

Collaborative learning between the University of Namibia and William Paterson University in New Jersey, United States of America, on a Facebook Page

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Abstract

In ensuring that students achieve 21st century skills, institutions of higher education are required to broaden their curricula to equip students with global competency skills through internationalisation. This study focused on hybrid academic collaboration projects between postgraduate students from the University of Namibia (UNAM) and those from William Paterson University in New Jersey (WPU) within the Educational Technology programme. These postgraduate students used Facebook web pages to collaborate on their academic activities and focus on promoting global competencies. This qualitative study is anchored in a multiple case design. Purposive and convenience sampling methods were used to select participants from both universities. Nine (9) participants were chosen from UNAM, and five (5) participants were from WPU. Interview guides and field notes were used to collect data from the University of Namibia and William Paterson University participants. The data that were collected using different instruments were transcribed verbatim and analysed using iterated reliability to identify labels, which led to themes and codes. The audio-recorded data were transcribed to create the transcripts, identifying elements using the TPACK framework as the lens. Documents and communications of students from the Facebook web page, consisting of direct text and images, were downloaded and examined without the researcher's intervention. The results showed that well-structured international learning experiences significantly boosted students' confidence in navigating global issues. Based on these findings, the study recommends that higher education institutions place greater emphasis on integrating hybrid international collaboration into their curriculum development efforts.

Keywords: *higher education, collaborative learning, academic collaboration, global competence skills, internationalisation*

Background of the study

The term global competence is interconnected to the concept of internationalisation of education. The internationalisation of higher education institutions worldwide remains an integral focus for many institutions of higher learning to stay relevant. In this silicon/digital age, institutions of higher education around the world have been striving to reconfigure higher learning through internationalisation to prepare graduates for complex, interconnected global challenges through virtual learning (Wilders & Boer, 2015). Tertiary institutions considered internationalisation as an effective mode to promote global competence, institutional relevance, and competitiveness, which is a key element for employability, civic engagement, and lifelong learning among students (Jiaxin et al., 2024; Richter & Kjellgren, 2024; Adoui, 2025; Maier et al., 2025). However, institutions of higher learning are noted to lack coherence, and their programmes are not always aligned with pedagogical practices (Jiaxin et al., 2024;

Guo-Brennan, 2022). Facebook is one of the most used digital communication platforms. Several studies have explored the role of social media, specifically Facebook, as a learning support environment (Enkhbayar et al., 2020; Cinelli et al., 2022; Hang, 2024; Mishnick & Wise, 2024). The UNAM and WPU's collaborative project aspired to give graduate students an opportunity to learn and work with international peers in solving contextual problems through sharing ideas and learning about each other's educational challenges. Therefore, the research study aimed to unpack the practical aspects of teaching and learning online, and how to foster collaboration through a learning design, and promote networking as a valiant effort. Staff from William Patterson University and those from the University of Namibia experimented with ideas of promoting global competence for years. First, it is an undergraduate environment, and then on the graduate level. All staff members recognised

that the cross-cultural experience had prepared the teachers for operating beyond their known boundaries, and they discovered that other teachers in various countries had experienced similar problems.

The University of Namibia and William Paterson University Connections

The educators who participated in this study used their international networks to see how they could incorporate an international working relationship that was focused on the two countries. Twelve (12) post-graduate students (student teachers) from these countries were grouped in a project to design a technology-infused lesson plan. In doing so, each participant had to share the technology issues encountered for the past four years at their schools and the solutions to address these issues to deliver the lesson. After many failed attempts over the years in terms of Internet access and finding a shared platform that could accommodate this collaborative learning environment, Facebook appears to be the best technology solution. It is important to note that the US students used Blackboard and the Namibian students used Moodle as the respective Learning Management Systems (LMS). Despite an add-on on Moodle and Blackboard that allowed the two institutions to use their respective platforms, any attempt to get it to work was unsuccessful.

Research questions

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What benefits do the lecturers/staff and postgraduate students identify when using Facebook to build their global competency skills?
2. What challenges do the lecturers and postgraduate students experience and identify when using Facebook to build their global competency skills?
3. How do students and lecturers at the University of Namibia perceive and experience the use of Facebook in promoting internationalisation through collaborative learning?

Literature review

The concept of internationalisation in higher education is interrelated to, or rather used interchangeably with, globalisation. Svensson and Wihlborg (2010) mention that

globalisation and internationalisation are dynamically related concepts, though internationalisation of higher education could be seen as a proactive response to the catalyst globalisation. Internationalisation is closely related to the dynamic process of globalisation. In general, terms, internationalisation and globalisation in higher education may be understood as strategies for expanding higher education opportunities and ideas beyond national boundaries. Bereiter and Scardamalia (2012) support the idea of cosmopolitanism by proposing that education curricula need to incorporate knowledge-based learning, such as global awareness, foreign language learning and cross-cultural student activities that make students and graduates feel at home in the world.

The importance of internationalisation in higher education

Thune and Welle-Strand (2005) stated that internationalisation of a curriculum helps to define ethos for the future of the global population, as well as to provide students with knowledge on global perspectives and the opportunity to discuss and debate comparative issues. However, in some instances, internationalisation activities are confined to the limited knowledge instructors/lecturers may possess (Barnett & Coate, 2005). Moreover, Bégin-Caouette (2012) emphasises that institutions of higher education should support efforts to establish partnerships with foreign institutions to expose teachers to multicultural education and global competencies.

Bégin-Caouette (2012) further reveals that higher institutions of education have a significant role in internationalising services provided to teachers in the areas of training activities, teacher mobility and international cooperation. For students to be global-ready graduates, they are required to have better perspectives of the global systems, global issues, the dynamics of how things are interrelated and interconnected in the world, and how the society could best address global issues, as well as the skills to listen, observe, evaluate, analyse, interpret, and relate to such global issues (Wallard, 2005). Furthermore, Willard (2005) identify several specific global competence skills as follows: initiative, enthusiasm, inquisitiveness, interest in continuous learning, courage, self-confidence, self-control, self-knowledge,

positive outlook toward adversity, appreciation of diversity, perseverance, creativity, comfort with uncertainty, open-mindedness, language and communication skills, assertiveness, sense of humour, and thriving in diverse environments. In addition, Jiaxin et al. (2024) identify nine benefits of online collaborative learning as follows:

- promoting critical thinking skills;
- promoting creative thinking through social stimulation and sharing of ideas;
- requiring active student involvement in the learning process;
- students increase preparation and practice working with one another;
- providing a safe place for questions;
- creating a more personal environment in large classes;
- providing a social support system for students;
- building diversity understanding among students; and
- allowing version control management with the creation of a central folder, or location, where recent versions are saved, and developing team skills applicable on the job and beyond.

The views of Jiaxin et al. (2024), Robertson (2021), and Li (2020) on global competence skills demonstrate that the internationalisation of higher education has a distinct advantage in preparing students for a global society. For this study's purpose, one would also question whether the mode of delivery would determine the degree of acquisition of global competence skills among students.

Facebook use in higher education

The use of Facebook at tertiary institutions has gained rapid attention due to its potential to enhance student engagement, collaboration, and better learning outcomes. Facebook, as a social media platform, provides a flexible and engaging environment that enhances both formal and informal learning experiences. As per the views of Chugh et al. (2021), numerous educators acknowledged the advantages of Facebook for supporting communication among students and educators. Hence, its utilisation in teaching and learning remains limited due to insufficient institutional support and digital fluency. The merits of Facebook in an educational setting are its capability to enable

collaborative learning. Collaborative assessments conducted on Facebook could enhance or improve student performance and outcomes, particularly when educators are coming and willing to deliver (Liu et al, 2022). Ansari and Khan (2020) also agreed with Liu et al (2022) that Facebook enhances students' engagement, critical thinking, problem solving and knowledge sharing, which critical aspects for active are learning.

Regardless of these merits, Facebook moderators still find it hard to manage student behaviours, ensure equitable involvement, and maintain academic rigour on the Facebook platform (Zou et al., 2025). Moreover, fears about privacy, disruption, and the blurred boundaries between personal and academic life have led some tertiary institutions to formulate clear policies on the effective ways of using social media in education (Kwestel & Fitzpatrick, 2020). This gap not only affects the students' exchange of ideas but also hampers collaborative learning (Hrastinski & Aghaee, 2011). Thus, this study aimed to examine the use of Facebook as a platform for internationalising teaching and learning through collaborative learning to determine whether the exercise yielded the intended outcomes.

Methodology

The research study was a qualitative, unique case study design, and the investigation sought to understand and learn from the experiences of the graduate students' use of the Facebook web page for international collaborative learning. Twelve (12) participants from a population of 32 participated in this study. The Namibian participants were more willing to participate, and the time differences were a challenge in scheduling interviews with the other students. Eight participants were male, and four were female. Eight participants were teachers at the secondary school level, and one was an education officer.

The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with the Namibian students and the staff member at their respective places (or offices) while taking notes of the data that were not part of any question and that appeared to be important for the study. With permission from the students, audio-recordings of all interviews were done using a smartphone voice-recorder application to ensure ease of verification of every response

to each question at the analysis stage. The staff member and students from William Paterson University, USA, were interviewed through Skype. However, due to poor voice projection, the researcher had to send the information captured during the Skype interview to the lecturer and students for verification. The interview data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using inter-rated reliability techniques for the identification of the codes and labels, which led to themes. Further analysis was done on the Facebook pages' conversations and activities where the specific cohorts had continual conversations and posted their updated assignments. Unpacking the conversations and reviewing the combined artefacts being created gave insight into the development of the global competencies developed over the span of the activity. Additional field notes taken during interview sessions enriched the data and data analysis process.

Results and discussions

The study revealed that all participants who participated in the study were within the age range of 31-40 years; only one participant fell within the 41-50 age range. Both lecturers held doctoral degrees within the same field of Instructional Technology and Media. One was a full professor and the other an associate professor. From the two (2) lecturers' viewpoint, the objective for the collaboration was to structure a learning experience that encouraged collective learning, collective problem solving, improved communication, and develop a product that could be used by all within the group. Participants were divided into groups with school subjects similar to those they taught, or with similar interests, and were tasked to develop an integrated technology lesson plan.

The students created technology-infused lesson plans that considered ways of integrating technology in teaching and learning as per their local context. This exercise reinforced critical thinking and creativity among students while preparing them to be efficient in their work fields. Student 3 expressed that: *"The collaborative learning project with their international counterparts was a good initiative"*. Whereas, student 2 narrated that: *"It provided them with opportunities to interact and share knowledge and skills on several aspects with students*

from different backgrounds". These opportunities included: the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the global educational issues; the reinforcement of critical thinking and creativity; and learning the culture of teamwork, as well as the culture of working with peers from diverse backgrounds (Bailey, 2025).

The South African Policy Framework for the Internationalisation of Higher Education recognizes that an international collaborative learning process can integrate or infuse the intercultural, international, and global dimensions among students that include advancing the goals, functions, and delivery of higher education services, while enhancing the quality of education and the research agenda (Republic of South Africa, 2017). Internationalisation of education provides students with the knowledge and skills on global perspectives and allows students to discuss and debate comparative issues (Bamberger & Morris, 2023; Çalıkoğlu et al., 2023). This study confirmed that through collaborative learning, students were exposed to better ideas of designing technology-integrated lesson plans, appreciated the use of technology in education, and had a chance to learn how to work on educational activities with international students.

For instance, student 4 said that: *"It was excellent teamwork and another way of learning from what other international universities are doing, without really needing to travel long distances, which would cost us a lot of time and money"*. While student 1 mentioned that: *"It was a good encounter to interact with international peers"*. One of the participating lecturers indicated that: *"They were also very eager to make quick progress on the collaboration assignment as their grade was riding on successful completion. For all of them, there were times of frustration as their UNAM peers did not get back to them in a timely fashion and/or did not seem to have any sense of urgency in moving forward with the collaboration."* The international collaboration in this study served its purpose of internationalising education.

The studies conducted by Ansari and Khan (2020), Liu et al. (2022) and Cao et al. (2023) confirm that the use of Facebook in education yields better results. Therefore, educators should encourage the use of social media for collaborative learning among students. The participating students were

impressed by how Facebook could be used for international collaborative learning. One of the participating lecturers stated that: *"Students were excited about the initiative and the WPU students were keen to communicate more with UNAM students"*. Another participating lecturer also mentioned that: *"Some students even developed some sort of friendship, shifting from just academic peers to some, like, personal friends"*. However, some UNAM and WPU students raised concerns and suggested that hosting collaborative learning on Facebook needs the moderators to monitor the process closely and continuously. As one participating UNAM student revealed, *"As a group leader, I have always encouraged my group members to contribute and share ideas and tried to allocate members in our group with specific tasks to complete"*. Another participating student from WPU voiced that: *"We reported the setbacks to our lecturers, who in turn took it up with the inactive members"*.

Kwestel and Fitzpatrick (2020) and Chugh et al. (2020) alluded to the idea that institutions of higher learning should have a policy in place to regulate and promote the use of social media in education. Thus, this study recommends that educators at tertiary institutions should always ensure that there are enough moderators to monitor the entire process, as well as ensure that all students are actively participating in the project's activities. At the same time, there is a need for higher education to have policies that regulate the use of Facebook and other social media platforms in higher education. The participants in this study made valuable suggestions for applications within Facebook that could be used to establish the relevance of content and to direct the attention of its members towards items such as the 'write a post' space, the 'upload file' icon, the 'comment' icon, 'notifications,' and the 'like' button.

Below are the exact transcriptions of what they said: *"With the rapid changes in technology development, Facebook can allow lively class through Live Video application; it allows one to upload and download documents, share information in a private room, such as a class page, class group and chat room"*. Participants also suggested that: *"This platform needs more exploration to find the place for education that can yield better outcomes"*. Inclusively, these features would

be helpful as indicators of the relevance of Facebook in higher education. In addition, Facebook offers its users a calendar to digitally coordinate dates, plan, and market events of all kinds. This could be helpful for students and lecturers to plan their activities in time slots that are suitable for collaborative learning. It is equally important to take note that using Facebook for international collaborative learning could be frustrating, as sometimes students have limited access to ICT facilities and limited exposure to hybrid collaborative learning. Thus, collaborative learning would be more convenient if conducted with sufficient access to ICT facilities, constant awareness rising among students, monitoring, and taking into consideration the type of students participating in the project, as well as their learning styles. Cyber ethics and cyberbullying were some of the concerns raised by some participants. Notably, students who felt unsafe were the same students who mentioned that they had never had Facebook accounts before.

The experiences of "threats" could, therefore, be attributed to limited exposure to Facebook and awareness of safer use of Facebook. Below are direct quotes from two participants. Participant 5 said that: *"I never had a Facebook account before; this is my first time on Facebook, and thus I was never comfortable posting anything on my timeline since then because I was uncertain about the safety of being on a Facebook group/page with students I have never met"*. Whilst, participant 3 mentioned that: *"I have been receiving many friend requests from strangers, and when I viewed their Facebook profiles, I realised that they are mutual friends with some of the American students"*. Besides that, the majority of the participants indicated that they never experienced any sort of cyber threats/bullying during the academic collaboration project. This is evident from the participants' direct voices, as participant 5 stated that: *"No distractions experienced on my side or ill behaviours among peers or from other Facebook users in general. During this assignment, cyber ethics and safety were ensured, and the class group on Facebook was a closed group, meaning people who were not members of the group were not able to see our activities. All students were more professional. Though we did not know each*

other in person, with time, we developed trust in each other”.

Ansari and Khan (2020), Liu et al. (2022) and Cao et al. (2023) confirm that social media has the potential to support networked learning; however, critical social media literacy is required to help students to deal with the large amount of information with which they critically interact, and to share the content on social media with a critical mind. Students who experienced such problems might have lacked knowledge of safer ways of

using Facebook. Therefore, social media literacy and awareness are critical aspects for all students before starting to work on any kind of activity on social media to ensure students’ safety on such platforms. Another positive finding was that the information extracted from the Facebook collaboration page demonstrated an elevated level of engagement during collaborative learning. See the attached screenshots from the students’ Facebook collaboration page.



Figure 1: Screenshots from the students’ Facebook collaboration page

During the international collaboration, lecturers observed positive attitudes and behaviours among students, and students developed friendships, shifting from just academic peers to friendship. Students were willing to work in a team and were excited about the initiative in general. One student indicated that: *“Students were excited about the initiative, and the WPU students were keen to communicate more with UNAM students; they continuously exchanged ideas on what was happening at their schools”*. Bran (2016) states that without positive attitudes and behaviours, students may have little chance of

learning proficiency. These are clear indications that the students appreciated the initiative. Additionally, these attributes can easily affect the collaborative learning process, the learning climate and students’ participation in the classroom tasks. Importantly, lecturers involved in collaborative learning should ascertain better strategies to influence positive attitudes and behaviours. In the same vein, lecturers should also consider the feelings of students, which might interfere with the learning process, to ensure that the learning environment is conducive and accommodating to all students. Additionally, the platform,

environment, and questions of the tasks given should be selected with sensitivity to dispel fear, anxiety, and low self-esteem among students. Moreover, the study revealed that both UNAM and WPU participants benefited from the collaborative project in various ways. Significantly, students were able to adapt and adjust to the environment and work together despite coming from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Due to the differences in time zones, Facebook allowed for an asynchronous mode of communication. WPU participants raised concerns about the delay in receiving feedback from their UNAM counterparts, which delayed the progress of project completion. However, the study findings indicated that the UNAM participants had a network connectivity challenge. These issues affected the collaboration process and made the Facebook platform inconvenient for collaboration, particularly in remote areas with limited internet and network coverage. The differences in curricula, timetabling and time zone were some challenges that interfered with the collaboration progress.

Although the study revealed that students were advised to concentrate only on areas that were aligned to their subject content, it remains a challenge because the curricula in which these participants (student teachers) were teaching were not at the same complexity (developed and developing countries). Therefore, students had to choose a common objective together for their technology-infused lesson plan task. The lack of commitment from students and delayed feedback from fellow students represented another challenge. Collaborative assignments ought to receive equal support from all group members. Educators who participated in the collaborative learning project faced various obstacles when they were implementing this project. The study indicated that obstacles varied depending on the nature of learning tasks, university calendars, students' attitudes and behaviours, mode of collaboration, availability of relevant facilities, collaboration skills of both students and lecturers, as well as the geographical location of students and lecturers engaged in the collaboration. Thus, it is crucial to address the challenges beforehand.

Educators are likely to face challenges while structuring collaborative activities, such as monitoring students' on-task behaviours, managing group-work time, providing relevant

materials, assigning individual task roles, and establishing teamwork beliefs and behaviours (Zou et al., 2025; Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020). Worth noting from this study, there were some structural challenges experienced by UNAM and WPU participants that interfered with the collaboration process. These challenges ranged from monitoring issues, delayed feedback amongst students and culturally different issues (in terms of priorities among students), time overlaps, and the academic calendars of the universities that did not fall in the same months. Notably, the actual product, or assignment, was well thought through and relevant for both parties that participated in the learning project. Hence, the educators decided on some relevant objectives to be accomplished by all the students.

Conclusion

The study concluded that Facebook is a noble platform for collaborative learning in higher education. Two major conclusions were drawn from this study. Firstly, the study revealed that Facebook could be used for international collaborative learning to promote students' global competency skills. The study confirmed that the students completed the project, and they were exposed to global competency skills such as working with peers from different socio-economic, cultural, geographical, and religious backgrounds; working as a team; being innovative; critical thinking; problem-solving skills; and they learned new strategies and concepts of the subject matter. The participants (student teachers at the graduate level) confirmed that they could follow the technological instructional strategies in the classroom. Secondly, the results revealed that the educators communicated well to determine the necessary coordination and relevant instructional strategies. A virtual collaborative learning project requires participants to build a mutual and beneficial relationship, as this is key to success. Therefore, it is important to establish a win-win method so that both institutions may feel a sense of accomplishment and benefit from collaborative learning.

Recommendations

It is essential that assignments hosted on social media, such as Facebook, should be thoroughly planned, enabling input from both students and lecturers to ensure efficient teamwork and to attain the intended learning outcomes. The

study suggested that there is a need to explore more about how to advance students' global competency. There is a need to examine the applicability of such skills and the impact these skills may have had on the schools / workstations of the participants in this collaboration study. Additionally, it is important to investigate which ICT tools are best suited for such collaborations in higher education. The educators who participated in this study were first thought to use their learning management systems (LMS), but found that they were not able to have dialogue despite attempts at Blackboard and Moodle integration add-ons. Further studies should focus on the relevance of the respective university's curricula and how it embraces cultural diversity and inclusivity. Lastly, the study recommended that it is crucial for universities to provide clear policies and guidelines on the internationalisation of higher education, focusing on empowering educators and students.

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