

African-European partnerships: Experiences of academic staff in new COIL exchanges between South Africa and Europe.

Authors:

Alun DeWinter, Coventry University

Reinout Klamer, The Hague University of Applied Sciences

Theme: Knowledge and impact

Abstract:

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) plays an important part within the Higher Education internationalisation at home agendas, allowing student to engage in intercultural collaborations around the globe without the need to travel or be involved with costly international mobility, whilst developing traversal skills such as teamwork and intercultural competency. This paper explores the use of COIL within the context of iKudu, an EU funded project which seeks to foster African-European partnerships to develop internationalisation capacity through the lenses of equality and decolonisation. This paper explores the underlying literature around COIL and equality before examining the expectations and experiences of academic staff who have been involved in the creation of new collaborations between a consortium of five South African and five European universities. This article offers insight into the challenges of setting up new international collaborations against the backdrop of COVID-19 as well as insight into the hopes and expectations of the staff involved.

PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS IS A WORK IN PROGRESS INITIAL DRAFT FOR THE PURPOSES OF THE OCTOBER 6TH DEADLINE. THE LATTER HALF OF THE PAPER NEEDS WORK AND FURTHER FINALISATION.

Introduction and project background:

The EU-funded iKudu project brings together five South African and five European universities to contribute to the development of internationalized and decolonized curricula through the establishment of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) partnerships. Within iKudu, there is a foundation of equality and equity between partners, with strong focus on internationalisation through the lens of decolonization and Africanisation at the core of the project. Although equity is at the heart of iKudu activity, it is important to note that the ten participating universities are all quite different in background and experience, each with their own experiences of internationalisation of Higher Education (HE) and COIL. In terms of the consortium profile, iKudu has one South African research-focused university (University of the Free State), two technical universities (Central University of Technology and Durban University of Technology) and two further universities in historically disadvantaged areas (Univen and Limpopo University). On the European side, there are three universities with a research universities, (Coventry University, University of Antwerp, and University of Siena) as well as universities of applied sciences (Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences and the Hague University of Applied Science). In the spirit of the decolonized approach, iKudu is attempting to harness the diverse profile of each of the consortium members, to ensure that their differences are all contributing to a stronger sense of partnership and community.

In terms of COIL experience, AUAS, Coventry, DUT and THUAS all have experience of designing and delivering COIL courses, and have university structures to support the COIL process, whereas the other six universities have little or no direct experience of COIL. These differences are important to acknowledge as they can have an impact on the nature of discussions and have direct practical consequences for setting up COIL projects at each university. In addition, with decolonization at the heart of the project, the Eurocentricity of the majority of universities with existing COIL experience, careful considering must be made to enshrine and promote the core goal of Africanisation within iKudu.

iKudu is led by Cornelius Hagenmeier, from UFS. This is noteworthy as it is generally unusual for an EU funded project to be led by a non-EU partner, but strongly reinforces the desire to put decolonization and Africanisation at the heart of the project. In terms of the project structure, there is a steering committee and two working groups, with representatives from all consortium partners present in each of these components. The two working groups are tasked with two very different responsibilities; the first focusing on the transformation of internationalization of the curriculum and the role that the COIL projects can play in this, and the second on establishing the partnerships for the COIL projects, training the lecturers and evaluating these projects. Another unique element of iKudu is the integration of all staff working across the consortium; in order to promote collaboration and a deeper

understanding between partners, iKudu project members are invited to a weekly quasi-social virtual 'cuppa' – a space where members can enjoy a hot drink together, whilst discussing project/internationalisation-related matters in an informal setting. This has led to a stronger feeling of community within the consortium and has allowed steering group and working group members to more closely integrate with one another between institutions, despite the challenges of the global pandemic of 2020.

Indeed, it is important to note that the Covid-19 pandemic heavily impacted the original project plan and has changed original vision for the project, moving away from face-to-face consortium meetings and trainings to entirely virtual interactions. Additionally, there has been a delay in the establishment of coil partnerships between South African and European universities. Due to this, just two out of the 12 originally envisioned partnerships were completed by September 2020. With this in mind, this paper has also shifted from its original vision, with a refocus towards the expectations of consortium staff participating in COIL practices than just the experiences of these staff.

The partnering process is a process where lecturers from South Africa and Europe are matched and assisted in creating the collaborative learning opportunities within their modules. By doing this, iKudu brings together a large number of academic staff from diverse international and educational backgrounds, each with a variety of differing experiences in terms of internationalisation at home through the use of online technologies. All partners are involved in training and relationship-building activities before embarking on COIL activity. Due to the current COVID-10 situation, it was necessary to switch all training to be delivered in an entirely virtual space; the impact of this has resulted in project-wide changes to delivery.

In terms of structure, a literature-focused exploration of COIL will be introduced and the phases of COIL partnership will be discussed. The relationships between COIL, intercultural differences and equality will be examined before presenting qualitative interview data around the experiences of four European and four South African lecturers will be interviewed and the results.

Literature review

What is COIL?

COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) has been gaining in use and popularity within Higher Education over the past decade and is a shared-syllabus approach to virtual exchange, allowing geographically distant students learn collaboratively in a virtual cross-cultural environment (Guth & Rubin, 2015). Each of the words within COIL holds significance – in order to truly achieve its aims, the educational activity must include international collaboration in an online space (Van Hove, 2019). Júnior and Finardi highlight that COIL offers academics much flexibility and allows interaction between cultures, ethnic and religious groups in order to promote intercultural learning through diversity (2018:21) Activities are normally designed by academics in two or more partner universities and then delivered to students, who work together to achieve specific tasks (O’Dowd, 2018). As noted by Van Hove, COIL is an essential form of internationalisation in education that is achievable without overseas mobility, but does requires careful planning, support and relationships in order to succeed (2019). With regards to the creation of COIL activity, it is important to note that there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach and offers much flexibility in its design and delivery. The form and nature of the activity is itself a collaboration between academic partners, who must tailor all activity so that it is relevant and meaningful for their students (O’Dowd & Lewis 2016).

Importantly, COIL offers much flexibility and is not limited to activity within a single subject area. By contextualizing and tailoring the COIL activity, interdisciplinary projects are achievable, thereby providing greater freedom for innovation and new collaborations (Wimpenny & Orsini-Jones, 2020:7). COIL projects therefore have a wide scope to bring students together across the world to enrich their learning experience in a virtual space. With flexibility comes certain challenges, however, as it important to note that COIL activity requires extensive planning, training and buy-in to enable staff to make the most out of the practice (Appiah-Kubi & Annan 2020). In the iKudu context, this need to train and plan also presents a challenging dichotomy to consider, as there are a disproportionate number of European consortium members that have more COIL experience that are leading the project training, which brings challenges to the core principles of Africanisation and decolonization through the uneven prior experiences of consortium. This consideration is a critical point for greater reflection to the iKudu project, but one that brings into focus the spirit of co-equal creation of learning environments as well as equality and diversity that are also enshrined within COIL practice (SUNY COIL 2020).

Equality and Intercultural Diversity in COIL practice

As previously noted, iKudu has a strong focus on decolonized practices, and the promotion of Africanisation in internationalisation. These are incredibly large and complex issues to tackle, but can be viewed through a lens of equality and equity between stakeholders within the context of iKudu. If we understand decolonization within education to infer a practice of rebalancing power away from Eurocentricity, attempts to enshrine decolonized practice should be specifically aimed at inclusively ensuring that all staff and students of all cultural backgrounds feel equally represented in their Higher Education experience (Coventry University, 2020). Within iKudu, Africanisation adds an extra dimension and focus to this, seeking to ensure that the efforts to decolonize also enshrine indigenous knowledges through the use of African values and philosophies (Higgs and Van Wyk, 2007). Although this is a somewhat simplified take on a much larger challenge, this lens of equality is useful to understand iKudu and its use of COIL in the context of South Africa-European partnership.

The use of COIL has strong synergies to concepts of equality and harnessing diversity. Encompassing many core principles of internationalisation at home, COIL offers avenues to promote mutual understanding, decolonization and the development of intercultural competencies, with Rubin noting that COIL uses the internet to bring cultures together and authentically engage with others, without the need to engage in costly mobility (2019). That being said, it is important to note that equality and equity are not the same thing and it is incredibly important to consider how equal partnership can be assured, given the geographical contexts and local nuances of each of the consortium members. Within the consortium, there are potential disparities between student access to online technologies within the partnerships, which may result in issues of inequity (Genc, 2020). The underlying question of 'How can COIL contribute to truly equal partnerships?' is vitally important and there are those that view the use of online learning technologies as perpetuating inequalities, rather than addressing them, through the reinforcement of issues of power and privilege contrary to iKudu's goals of Africanisation and decolonization (Vavrus & Pekol (2015).

This is indeed a critical consideration for the consortium, but one of the fundamental cornerstones of iKudu is to ensure that all partners are harnessing COIL to ensure co-equality in the development of COIL activity and to draw from the diversity of each of its stakeholders to contribute to equity. Indeed, one of the central elements of COIL practice is the interdependency of lecturers and academic staff who collaborate online and this must account for intercultural differences and local needs and contexts (O'Dowd, 2018). In addition, the context of the iKudu project requires full and careful consideration of the current debates about Africanisation and Decolonization of education to ensure

that any potential inequalities in the starting points of the consortium partners do not result in inequity within the project in the long-term. (IKUDU final project application, 2019).

Striving for true equity requires a careful approach to the project management, to the workgroup operations and to the COIL partnering process. It is within this space that this paper seeks to examine the ways that the iKudu project is managing a decolonized, Africanized approach.

Paper Methodology

Commencing in 2019, the iKudu project has, like many projects within HE, been impacted by COVID-19, resulting in some delays on COIL project delivery. This has had some impact on this very paper, which initially was envisioned to capture, analyze and explore data from academics involved in successfully delivered projects. Adjusting to the challenges iKudu has encountered, this current research is based upon qualitative interviews with prospective COIL partners within the consortium as well as interviews with staff involved in the limited number of COIL projects delivered to date.

As part of the project delivery, a second round of partnering was scheduled in September 2020. 22 new academics from South African Institutes and 16 new academics from the European institutes will be available to be partnered for their first coil collaboration in iKudu. Additionally, 7 out the remaining 12 partnerships which were originally planned to have taken place, will work together with their partners to develop and delivery COIL activity in the coming academic year. It is important to note that the South African academic year structure differs to that seen in Europe, so data capture of this paper has been led by a number of factors. Firstly, the afore-mentioned delay in COIL delivery means that the research was limited in terms of gathering interview data for projects that have already been delivered. Secondly, the next phase of COIL activity is intended to take place from the October 2020 to November 2021. This provides the researchers with a larger sample to draw from, but one has to take into account the willingness of the respondents to participate in interviews related to this research without disturbing the ongoing partnering process. In addition, the nature of the interviews must focus on the forward-looking intent, hopes and dreams of the iKudu project, as opposed to a reflective, back-wards looking approach.

Therefore, this paper examines data collected from a semi structured interview approach, focusing on the topics covered in the literature review in a forward-looking fashion. Each interviewee was provided with a list of questions beforehand in order to prepare answers, but were encouraged by the researchers to discuss other relevant and were interrogated further in the spirit of the semi structured approach. This is a qualitative approach focusing on interpretation of the respondents to specific

terms associated with the wider aims of the iKudu project, which are expected to not always be at the center of their collaboration.

The interviews took place virtually using ZOOM, and focused on the following interview topics:

- **Meaning and perception of COIL: - What is the meaning of Collaborative Online International Learning to you?**
- **Significance of iKudu _-what does it mean to you, personally and professionally, to be part of this collaboration and the wider iKudu project?**
- **Importance of diversity: How do you plan to use the existing diversity that you expect in your students, what influence do you think this has on the project outcome**
- **Importance of equality: How do you feel about the importance of equality and equity, and how could you use this in your collaboration?**
- **Decolonization and Africanization: how familiar are you with these terms, and do you think that this collaboration could play a role in decolonizing mindsets and creating a sense of Africanization?**

It is expected that interview data will be available for a small number of core iKudu stakeholders, but enough to draw initial themes and recommendations. The interviewees include workgroup leads responsible for the partnering process from both South African and Europe, as well as interviews with staff involved with the two completed COIL Courses.

The profile of the interviewees will be documented here as well as further details on the partnering process and how the consortium diversity can contribute to the equity of the greater whole of the iKudu project.

Findings: EXPERIENCES AND EXPECTATIONS

This section is to be completed as interviews are currently ongoing. This will be an evaluation of the expectations and experiences of iKudu COIL to date. We will also be reflecting on the initial data captured to make suggestions around COIL practice to improve future delivery and identify 'best practice', particularly with regards to project training and the COIL partnering process, particularly

around issues relating to perceived effort requirements, equality, decolonization and delivery within iKudu.

Conclusions

Despite the challenges of the 2020 COVID-19 environment, the iKudu project has adapted to deliver most of its intended outcomes within the intended timescales, albeit with a delay on COIL delivery due to the unprecedented and unforeseen issues. That being said, considerations of decolonization, Africanisation and equality and equity have been further reinforced by the switch to delivering the project online and give the consortium a space to reflect and consider the most appropriate ways to enshrine the philosophy of co-equal partnerships and COIL creation.

CONCLUSION TO BE FINALISED BASED UPON INTERVIEWS

List of References

Appiah-Kubi, P. & Annan, E. A Review of a Collaborative Online International Learning *International Journal of Engineering Pedagogy* 10(10) 109-124

Coventry University (2020) Why is Decolonisation of the Curriculum Important? *Coventry University Curriculum 2025: Inspiring Curriculum Excellence* [online] available from: <https://curriculum.coventry.domains/decolonisation/why/> [last accessed 02/10/2020]

Genc, C. (2020) The digital disconnect for disadvantaged students, Spring Forum 2020, European Association for International Education

Júnior, C. A. H. & Finardi, K. R. (2018) Internationalization and virtual collaboration: insights from COIL experiences', *Ensinoem Foco*, 1(2), pp19–33

O'Dowd, R. (2018). From telecollaboration to virtual exchange: stage-of-the-art and the role of Unicollaboration in moving forward. *Journal of Virtual exchange*, pp1-23.

O'Dowd, R. & Lewis, T. (2016) *Online Intercultural Exchange: Policy, Pedagogy, Practice* London: Routledge

Guth, S & Rubin, J. (2015) *Collaborative online international learning: An emerging format for internationalizing curricula globally networked teaching in the humanities*, - London: Routledge

Rubin, J. (2019) 'Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) – Now preparing students for international virtual work' in Coelen, R. & Gribble, C. (eds) *Internationalization and Employability in Higher Education* London: Routledge volume 4, chapter 15

SUNY COIL Center (2020) 'About COIL' *SUNY COIL Centre* [online] available from: <http://coil.suny.edu/index.php/page/about-coil-0> [last accessed 06/10/2020]

Van Hove, P. (2019) 'COIL: what's in an acronym?' EAIE [Online] available from: <https://www.eaie.org/blog/coil-acronym.html> [last accessed 28/4/2020]

University of Free State, (2019). IKUDU final project application. Bloemf

Vavrus, F., & Pekol, A. (2015). Critical internationalization: Moving from theory to practice. *Forum for International Research in Education*, 2(2), 5-21.

Wimpenny, K. & Orsini-Jones, M. (2020) *Innovation in Collaborative Online International Learning: A Holistic Blend* in Burgoss, D. (2020) (ed) *Radical Solutions and eLearning: Practical Innovations and Online Educational Technology* Singapore: Springer pp1-27