied and material resources (Räsänen, 2020). Teachers need support for integrating technology into teaching (Guilbaud et al., 2020).

Methods

This study utilised a mixed methods approach. Quantitative methods were used to form a common understanding of student experiences. After analysis of the survey results, the most significant themes were

selected to inform the qualitative part, where data was collected through thematic semi-structured interviews (Collis & Hussey, 2013). It is worth noting that the interviews were held on purpose after one year following the survey to gain more information on students' experiences. It was the researchers' intention to hear how their views may have developed during the studies in the online degree.

Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

The quantitative data was collected through electronic survey during 2019 by sending a group email to all students in the 2017 (*n* = 32), 2018 (*n* = 34), and 2019 (*n* = 34) cohort of BBA in International Business Online DP at Turku University of Applied Sciences (TUAS). In total, 59 answers were received, making the total response rate 59%. All students in the international online degree programme were included in this data collection, thus the entire student body is represented. Details of participants' background and experiences are shown in Table 1.

Of the total number of survey respondents (*N*=59), almost half were first-year students and half second-year students. Most respondents resided in Finland (*n*=46). When asked about their cultural background, 41 said they have one culture, whereas the rest identified as having multiple cultures. It is important to emphasise that this cohort represented multiple nationalities and cultures, and therefore the fact that majority resided in Finland does not correspond to being of Finnish nationality or cultural background.

The respondents' background and experiences differed vastly in terms of studying in an international group, studying online, and studying intercultural communication. The diversity of the respondents' background is also shown in their use of English and age.

Students were informed the questionnaire was anonymous and all data would be handled as group data rather than by looking at individual answers. The statements in the questionnaire were based on the background literature on internationalisation and intercultural aspects of HE in an online context. A Likert scale of 1-5, where 1 referred to full disagreement and 5 referred to full agreement, was used. The statements were divided into three parts:

- Part I: International aspects of online degree studies
- Part II: Intercultural aspects of online degree studying
- Part III: Intercultural and international aspects of online degree teaching

Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS and the following analyses were conducted: descriptive statistics of the statements, nonparametric Mann-Whitney U test, and nonparametric Spearman's correlation measure.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the Survey Respondents (N=59)

<u>IB Online Degree Students</u>	<u>N</u>
Study Year	
1 st Year Student	28
2 nd Year Student	31
Current Residence	
Turku	24
Finland (elsewhere)	22
EU	9
Outside EU	4
Cultural Background	
One Culture	41
Multiple Cultures	16
Prefer Not to Say	2
Online Learning Experience Before IB Online	
None	38
Some	21
Studies in International Group before IB Online	
Never	38
Some	21
Studies in Intercultural Communication	
IB Online Studies Only	26
IB Online Studies and Previous Studies	20
As Part of Work	2
None	11
Use of English	
In IB Online	56
At Work	37
At Home	34
Mother Tongue	7
Age	
19-29	27
30+	32

Background variables were tested to see if they influenced the experiences. Correlation of statements were studied to see if they revealed tendencies regarding experiences.

Results Based on the Electronic Survey

The main objective of this study is to examine how internationalisation and interculturality are experienced by students of an international online DP. The results of the electronic survey show the overall experiences of all respondents. Table 2 illustrates the mean (scale 1-5) and standard deviation of the respondents.

The statistics in Table 2 show that there was substantial variance in student responses regarding support and technical solutions at the university level. On the other hand, most students seemed to agree that studying in an international degree improves intercultural skills

Most students seemed to feel that having international students adds value to online degree studies, and their skills for working globally are improved. However, there was variance in the responses regarding collaboration and support for intercultural groups online, as well as how important collaboration is seen. There was variance in the answers related to training needs of teachers in intercultural skills and course design for intercultural groups, whereas students seemed to agree more on having international staff in the DP.

It was of interest to see if the background variables would influence the experiences of the students. For this, nonparametric Mann-Whitney U tests were used to analyse if the experiences differ by the background variables of study year groups (1st and 2nd), online study experience, and international degree study experience.

A Mann-Whitney U test indicated that most differences in opinions were found between these two groups: “have experience studying online” and “never studied online.” The distribution of the groups is significant concerning the statement “Teachers need training in designing courses for intercultural groups” ($p = .007$), where those with online study experience seemed to agree stronger on this ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.02$) than those who had never studied online ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.13$). Another significant difference was found concerning the statement “Teachers need training in intercultural communication skills” ($p = .016$), where those with online study experience agreed stronger on this statement ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.23$) than those without experience ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.20$).

A Mann-Whitney test indicated differences also between the two groups of those “with international study experience” and “never studied in an international group.” Students with experience seemed to need more support for working in intercultural groups online ($M = 4.00$, $SD = .94$) than those who never had studied in an international group ($M = 3.03$, $SD = .91$). This difference was statistically significant ($p < .001$). Students with experience also experienced that students’ cultural background has more influence on their online presence ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.09$) than those who never had studied in an international group ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.00$). This result is statistically significant ($p = .033$). Moreover, students with experience seemed to agree more ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.13$) on the statement “teachers need training in intercultural communication skills” ($p = .025$) than the other group ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.27$). Similarly, students with experience expressed stronger ($M = 4.00$, $SD = .98$) than those without experience ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.15$) that teachers need training in designing courses for intercultural groups ($p = .003$). It was also found that students’ experience on creating their own culture online is greater for second-year students ($M = 4.06$, $SD = .16$)

than for first-year students ($M = 3.61$, $SD = .17$). The finding was significant ($p = .044$).

Finally, an analysis by using non-parametric Spearman’s correlation coefficient was conducted to examine the relationship between the statements. Only moderate, strong, and very strong correlations ($r_s > .40$) with statistical significance ($p < .001$) are presented in this paper. A strong positive correlation was identified between the statements “Teachers need training in intercultural communication skills” and “Teachers need training in designing courses for intercultural groups” ($r_s = .748$, $p < .001$). The statement “Students’ cultural background has an influence on their online presence” correlated positively with “Teacher’s cultural background shows in their teaching style” ($r_s = .469$, $p < .001$). In addition, the statement “Having international students adds value to online degree studies” had a positive correlation with “Having international staff members adds value to online degree teaching” ($r_s = .443$, $p < .001$). See Appendix for correlations.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

After gathering and analysing the survey results, students were asked to take part in the thematic interview via an email invitation. The invitation was sent to those students who had expressed in the electronic questionnaire their interest to participate in further research about this topic. In total, 13 students were invited, out of which 8 accepted the invitation and 7 participated. The thematic semi-structured interview was held using the Zoom platform in May 2020. The meeting lasted for one hour and it was recorded. The themes of the interview were based on the most significant themes from the survey results.

Table 3 describes the interview group. For the analysis of the results, each interviewee was given a code A-G. The coding was done before the analysis by the first author to keep the anonymity of the interviewees for the analysis phase.

The interviewees ($N = 7$) represented an international online degree in terms of cultural and linguistic diversity. They all represented different backgrounds in terms of online and international study experience. None of the interviewees spoke English as their mother tongue.

All year groups from the entire student body were represented. Most students ($n = 5$) were first-year students during quantitative data collection, but some ($n = 2$) of them had proceeded to the second year of studies during the qualitative data collection. Some ($n = 2$) second-year students had progressed to third-year studies or further during the data collection process.

Table 2
Survey Mean and Standard Deviation of Respondents (scale 1-5)

Statements	Mean	SD
Part I: international aspects of online degree studies		
1. Studying in an international online degree improves intercultural communication skills	4.46	.80
2. International activities strengthen the quality of online degree education	4.29	.83
3. International students are an important part of TUAS	4.27	.87
4. TUAS is international	4.12	.91
5. IB Online offers a truly international study environment	4.03	.96
6. An online degree offers a chance for international experiences without having to go abroad	4.02	.96
7. Virtual exchange is a good method for internationalisation during online degree studies	3.86	.97
8. TUAS staff (other than teachers) is culturally aware	3.78	.87
9. As an IB Online student, it is easy to get help from TUAS (other than teachers) when needed	3.76	1.24
10. Technical solutions at TUAS are suitable for studying in an international online degree	3.59	1.17
Part II: intercultural aspects of online degree studies		
1. Online degree studies improve communication skills for working globally	4.53	.73
2. Having international students adds value to online degree studies	4.47	.70
3. Online collaboration between students from different cultures increases cultural awareness	4.41	.83
4. Low level of English has a negative effect on communicating online in a multicultural group	4.31	.97
5. Students create their own culture online, regardless of their cultural backgrounds	3.85	.91
6. Students' cultural background has an influence on their online presence	3.80	1.06
7. Students need support for working in multicultural groups online	3.49	1.04
8. Collaboration between online and on-site students is important in an international online degree	3.02	1.17
9. Collaboration with students from other cultures is more difficult online than on-site	2.58	1.30
10. Different cultural backgrounds create conflicts during studies	2.41	1.00
Part III: intercultural and international aspects of online degree teaching		
1. Having international staff members adds value to online degree teaching	4.42	.86
2. Teachers support students in working in multicultural groups online	3.76	1.15
3. Technical tools used in the degree studies are suitable for multicultural virtual communication	3.75	1.14
4. Teachers' cultural backgrounds show in their teaching style	3.69	1.04
5. Teachers choose communication tools on their courses that are suitable for multicultural groups	3.68	.99
6. Teachers are culturally sensitive to students' differing cultural situations during studies	3.58	1.05
7. Teachers are able to solve intercultural conflicts during studies	3.58	.81
8. Teachers need training in designing courses for multicultural groups	3.54	1.15
9. Teachers need training in intercultural communication skills	3.51	1.25
10. Teachers have sufficient English language skills for teaching international groups	3.42	1.19

Findings Based on the Interviews

For the qualitative part of this study, a thematic semi-structured interview was conducted with seven interviewees. The results of the interview show in-depth experiences in two themes:

Theme 1: Online Degree Students in an International Online Degree

Theme 2: Online Degree Teachers in an International Online Degree

In terms of Theme 1, when the support that students need for working in intercultural groups online was discussed, the most important finding was

that students find it important to have training in intercultural communication skills:

- “intercultural communication course is very important to understand cultures and ways of communicating” (F)
- “both teamwork and working in international teams have to be supported” (E)

When discussing the online culture and student’s cultural backgrounds, an important finding was that the students follow shared ways of working online although their own background has an influence:

- “different interpretations about ways of working” (D)

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics of the Interview Group

ID	Study Year During Survey	Study Year During Interview	Cultural Background
A	2 nd	3 rd or later	Europe (other than Finland)
F	2 nd	3 rd or later	Outside Europe
B	1 st	2 nd	Outside Europe
D	1 st	2 nd	Finland
C	1 st	1 st	Europe (other than Finland)
E	1 st	1 st	Europe (other than Finland)
G	1 st	1 st	Finland

- “paying attention to how to present myself in the intercultural virtual environment” (B)

When discussing the value international students bring to online degree studies, an important result was that the diversity brings value in different ways and enhances trust:

- “opened my world” (D)
- “Just inspiring” (G)
- “Access to international community” (E)

The summary of results regarding Theme 1 are shown in Table 4.

In terms of Theme 2, when discussing the training teachers need for intercultural communication skills, a clear result was that students felt teachers need more training in the use of English both as a lingua franca and for specific purposes (ESP). Also, another relevant finding was that they felt teachers need training in communication skills that are specific to an online context:

- “information is lost” (A)
- “training in how to conduct online meetings” (E)
- “intercultural communication course for teachers” (D)

In terms of Theme 2, when considering the training teachers need for designing courses for multicultural groups, a common answer was related to the standardized structure where diversity shows in the course contents:

- “present everything in the same format” (A)
- “culture stays on the intercultural course, other courses are not as international” (G)

When mentioning the tools teachers should select for international online groups, the majority of the students felt that choosing the right tools for specific needs is important for working in study teams online:

- “It is not the tool but how it is used” (B)
- “Choice of tool makes a difference” (E)
- “learning new tools for working life as well” (F)

The summary of results regarding Theme 2 are shown in Table 5.

The research can be considered reliable and valid. All aspects related to comparison of online or on-site studies as well as control statements were left out to have more reliable results. Since considerable time had passed between the survey and the interview, it can be assumed that the interview results add new insights into the data set. The integrity of the research was considered. Data were collected complying with the general data protection regulation, and informed consent was gained from the data subjects (European Commission, 2018).

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to find answers to the following questions:

1. How is internationalisation and interculturality experienced by students of an international online degree programme?
2. How can their experiences inform the holistic design of international online degree programmes?

International and Intercultural Aspects of Studying in an Online Degree Programme

Feast et al. (2011) found that students who enrolled in their international programme were already interested in international and intercultural issues. In the present paper, we found that those students, who had previous experience of studying in an international group or online, expected more support for students (Pallof & Pratt, 2004) and more training for teachers. It is possible that the teacher’s own cultural identity or language background shows (Schalkwyk et al., 2015) in how they communicate or offer support. There may also be cultural clustering, similar to language clustering (Ahmad, 2018), where personal knowledge networks can lead to sharing knowledge more with those who share a similar background.

Table 4

Results of Interview Theme 1: Online Degree Students in an International Online Degree

Theme 1	Key Findings
Q1. What kind of support do students need for working in intercultural groups online?	Formal training through an online course in intercultural communication that is offered at the beginning of starting studies in an international online degree
Q2. How does students' cultural background influence their online presence?	Student's cultural backgrounds have an influence on online presence, and it is important to be aware of it as the online culture is dependent on shared rules
Q3. How does having international students in degree programme add value to online degree studies?	International students enrich the study experience in multiple ways, by creating networks; making friendships; learning cultures, languages, and communication tools; and through this diversity, creating a sense of belonging and trust

Table 5

Results of Interview Theme 2: Online Degree Teachers in an International Online Degree

Theme 1	Key Findings
Q1. What kind of training do teachers need in intercultural communication skills?	Teachers need training in language skills and communication skills in an intercultural online context
Q2. What kind of training do teachers need in designing courses for intercultural groups?	Teachers should design courses that are uniform in layout and structure to make processes clear but diverse in content and materials to show internationality
Q3. What kind of communication tools should teachers choose for their courses for intercultural groups?	Teachers should select authentic and purposeful tools that support students' work online in studies and work

An important finding was that the students seemed to prefer shared ways of working online, although their own background influences the online presence. Students' view on creating their own online culture increased according to their study year (i.e., first-year students' experience of creating their own online culture was not as strong). This showed in both interview and survey results, where students seemed to indicate that they create networks, share, and learn from each other, but teachers need more training in supporting their work in intercultural groups in online contexts. This supports previous findings for training needs in terms of teachers' intercultural competence (Huang, 2017; Villar-Onrubia & Rajpal, 2016). An interesting explanation could be Warren's (2018) finding about teachers trying to maintain various identities, and, therefore, it is plausible those teachers that are new to teaching online or culturally and linguistically diverse groups may have placed more focus on professional identity of subject teaching, thus being less able to manage the cultural aspects. However, overall satisfaction with the international online DP was very high, and students felt studying in

an international online DP improves intercultural communication skills.

It can be assumed the students were familiar with some of the challenges that may arise from studying in an intercultural group. In the interview, students strongly presented the importance of intercultural communication training from the beginning of the degree studies and emphasised the importance of understanding other cultures. At the same time, culture was considered as something that is inherent in people irrespective of the context, and they suggested that culture is something that shows both online and onsite. They also highlighted cultural identities. Also, some discussion centred around the cultural distance from the main culture of the DP, and how cultural etiquettes are important. This could explain the need for the support and training in intercultural communication skills, as it will be easier to follow the etiquette if there is common understanding and cultural awareness.

This could mean that it is important to understand the influence of cultures on online work and communication, but shared rules and jointly agreed ways of working are important in an online context, thus

supporting the forming of new cultures in online learning (Prensky, 2012). Forming an online culture takes time, but in an online degree everything is online from the beginning, thus creating an immediate need for shared online culture, based on the discussion in the interviews. In working life, corporate culture exists already, and, therefore, forming of an online culture in the corporate context may be easier for students in working life. On the contrary, in an online degree, the organisational culture of the HEI may not show as clearly and, therefore, based on the interviews, there was a clear need for it. An interesting example of online culture was brought up by one student who had experienced significant differences in the online culture between the international online degree examined in this paper and a Finnish fully online DP, where all instruction is held in the Finnish language and all students are of Finnish nationality and culture. This could show that international and intercultural aspects combined to online degree education create a unique online culture.

Indeed, students appreciate having international students in their group and the added value they bring with different perspectives (Green, 2005). We found that the added value of having international students in an online degree comes from having access to international community. Examples mentioned by students include new networks, friends, tools, and cultural knowledge. Creativity, inspiration, and new ideas were important benefits gained. An interesting aspect related to cultures and choice of media (Varhelahti et al., 2017) was everyone learning to use the same digital tools and working methods, which in turn can result in equal access and competence.

When discussing the training needs for teachers, it is worth noting that pedagogy or teaching skills were not brought up by interviewees, and all training needs were related to intercultural and communication aspects in an online context. This could indicate that teaching is experienced to be good, but another interesting reason could be the earlier mentioned need for shared rules and common ways of working. The interviewees mentioned the need for leadership skills in leading intercultural teams online. This could mean leadership skills of intercultural virtual teams is an important skill for teaching in an international online DP setting.

When discussing the training needs for designing courses for multicultural groups, a common answer in the interview was related to standardized structure where diversity shows in the course contents. In the interviews, a clear need for teachers' online skills in terms of communication and tools was expressed. The survey showed that students who had more experience of studying online may have higher expectations for online teaching skills. This can indicate a training need for using online learning environments appropriately in teaching.

In the interview, students mentioned that communication skills were as important as intercultural skills. But one training need was highlighted more than other communication needs - the use of English as language of instruction and lingua franca. This clearly shows that students seem to include language as one aspect of intercultural skills (Byram, 1997). This could also indicate a difference between language levels of students and teachers, as those students accepted to an international DP are required to have minimum B2 level English, but for teachers there is no such requirement.

Another interesting factor mentioned by students was the need for diversity in terms of materials. This could indicate that perhaps teachers do not know how to utilize the international experiences or diverse backgrounds of students well, or that they have not realized the importance of cultural diversity in the teaching material. On the other hand, it is possible the students' year group has influenced this, as their own sharing of cultural expertise may increase over study time, such as gaining more business-related cultural knowledge.

Design Principles for Holistic Design of International Online Degree Programmes

Our research supports earlier findings (Clifford & Montgomery, 2017; Hudzik & McCarthy, 2012) that internationalisation and interculturality should be considered holistically in terms of staff training, instructional design, student support, and diversity of staff and students. It further supports the idea of intercultural competence as something that is placed in a situated context that reflects more than national identifications and present whose guidelines in competence are followed (Collier, 2015).

Based on the research results, in the design of a fully online international DP, it is important to have a culturally diverse mix of students and staff, as it seems to add value to online degree studies, but teachers need training for teaching diverse virtual groups. Moreover, online degree teachers should select suitable tools for teaching intercultural online study groups, and they should be trained in the communication and leading of intercultural teams in an online context. Also, online degree teachers in international online degree programmes should have good language skills and cultural awareness in creating materials and instruction for intercultural groups. Importantly, students should be supported in working in intercultural teams. Whilst importance should be placed on individual's cultural identity, focus should be on shared online culture. A need for organisational culture showing from the beginning of the studies was indicated.

Specific Recommendations for the Holistic Design of International Online Degree Programmes

In conclusion, results of this paper reveal various international and intercultural aspects that need to be considered in the organisational level approach to the holistic design of international online DPs.

Several recommendations can be made to managers, administrators, or educators planning to offer fully online international DPs, where both students and staff represent multiple locations and cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The following design principles can be used for holistic design of international online DPs:

1. Presenting a clear organisational culture from the beginning of the online degree studies
2. Supporting cultural distance from the main culture of the online degree programme by introducing cultural etiquettes
3. Creating shared rules and jointly agreed ways of working in a culturally and linguistically diverse online context
4. Creating standardized online course structure with culturally diverse contents and materials
5. Using the same digital tools and working methods to enable equal access and competence irrespective of location
6. Training teachers and students in intercultural communication online from the beginning of the online degree studies to enhance understanding of other cultures
7. Training teachers in online teaching skills and using online learning environments for culturally diverse groups
8. Enhancing teachers' leadership skills for leading and supporting culturally diverse teamwork online
9. Giving access to wider international community via online means
10. Having a cultural mix of international students and staff members in the online degree programme
11. Showing respect to individual cultural identities within culturally diverse virtual teams

In this paper, we have outlined how online DP students experience international and intercultural aspects of their online degree studies and how their experiences can be used to design and further develop international degree programmes implemented in fully online contexts. This paper presents results from one online DP in an applied HEI in Finland and, therefore, results should be reviewed with care. More research is needed to understand how the international and intercultural elements presented in this paper can be integrated in online DPs in other disciplines or HEIs.

One area of further research can be how teachers' cultural identity may show in online learning environments, or how much they may influence teachers' online course design, implementation, or delivery. It would also be interesting to widen the concept of online teaching skills to leadership aspects of online study teams. Another interesting aspect for further research would be to see how international students in online DPs feel about their well-being and progress in their studies. It may be relevant in future research to include field-specific considerations to holistic organisation-level principles for international online degree programmes.

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Appendix A

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1. TUAS is international.																	
2. International activities strengthen the quality of online degree education	.343**																
3. International students are an important part of TUAS	0.153	.561**															
4. IB Online offers a truly international study environment	.270*	.500**	.557**														
5. Studying in an international online degree improves intercultural communication skills	0.210	.356**	.410*	.493**													
6. Virtual exchange is a good method for internationalisation during online degree studies	0.145	.419**	.313*	.434**	.367**												
7. An online degree offers a chance for international experiences without having to go abroad	0.141	.355**	.505**	.401**	.375**	.433**											
8. As an IB Online student, it is easy to get help from TUAS (other than teachers) when needed	.451**	.526**	.417**	.418**	.264*	.529**	.459**										
9. TUAS staff (other than teachers) is culturally aware	.378**	.362**	.323*	.362**	.273*	.447**	0.247	.541**									
10. Technical solutions at TUAS are suitable for studying in an international online degree	0.200	0.219	.410**	.456**	.332*	.338**	.424**	.366**	.516**								
11. Students' cultural background has an influence on their online presence	0.052	0.246	0.252	0.242	.332*	0.248	0.052	0.088	0.232	0.168							
12. Students create their own culture online, regardless of their cultural backgrounds	0.169	0.104	0.004	0.171	.308*	.379**	0.110	0.175	0.190	0.182	-0.047						
13. Collaboration between online and on-site (on-campus) students is important in an international online degree	0.207	0.137	.361**	0.164	0.192	0.057	.324*	0.191	.401**	.260*	0.214	-0.027					
14. Online degree studies improve communication skills for working globally	0.136	.466**	.349**	.427**	.482**	.531**	0.215	.346**	.295*	.264*	.293*	0.093	0.193				
15. Online collaboration between students from different cultures increases cultural awareness	0.086	.330*	.295*	.291*	.586**	.636**	.355**	.347**	.311*	0.233	.322*	.314*	0.117	.424**			
16. Students need support for working in multicultural groups online	-0.214	0.018	0.096	0.040	0.005	-0.079	-0.037	-0.160	-0.022	-0.058	0.171	-0.110	.280*	-0.017	0.027		

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
17. Low level of English has a negative effect on communicating online in a multicultural group	0,078	0,015	0,048	-0,158	-0,065	-0,135	0,115	0,001	-0,170	-0,131	-0,027	-0,147	-0,027	-0,123	-0,041	-0,127					
18. Having international students adds value to online degree studies	0,059	0,213	,344**	,393**	,387**	,365**	0,170	0,156	,349**	,263*	,338**	0,180	0,119	,348**	,321*	0,071	-0,326*				
19. Collaboration with students from other cultures is more difficult online than on-site	0,104	-0,411**	-0,328*	-0,342**	-0,298*	-0,276*	-0,365**	-0,305*	-0,088	-0,052	-0,069	0,027	0,016	-0,453**	-0,225	0,201	-0,158	-0,297*			
20. Different cultural backgrounds create conflicts during studies	-0,087	0,060	0,021	-0,120	0,013	-0,081	-0,087	-0,071	-0,181	-0,118	0,095	0,011	-0,146	0,018	-0,062	,290*	-0,233	-0,045	0,194		
21. Teacher's cultural background shows in their teaching style	0,076	-0,093	-0,096	-0,029	0,037	0,175	-0,221	0,019	0,138	-0,026	,469**	0,104	0,111	0,114	,261*	0,142	-0,205	0,101	,363**	0,203	
22. Teachers need training in intercultural communication skills	-0,333*	-0,112	-0,113	-0,031	-0,112	-0,233	-0,228	-0,331*	-0,228	-0,313*	0,191	-0,177	0,072	0,001	-0,274*	,383**	-0,240	-0,005	0,024	0,166	0,229
23. Teachers have sufficient English language skills for teaching international groups	,374**	,354**	0,217	,319*	0,153	0,141	0,221	,271*	0,131	0,191	0,156	0,035	0,081	,322*	0,247	-0,093	0,010	0,148	-0,218	-0,046	-0,043
24. Teachers are culturally sensitive to students' differing cultural situations during studies	0,070	,497**	0,245	0,194	,257	,380**	0,242	,318*	0,201	0,197	,485**	0,083	-0,012	,522**	,463**	0,002	0,023	,273*	-0,322*	0,144	0,119
25. Teachers support students in working in multicultural groups online	,372**	,439**	,308*	,393**	,512**	,506**	,438**	,544**	,290*	,275*	,261*	,349**	-0,030	,409**	,593**	-0,184	0,053	0,255	-0,343**	0,033	-0,075
26. Teachers choose communication tools on their courses that are suitable for multicultural groups	,345**	,468**	,419**	,261*	,309*	,421**	,499**	,545**	,475**	,461**	0,153	0,145	,297*	,266*	,395**	-0,220	0,019	0,254	-0,356**	-0,225	-0,166
27. Having international staff members adds value to an online degree teaching	,265*	,265*	,571**	,526**	,586**	,459**	,321*	,275*	,336**	,517**	0,238	,326*	0,098	,427**	,377**	-0,158	-0,091	,443**	-0,237	-0,137	0,006
28. Teachers need training in designing courses for multicultural groups	-0,383**	-0,070	0,050	0,000	-0,003	-0,111	-0,186	-0,319*	-0,239	-0,223	0,202	-0,111	-0,051	-0,021	-0,169	,346**	-0,264*	-0,004	0,018	0,176	,320*
29. Technical tools used in the online degree studies are suitable for multicultural virtual communication	0,196	,456**	,413**	,432**	,291*	,401**	,509**	,512**	,293*	,607**	0,123	-0,029	0,185	,306*	,327*	-0,202	-0,122	0,242	-0,309*	-0,167	-0,119
30. Teachers are able to solve intercultural conflicts during studies	,292*	,265*	0,043	0,125	,273*	,408**	0,152	,345**	0,201	0,230	0,086	,361**	0,003	,259*	,303*	-0,240	0,041	0,206	-0,189	-0,075	-0,057

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).