



A case study of the collaborative design of business curriculum on the Slovenian-Italian border for intercultural management adult students

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Abstract: This case study examines the impact of cross-border business curriculum design in the Slovenian-Italian border region, focusing on a MA-level program in Intercultural Management delivered in the twin cities of Nova Gorica (Slovenia) and Gorizia (Italy). The program was co-designed to foster cross-border exposure and develop students' competencies for navigating complex regional business environments. The instructional design was built on four key pillars (4-pillar ID model): collaborative curriculum design, contextualized learning, immersive cross-border exposure, and personalized learning, and was piloted with adult learners. The study was conducted in three phases (2022-2024). Phase one analyzed reflective narratives from 86 Slovenian MA business students; phase two used a short quantitative self-assessment of cross-border competencies; and phase three involved a pilot survey with 25 participants, using a pre- and post-test design.

Keywords: cross-border business curriculum, regional business environments, curriculum design, cross-border exposure, instructional design

Študija primera o sodelovalnem oblikovanju poslovnega kurikuluma na slovensko-italijanski meji za študente medkulturnega managementa v izobraževanju odraslih

Povzetek: Študija primera preučuje vpliv oblikovanja čezmejnega poslovnega kurikuluma na območju slovensko-italijanske meje, s poudarkom na magistrskem programu Medkulturni management, ki se izvaja v dveh sosednjih mestih - Novi Gorici (Slovenija) in Gorici (Italija). Program je bil sooblikovan z namenom spodbujanja čezmejne izpostavljenosti ter razvijanja kompetenc študentov za delovanje v kompleksnih regionalnih poslovnih okoljih. Didaktična zasnova temelji na štirih ključnih stebrih (model 4-stebnega ID): sodelovalno oblikovanje kurikuluma, kontekstualizirano učenje, poglobljena čezmejna izkušnja in personalizirano učenje, pilotno pa je bil program izveden z odraslimi študenti. Študija je potekala v treh fazah (2022-2024). V prvi fazi so bile analizirane refleksivne pripovedi 86 slovenskih magistrskih študentov poslovnih ved; v drugi fazi je bila uporabljena kratka kvantitativna samoocena čezmejnih kompetenc; v tretji fazi pa je bila izvedena pilotna raziskava s 25 udeleženci, z uporabo pred- in po-testnega dizajna

Ključne besede: čezmejni poslovni kurikulum, regionalna poslovna okolja, oblikovanje kurikuluma, čezmejna izpostavljenost, didaktična zasnova

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1 INTRODUCTION

The authors of this research emphasize the intrinsic value of cross-border business curricula in the context of the Slovenian-Italian border region. The study aims to shed light on the transformative potential of cross-border education, fostering international business knowledge among students, while also providing valuable insights for educators, institutions, and policymakers. Specifically, this study concentrates on the Master's level program in Intercultural Management, which is implemented in the cross-border city of Nova Gorica (Slovenia) and Gorizia (Italy). Researchers seek to understand how collaboratively designed cross-border curriculum equips students with the requisite knowledge and skills to effectively navigate the multifaceted complexities of regional business environments. The pedagogical design of this cross-border business curriculum embodies collaborative design, contextualized learning, immersive exposure, and personalized learning (storytelling). It leverages the unique context of the Slovenian-Italian border region to provide adult students with a holistic and immersive learning experience. In this article researchers seek to analyze the impact of the instructional design model on business learners. By examining the Slovenian-Italian case study, this research seeks to provide insights into effective approaches teaching in cross-border contexts.

The brief literature review below aims to explore the scope of cross-border research, linking the interdisciplinarity of the field of research with the need to contextualize the curriculum within local cross-border dynamics (Boesen, Schnuer, 2017). Cross-border cooperation (CBC) within the European Union (EU) is a crucial mechanism for enhancing regional integration, economic development, and social cohesion. The key EU frameworks for Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) encompass the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) Objective, the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), the European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI), and several others. A diverse array of literature focuses not only on EU frameworks, but also on the dynamics of cross-border interactions, identity formation, governance, and economic cooperation. Researchers emphasize the significance of competencies, power relationships, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on bordering practices in the world, in EU. Beck and Wassenberg (2011) provide a comprehensive perspective on living and researching cross-border cooperation in Europe, offering insights into the complexities and dynamics of collaborative efforts across European borders. Beck (2019) delves into cross-border cooperation in Europe, presenting it as a subject of transdisciplinary research. Beck's work acts as an introduction to a broader discourse on cross-border cooperation within the European context, emphasizing the importance of a transdisciplinary approach to unravel the complexities of cross-border dynamics and interactions. In examining the concept of (un)familiarity in border practices and identity formation at the Slovenian-Croatian border on Istria, Andersen (2012) delves into the complexities of navigating cross-border interactions. This aligns with the broader discussion on the power dynamics and governance of borderlands, as highlighted by Brunet-Jailly (2013), emphasizing the influence of power relationships in border regions. Paasi A. (2009) contributes to the discourse by discussing the concept of bounded spaces in a seemingly 'borderless world,' providing a critical perspective on the power dynamics, territoriality, and geopolitics associated with borders. Van Houtum and Van Naerssen (2002) delve into the complexities of bordering, ordering, and othering. Researchers also offer insights into the socio-political aspects of border formations and their implications on society (Genova, 2017). Wille (2020) specifically addresses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on borders, highlighting the evolving nature of border dynamics in the face of unprecedented global events. In recent cross-border studies, Wille and Nienaber (2020) present a comprehensive exploration of everyday life, working life, communication, and languages in the context of border experiences in Europe, shedding light on the recent trends in cross-border research. Additionally, Wille, Gerst, and Krämer (2021) contribute to the discourse by advocating for a critical self-examination, delving into the methodologies and identities within the realm of border studies. Overall, these recent sources collectively show the need for a nuanced understanding of borders, emphasizing the multidimensionality and adaptability of border studies in various societal contexts. Business perspectives in the cross-border interactions on the Slovenian-Italian border are tackled by Buko (2018, 2019) and Selvelli (2021, 2020), focusing on the significance of competencies in shaping intercultural entrepreneurial strategies in the Italian-Slovenian border region, focusing on the role of business leaders in fostering successful cross-border collaborations.

In summary, findings from the literature emphasize the need for managerial intercultural understanding, and strategic business approaches in the cross-border regions. Overall, these insights are essential for comprehending the multifaceted nature of cross-border relationships and devising

informed strategies for effective engagement and collaboration in this context. Consequently, a pressing need exists to contextualize business curricula at the local Universities located in the border regions, within local cross-border dynamics, enabling students to grasp the nuances of their specific regional cross-border environments. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) play a central role in this formula. HEIs are pivotal in crafting innovative and relevant curricula that encompass intercultural competencies and are rooted in the social and cultural fabric of the regions they serve in their local cross-border contexts.

2 PROJECT: PILOT CROSS-BORDER CURRICULUM PROJECT

The curriculum was co-designed within the Slovenian-Italian border context, a region with high cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity. One of the core courses within the program MA level program “Intercultural Management” is “Economic and Business Culture” (5 ECTS) was specifically tailored for testing cross-border business education. A group of cross-border professors (from Italian and from the Slovenian side) employed innovative practical approaches to pilot curriculum delivery. Central to the pilot objectives was immersive cross-border exposure and contextualized learning experiences. The unique setting and design make it an ideal case study for exploring the value and impact of cross-border business education.

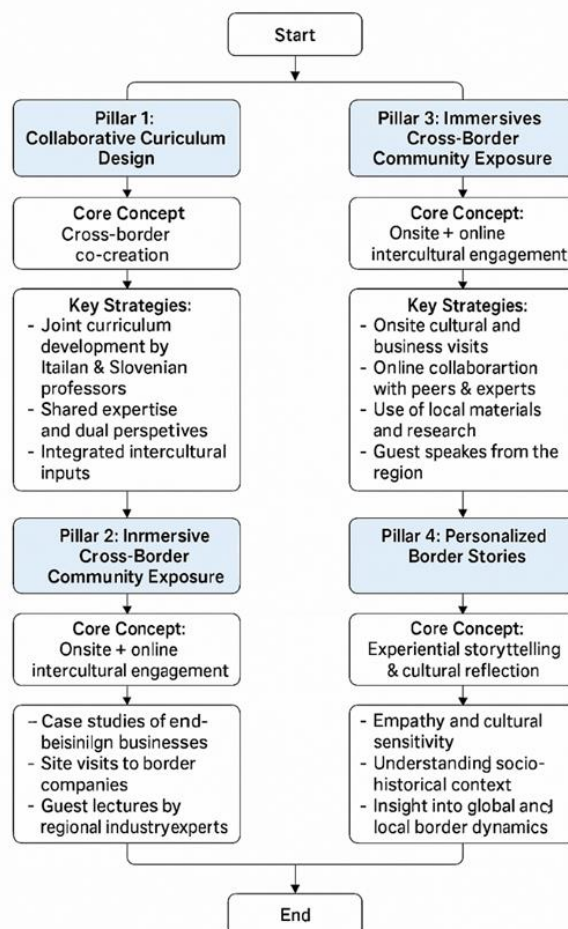
Theoretical framework: The theoretical framework guiding this course is firmly rooted in the discovery-based learning model. This innovative pedagogical approach is rooted in the experiential learning (Clark & White, 2010). It helps students to engage with intercultural management through diverse cognitive pathways. The primary objective is to instigate a process of “re-discovery” concerning the intricacies of business and economic cultures across various countries, with an initial focus on the distinctive border region shared by Slovenia and Italy. Central to this framework is the adoption of a comparative mindset, wherein learners cultivate the capacity to systematically compare and contrast economic and business cultures (Slovenia and Italy). The learning structure encompasses four interconnected dimensions: Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills, designed to holistically prepare students for navigating the complexities of intercultural management and cross-border business operations. Students engage in activities that enhance their cultural awareness, communication skills, language competencies, and adaptability. They are encouraged to reflect on their own cultural biases and assumptions, fostering a deeper understanding of the role of culture and historical legacies of political divisions in business and everyday spontaneous interactions. The pedagogical design of the business module in the context of the Slovenian-Italian border region is characterized by its innovative and practical approaches, reflecting the program’s tailored focus on cross-border business education for an evolving European context of mutual cooperation. This component of the MA-level Intercultural Management degree program was meticulously crafted to address the unique needs and opportunities presented by this culturally diverse and economically dynamic border region.

Below, are the key elements and strategies that constitute the pedagogical design of this curriculum (four pillars of instructional design framework/ 4-Pillar ID Model):

Visual 1: 4-Pillar Instructional Design Model for Cross-Border Business Curriculum

Pillar	Core Concept	Key Strategies	Intended Learning Outcomes
1. Collaborative Curriculum Design	Cross-border co-creation	- Joint curriculum development by Italian & Slovenian professors- Shared expertise and dual perspectives- Integrated intercultural inputs	- Appreciation of cross-national business synergies- Enhanced curriculum richness through diverse viewpoints
2. Contextualized Learning Experiences	Real-world business immersion	- Case studies of Slovenian-Italian businesses- Site visits to border companies- Guest lectures by regional industry experts	- Practical understanding of cross-border challenges- Application of theoretical concepts to real-life scenarios
3. Immersive Cross-Border Community Exposure	Onsite + online intercultural engagement	- Onsite cultural and business visits- Online collaboration with peers & experts- Use of local materials and research- Guest speakers from the region	- Connection between theory and practice- Engagement with regional communities- Appreciation of local expertise and intercultural dynamics
4. Personalized Border Stories	Experiential storytelling & cultural reflection	- Narratives from borderland individuals- Co-teaching with intercultural professionals- Comparative case studies (e.g., Gorizia-Nova Gorica & Tijuana-San Diego)- Historical & socio-cultural lectures	- Empathy and cultural sensitivity- Understanding socio-historical context- Insight into global and local border dynamics

Visual 2: Graphic representation of "4-Pillar Instructional Design Model for Cross-Border Business Curriculum"



1. Collaborative curriculum design: The collaborative design of business curriculum in a cross-border setting, specifically between professors from Italy and Slovenia, allows for a symbiotic exchange of expertise and perspectives from both sides. It represents the intertwined nature of cross-border business relations.

2. Contextualized Learning Experiences: The model places a strong emphasis on contextualized learning experiences. Students are exposed to real-world cross-border business scenarios, enabling them to understand the complexities and challenges faced by businesses operating in the Slovenian-Italian border region. This contextualization is achieved through a variety of means, including case studies, site visits, and guest lectures by industry experts who share their experiences and insights.

3. Immersive Cross-Border Community Exposure: students engage in activities that involve both online and onsite learning. Onsite experiences include visits to businesses, institutions, and cultural sites on both sides of the border. Online components facilitate collaborative learning and cross-cultural interaction, connecting students with peers, experts, and resources from both Slovenia and Italy. Immersion increases classroom engagement by fostering a strong connection to the local community. This approach prioritizes the incorporation of local expertise and resources to enhance the learning experience. To achieve this, the curriculum integrates local experts as guest speakers into the program delivery, providing students with firsthand insights and real-world perspectives on intercultural management in the Alpe Adria region. These experts bring a wealth of knowledge and experience related to the complexities of border dynamics, enriching classroom discussions and providing practical, context-specific examples. Additionally, the curriculum leverages local materials, research articles, books, and other resources that spotlight the wealth of content related to intercultural communication in the tri-border region. Immediate applicability of course content fosters a deeper understanding of the local context and encourages students to actively engage with the regional community. This pillar serves as a bridge between academic theory and real-world practice, ensuring that students are well-equipped to navigate the intricacies of cross-border business in the local community and beyond.

4. Personalized Border Stories: Students are exposed to narratives and testimonies from individuals and businesses on both sides of the border. These stories provide a human dimension to the cross-border experience, allowing students to gain deeper insights into the cultural, historical, and economic factors that shape the region. The experts not only shared their personal intercultural narratives but also delved into the profound societal impacts of culture. Furthermore, they engaged students in conversations about the practical aspects of cross-border project implementation, with a particular focus on the dynamic Slovenian-Italian border region. This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between culture, society, and cross-border business dynamics while fostering a rich learning environment that transcended traditional classroom boundaries. Experiential storytelling and co-teaching constituted an integral part of the didactics envisaged for the purpose of stimulating sensitivity towards cross-border issues. Historical, socioanthropological, cultural, geographical and linguistic components were added values included in the lectures that were extensively based on individual narratives of border perception and overcoming. This also included the personal experience of intercultural professionals active at an academic level, in writing/journalism and beyond, which were crucial for reflecting on the value of the events of this border area, also in view of the important title of European Capital of Culture 2025, which was jointly awarded to the twin cities of Gorizia and Nova Gorica. The comparative approach to the issues Slovenian/Italian border area was particularly valuable since it placed the specificity of this crucial conurbation in relation with other meaningful contexts in Europe and beyond, highlighting the common challenges that these areas face in our globalized world. For example, particular focus was placed on borderlands such as the Mexican/Us one of Tijuana and San Diego, arguing that they constitute official trans-border agglomerations, with high elements of interconnectedness between the two sides of the frontier from a variety of standpoints, including economic, historic and demographic ones. In the lectures, it was demonstrated how both Nova Gorica-Gorizia and Tijuana-San Diego were shaped by complex patterns of identity reconfiguration in the course of the last century and continue to be faced with crucial issues of migration, embodying paradigmatic points of juncture located in correspondence to the so-called former East-West divide and the persisting North-South one respectively. The contributions coming from personal narratives and storytelling of local people also contributed in creating a sense of intersubjectivity which prompted a sense of empathy

and triggered responsive participation, in the form of individual anecdotes, reflections, which emerged in the discussion part of the lessons (Selvelli, 2019).

3 CASE STUDY RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This case study was conducted in three distinct phases, each designed to explore and analyze different dimensions of cross-border engagement of business students and the development of their competencies. Understanding how these categories contribute to the successful cross-border interactions of business graduates.

Phase 1: The case study mixed methodology employed in this research centers on a cohort of 86 Slovenian MA level business learners. These participants were strategically selected based on their involvement in a specialized academic program located within the unique Slovenian-Italian border context. This program was deliberately designed to incorporate innovative elements within the business curriculum, with a specific focus on cross-border exposure. The participants represent a diverse range of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives, all contributing to the richness of data collected for this study. The participants in this study represent a diverse group of adult learners age 25-55 y.o, 70% are female, 30% are men from various sectors, including the public sector, private industry, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) based in the border region. Their inclusion in the study provides a multifaceted perspective on the effectiveness of Intercultural Management studies in border regions. Notably, these adult learners bring a wealth of experiential knowledge deeply rooted in the intricacies of border life. Their backgrounds are steeped in prior education and professional engagements within the border region, making them particularly attuned to the unique challenges and opportunities associated with cross-border dynamics. This wealth of experience positions them as pivotal informants in evaluating the curriculum's impact and its alignment with the realities of borderland living and working.

Phase 1 Data Collection: Data for this research was primarily gathered through the analysis of structured reflections provided by the 86 participating Slovenian MA-level business learners. These reflections were part of the curriculum and offered students the opportunity to document their experiences, insights, and challenges encountered throughout their engagement with the cross-border business education program. The structured reflection format allowed for the collection of detailed, qualitative data pertaining to the students' perceptions, growth, and learning outcomes within the program. The research adheres to ethical guidelines, and all participants have provided informed consent for the use of their structured reflections in this study. Anonymity and confidentiality are maintained throughout the research process to protect the privacy and identity of the participants.

Phase 1 Data Analysis (2023): thematic analysis, is utilized to identify recurring themes, patterns, and nuances within the reflections. This approach involves a systematic and structured process of coding and categorizing the data. The coding was analyzed with the software webQDA.

Phase 2 Survey Data collection and analysis (2023): At the end of the instructional period, 86 students also filled in general survey reflecting on their abilities to manage cross-border projects. Quantitative survey data is a self-reflection of their competencies on the likert scale. End of class quantitative survey (google forms) summarized self-assessment of students and their perceived ability to work across the borders (Likert scale). In Phase 2, students completed a self-reflection survey consisting of three items designed to assess their perceived knowledge, attitudes, and skills related to cross-border competencies following the instructional period. The first item evaluated students' self-awareness in cross-border interactions using a 5-point Likert scale. The second item assessed their confidence in utilizing tools essential for effective cross-border project management, while the third item focused on their knowledge and ability to manage conflicts within cross-border teams. Quantitative survey data is analyzed as descriptive statistics (Likert scale answers illustrated with Pie Charts).

Phase 3 Pilot competency assessment (2024): a Likert-scale 18 questions survey was designed based on the data from phase 1 of the case study. Sequential design with pre (N25) and post (N25) was implemented to measure competencies. The sequential design of the study allowed for a comparison

of cross-border competencies before and after the class, focusing on the learning impact on knowledge, attitudes and skills.

To analyze the pre test and post test data sets, the statistical analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The goal was to determine whether there were significant changes in cross-border competencies after the class. To assess whether there were meaningful differences between pre- and post-survey results, a t-test was conducted on aggregated competency scores, which were treated as Likert-scale numerical data. Statistical significance was determined at a threshold of $p < 0.05$. This approach was selected because it effectively detects changes in participants' self-assessed attitudes, skills, and knowledge, supports valid analysis even with a relatively small sample size ($N=25$), and provides a replicable framework for evaluating similar educational interventions. To evaluate the internal consistency and reliability of the survey instrument, Cronbach's alpha was calculated.

Table 1: Competency Survey for Phase 3

Item No.	Survey Statement	Type	Dimension
1	I initiate interactions with people in the cross-border context.	Attitude	Openness
2	I reserve judgment during interactions with people during cross-border encounters.	Attitude	Openness
3	I ask questions about other cultures different from my own during teamwork across borders.	Attitude	Curiosity
4	I seek answers to questions about cultural differences as part of check-in/social communication during cross-border work.	Attitude	Curiosity
5	I understand differences in forms of verbal communication in different cultures when I travel across borders.	Skill	Communication
6	I understand differences in forms of non-verbal communication in different cultures across borders.	Skill	Communication
7	I use a worldview different from my own to interpret the views and actions of persons from different cultures during my work across borders.	Skill	Empathy
8	I act in a supportive way that recognizes the feelings of other cultural groups.	Skill	Empathy
9	I understand the importance of politics, history, beliefs, values, economics, and communication styles to members of other cultural groups.	Knowledge	Worldview
10	I differentiate the complex beliefs, values, communication styles, customs, politics, history, and economics of other cultural groups.	Knowledge	Worldview
11	I am aware of my own cultural rules and biases when I work across borders.	Knowledge	Self-Awareness / Worldview
12	I can describe my personal cultural rules and biases.	Knowledge	Worldview
13	I actively seek to improve my understanding of the complicated differences between cultures when I work across borders.	Knowledge	Worldview
14	I am aware of how my own experiences have shaped my personal rules or biases about intercultural cross-border interactions.	Knowledge	Worldview
15	I understand and can manage conflict in cross-border projects.	Skill	Conflict Management
16	I feel confident that I can work as part of a cross-border team and apply proper tools for successful project implementation.	Skill	Application
17	I am a positive, curious explorer of new ways of working in cross-border teams.	Attitude	Openness
18	I can identify cross-border business opportunities for business development.	Skill	Business Acumen

Overall, the 3-phase case study methodology provided a comprehensive framework for exploring and understanding the multifaceted nature of cross-border interactions, highlighting the interplay between attitudes, knowledge, and skills in achieving successful outcomes in international cross-border business settings.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Phase 1: Qualitative results

This section uncovers the insights derived from the phase 1 structured reflections of participants. Qualitative data from student reflections was organized in three themed categories: Cross Border Attitudes, Cross Border Knowledge, and Cross Border Skills. Under Cross-Border Attitudes (Category A), data showed the significance of openness and curiosity in embracing new encounters and seeking innovative solutions on a global scale within cross-border encounters. Moving on to Cross Border Knowledge (Category B), findings showed the importance of knowledge in understanding geopolitical contexts, hidden historical barriers, intercultural dynamics, and broader economic and legal frameworks. Lastly, in Cross Border Skills (Category C), data spotlighted practical cross-border skills: conflict management, comparative thinking, and frame shifting as vital competencies to navigate diverse cultural landscapes and ensure successful cross-border interactions in business.

Table 2: Key Themes

	Code Category	Definition	Mentions
A	Cross Border Attitudes		
A1	Openness	importance of openness in managers, embracing new cross border encounters for global	25
A2	Curiosity	importance of curiosity in managers, encouraging them to seek out new perspectives and innovative solutions in the global business landscape.	22
B	Cross Border Knowledge		
B 1	Cross border context	understanding of geopolitical and historical contexts that influence business dynamics across borders, awareness of cross border context	25
B 2	Hidden context barriers	significance of historical knowledge in understanding the root causes of potential conflicts and building stronger relationships with international counterparts.	19
B 3	Intercultural knowledge	Intercultural management knowledge pertaining to business stakeholders on different sides of the border /	27
B 4	Global Business Acumen	Understanding the economic, legal, and regulatory frameworks of both Italy and Slovenia, and the broader European Union, to make informed business decisions.	31
C	Cross Border Skills		
C 1	Conflict Management	skills to handle disputes or disagreements that may arise due to cultural differences or varying business practices	21
C 2	Comparative thinking	structured and analytical approach that focuses on evaluating and contrasting various aspects of different countries, and specifically border regions.	22
C 3	Frame shifting	cognitive and behavioral processes individuals undergo when adjusting their cultural frames of reference, beliefs, values, communication styles, and behaviors to effectively interact and engage with people from different cultures.	19

An interesting theme emerging from this research is the significant role of self-perception in the realm of cross-border collaboration and business success within the regional context. The theme of "self-awareness of border impact" illustrates the influence of border contexts on self-perceptions and attitudes, shedding light on the need for an introspective understanding of personal biases and perspectives. Additionally, the theme of "comparative mindset related to other border regions" highlights the students' capacity to draw parallels and distinctions between various border regions, enriching their cross-cultural awareness. Moreover, the theme of "clarity of anticipated conflicts and need for conflict management tools in cross-border projects" emphasizes the significance of understanding potential conflicts and employing appropriate tools for effective conflict resolution.

The comparative mindset with an illustration of the stories from other borders gave an additional perspective on the cross-border realities. Respondents noted the flexible nature of the Slovenian border, contrasting it with the more stringent experiences on other borders.

"Guest speaker lived very close to the Slovenian border and when she was young she visited Slovenia almost every weekend. This border was very flexible, like it doesn't exist. On the other side there is a different border between USA and Mexico. She visited Mexico several times, because her mother is Mexican. It was very complicated to cross this border, there was a lot of traffic, too. It is very interesting for me her look to cross border, the difference of crossing border between four countries. I very agree with her that the border between Slovenia and Italy was very flexible. When I visited high school in Nova Gorica on Erjavčeva street, we crossed the border on Erjavčeva several times by walk. But I am very impressed on their look at Slovenian, her wish to study Slovenian language. We thought that no Italian don't want to learn Slovene language." R 2

Several participants found storytelling elements in class engaging, resonating with the speaker's experiences of living near a border, similar to the presenter's experiences near Nova Gorica. It is clear from the qualitative data that students have connected with the stories of smuggling goods across the Italian-Slovenian border shared by the presenter, recalling similar family narratives of the past. The participant emphasized the importance of understanding historical events related to borders and their enduring impact on contemporary life.

"I think I found this class the most interesting because of the theme; guest speaker talked about Nova Gorica and her living next to the border, which is in my case very similar. Living in Rožna Dolina for all my life next to the border and now watching pictures that guest speaker had in her presentation and that I know them from my everyday, was very touching. I also remember the stories (when I was a kid) from my grandfather and mother about smuggling goods from Italia to Slovenia and also reversed; my grandfather sold all the wine and vegetables that he produced to Gorizia. I was very happy to hear her story also and I think because of the history that happened, it is very important that we are aware of what happened then and we still live with this today." R 3

In general, course participants showed a lot of personal engagement, expressing a passion for cross-border dynamics, and identified with guest speaker's life story. They found her experiences of living near two distinct borders fascinating. The participant acknowledged their own perspective as a Slovenian citizen and gained insight into how people from the other side perceived the Slovene-Italian border. Guest speaker's account highlighted the evolving nature of the border. Self-reflection process is illustrated in the quote below:

"As a cross-border enthusiast, I want to reflect on the impact of the guest talk. Expert's life story of having experienced life on two very different borders amazed me. I have always perceived our Slovene-Italian border from the Slovene citizen's point of view and didn't really know how people from the other side perceived us. Italian guest speaker offered an insight to this perception of the border even from here childhood and as adult. She showed us that our border was in the past and today is even more open and connects people instead of separating them. It is not a real border anymore; it became a frontier." R 4

Qualitative research data analysis confirmed the connection between learners' self-perception and their ability to engage effectively in cross-border collaboration, adapt to diverse cultural contexts, and ultimately realize favorable business outcomes (Attitudes, Knowledge, Skills). These findings underscore the critical importance of fostering self-awareness as paramount considerations in the design of curricula tailored for border regions.

4.2 Phase 2: Quantitative survey results

After the class, participants reported a heightened sense of confidence in engaging in cross-border communication. Notably, 36% of the 86 respondents acknowledged their awareness about substantial influence of their personal rules and biases in shaping their perspectives on cross-border cooperation, with 38.4% characterizing awareness as "very high."

Graph 1: Self-Awareness Dimension

Self-awareness: I am aware of how my own experiences have shaped my personal rules or biases about intercultural cross border interactions.

86 responses



The second survey question delved into students' confidence levels regarding their ability to function effectively within cross-border teams and utilize appropriate tools for project-related tasks. Results highlighted a substantial increase in self-confidence after the course. Data shows that 59.3% of respondents reported a "very high" degree of self-confidence, and 25.6% self-rated their ability as "excellent" in using tools for successful cross-border project management. These findings underline the positive impact of the course in bolstering students' confidence and perceived competence in cross-border teamwork and project tool utilization.

Graph 2: Confidence and Competencies

competencies: I feel confident that I can work as a part of the cross border team and apply proper tools for successful project implementation

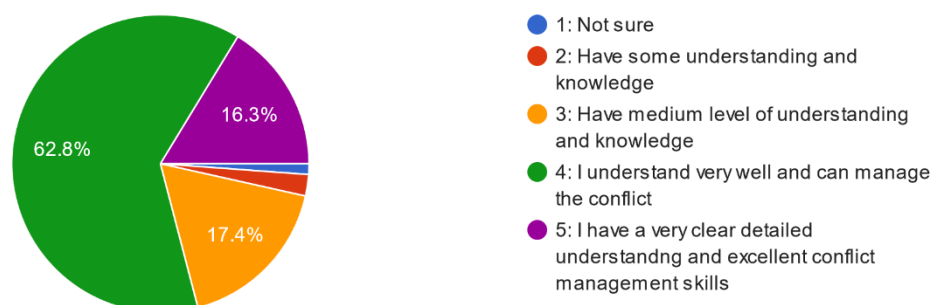
86 responses



In this study, an integral aspect was understanding students' self-assessment of their knowledge concerning the probabilities of cross-border conflicts and their ability to effectively manage conflictual situations within cross-border teams. The survey results shed light on these critical self-assessments.

Graph 3: Knowledge and Skills

Knowledge: I understand and can manage conflict cross border projects
86 responses



The findings revealed a notable level of confidence and self-assuredness among students in dealing with cross-border project conflicts. A substantial 62.8% of the surveyed students acknowledged possessing a "very good" understanding of the probabilities of cross-border conflicts and expressed confidence in their ability to manage such situations proficiently. Moreover, an additional 16.3% of respondents rated their knowledge and conflict management skills as "excellent." This suggests that a considerable proportion of the students perceived themselves to be adept in handling conflict within cross-border contexts.

In summary, the reflections and surveys revealed several points: Firstly, the majority of course participants, for whom this form of learning was a novel experience, exhibited a strong attitude of openness, demonstrating their openness towards an experimental setting. Secondly, these positive attitudes directly influenced the overall learning experience. Learners displayed curiosity, resulting in active participation, initiative, and immersion within small groups. This attitudinal curiosity facilitated engagement and fostered a vibrant learning environment. Thirdly, participants successfully applied specific theories to real-life daily cross-border situations, underscoring the practical relevance and efficacy of the pedagogical approach employed in this study. Finally, the survey data of self-assessment of students about their ability to work cross-border indicated an overall high level of understanding of the practical aspects of cross-border intercultural business work and high feeling of confidence among participants for cross-border communication.

4.3 Phase 3: Pilot cross border survey results:

Third phase of case study included pre and post data collection from 25 students who participated in the course. Students filled in a pre and post rubric to self-evaluate their cross-border competencies. Rubric consists of questions, using a Likert Scale. The scale consists of a series of questions, and participants are asked to rate their agreement or disagreement on a scale, ranging from 1 to 6. The survey includes questions that aim to measure attitudes, skills, and knowledge.

The pre- and post-test data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to evaluate changes in cross-border competencies following the course. A paired samples t-test was applied to the aggregated scores, which were based on Likert-scale responses, to identify any statistically significant differences. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was used to determine meaningful changes. This method was chosen for its suitability in detecting shifts in self-reported attitudes,

knowledge, and skills, its reliability in small-sample research contexts (N=25), and its relevance for ensuring transparency and replicability in similar educational evaluations.

Table 3: Cross-Border Attitudes

	Frequency_PRE	Frequency_POST	% PRE	% POST
low degree	1	0	4.0	0.0
somewhat low degree	5	1	20.0	4.0
somewhat high degree	13	5	52.0	20.0
high degree	6	14	24.0	56.0
very high degree	0	5	0.0	20.0
Total	25	25	100.0	100.0

The findings demonstrated a notable enhancement in participants' attitudes following the cross-border class. Specifically, the proportion of participants in the highest category for attitudes increased from 24% to 56%, reflecting a positive shift in their perceptions towards other cultures. This growth suggests that participants became more open and curious about different cultures. Openness indicates a willingness to explore and learn about other cultures, while curiosity reflects an active interest and desire to understand them.

Table 4: Cross-Border Knowledge

	Frequency_PRE	Frequency_POST	% PRE	% POST
somewhat low degree	2	0	8.0	0.0
somewhat high degree	12	4	48.0	16.0
high degree	8	15	32.0	60.0
very high degree	3	6	12.0	24.0
Total	25	100	100.0	100

Additionally, there was a substantial rise in the highest category for knowledge, in “high degree” from 32% to 60%, and in “very high degree” from 12% to 24% suggesting that participants significantly enhanced their understanding and intercultural cross-border knowledge. This increase is especially significant, as it indicates that participants developed and gained valuable insights into diverse worldviews in the Italian-Slovenian business settings during the class.

Table 5: Cross-Border Skills

	Frequency_PRE	Frequency_POST	% PRE	% POST
somewhat low degree	3	0	12.0	0.0
somewhat high degree	9	7	36.0	28.0
high degree	12	13	48.0	52.0
very high degree	1	5	4.0	20.0
Total	25	25	100.0	100.0

Similarly, the highest category for skills saw an increase in “high degree” from 48% to 52%, indicating that the intervention significantly aided participants in developing cross-border skills. Notably “very high degree” shifted from 4% to 20% among participants. As a result of the course, participants likely gained a better understanding and appreciation of diverse perspectives, enabling them to engage in more effective and meaningful communication in the cross-border business environment.

Overall, phase 3 data from sequential “pre” and “post” methodology with 25 students who participated in the course illustrates increase in knowledge, attitudes and skills after the cross-border business course.

Instrument reliability was also evaluated. To assess the internal consistency and reliability of the survey instrument, Cronbach’s alpha was calculated for both the pre-test and post-test data. The pre-test results showed a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.807 (standardized $\alpha = 0.810$), indicating high reliability of the scale. This suggests that the items used to measure cross-border competencies were consistently interpreted by participants before the intervention. In the post-test, Cronbach’s alpha was slightly lower, at **0.703** (standardized $\alpha = 0.715$), but still within an acceptable range. This indicates a moderate to good level of internal consistency, suggesting that the scale remained reliable after the educational intervention. The slight decrease in reliability may reflect greater variability in post-test responses, potentially due to individual differences in how participants integrated the learning experience. Overall, both pre- and post-test alpha values exceed the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, supporting the use of the instrument for measuring changes in cross-border competencies over time.

Table 6: Phase 3 instrument reliability

Phase	Cronbach’s Alpha	Standardized Cronbach’s Alpha	Number of Items
Pre-Test	0.807	0.810	18
Post-Test	0.703	0.715	18

To summarize, the findings from this 3-phase case study demonstrate the effectiveness of knowledge transfer using the cross-border teaching model described in the article above. Teacher facilitators played a crucial role in coordinating the learning process, structuring key steps, and encouraging written reflection following the course. These findings show the significance of experiential learning described in the 4-Pillar ID model in enhancing cross-border business competencies and understanding the intricacies of real-world business environments. The findings suggest that fostering skills, knowledge and attitudes should be key considerations in business curriculum design for border regions, as these factors significantly influence students’ ability to navigate and succeed in cross-border business environments.

5 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this research, as highlighted in the pedagogical design outlined above, show the possible transformative potential of cross-border business curricula in preparing students to excel in regional business environments. The curriculum's emphasis on contextualized learning, immersive cross-border exposure, collaboration, exposure to border stories, and the development of intercultural competencies aligns with the research's conclusions regarding the value of such curricula. As it becomes increasingly apparent that students' (cross-border region inhabitants) self-perception profoundly influences their capacity to navigate and thrive in cross-border business environments, educators and curriculum developers must prioritize didactical strategies that nurture these attributes in their pedagogical approaches, specifically at the universities located in the border regions.

The implications of this research extend far beyond the Slovenian-Italian border context. The collaborative curriculum design approach utilized in this study presents a replicable model that can be applied effectively in other border regions (in Europe and beyond). Drawing from the experiences and insights gained in the Slovenian-Italian border case, educational institutions in these regions can develop innovative and practical curricula tailored to their specific contexts. The study's focus on self-perception further highlights the nuanced interplay between personal awareness and effective cross-border collaboration and business outcomes. As a result, the implications of this research advocate for the adoption of collaborative curriculum design as a valuable and transferable approach for educational institutions in border regions worldwide. Looking ahead, the findings and insights derived from this research carry significant implications for the continued development of cross-border curricula, not only within the local Slovenian-Italian border context but also across various EU regions.

6 LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

Limitations of the study are linked to the need for future research to expand the sample size, incorporate a more balanced perspective from both sides of the border (Slovenian and Italian), consider the long-term impact of cross-border learning, and account for the contextual specificity of different border regions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of cross-border education's effectiveness.

To advance the field of cross-border business education, future research endeavors should delve deeper into the nuances of curriculum design, focusing on tailoring pedagogical approaches to the specific needs and challenges of diverse border regions. Additionally, studies that explore the long-term impact of cross-border business education on students' career trajectories and the businesses they engage with would be valuable in gauging the practical outcomes of such programs.

Building on the findings of this study, several directions for future research are proposed to deepen understanding and enhance the implementation of cross-border business education:

- A. **Adopt Longitudinal Designs:** Future studies should implement longitudinal research to track the long-term impact of cross-border curricula on students' professional development, intercultural competencies, and career trajectories. This would provide deeper insight into the sustainability and lasting effects of cross-border learning experiences.
- B. **Conduct Comparative Research Across Border Regions:** To test the transferability of the Slovenian-Italian model, comparative studies involving other EU border regions (for example Germany-Poland, France-Belgium, Hungary-Romania) are recommended. This approach would highlight how varying geopolitical, cultural, and institutional contexts influence curriculum design and effectiveness.
- C. **Refine Collaborative Curriculum Design as a Replicable Model:** The collaborative instructional framework used in this study should be further developed and tested across diverse educational settings. Future research should explore which elements (e.g., immersive exposure, contextualized learning) are most impactful and how they can be standardized or adapted for broader application within the EU.

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- D. Study the Role of Institutional Partnerships at HEIs on the borders: Research could investigate the processes and challenges of cross-border institutional collaboration, including governance models, joint accreditation, and faculty coordination. This would support best-practice development for higher education partnerships.
 - E. Examine Pedagogical Innovations in Border Context: Further studies should analyze the effectiveness of specific pedagogical strategies such as the use of border narratives, student co-design, and experiential projects in fostering intercultural and cross-border business skills.
 - F. Encourage Dissemination and Policy Engagement: future research should focus on disseminating successful curriculum models and documenting their outcomes in ways that inform policy development, institutional decision-making.

Overall, collaborative curriculum design and applied 4-pillar ID model, as showcased in this research, could be further examined and refined as a replicable model for other EU regions with unique border dynamics. These regions can draw inspiration from the Slovenian-Italian case to develop their own innovative cross-border curricula that foster intercultural competencies. Educational institutions need to engage in cross-border partnerships, share best practices, and collaborate on curriculum design to maximize the effectiveness of such programs. Educators on both sides of the border should continue to prioritize the integration of immersive cross-border experiences, exposure to border stories, and collaborative learning opportunities within their curricula. Lastly, the dissemination of successful cross-border curriculum models, along with the documentation of their impacts, could be encouraged to facilitate knowledge sharing and inspire innovation in business education across the EU.

7 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the impact of cross-border business curricula within the unique context of the Slovenian-Italian border region. The Master's level program in Intercultural Management, implemented in Nova Gorica (Slovenia) and Gorizia (Italy), stands as a testament to the transformative potential of cross-border business education. By incorporating innovative elements and practical approaches, this curriculum encourages the development of cross-border competencies (Attitudes-Knowledge-Skills) that are crucial for successful cross-border collaboration and business operations.

Findings illustrated three pillars: Cross Border Attitudes, Cross Border Knowledge, and Cross Border Skills. Under Cross-Border Attitudes, data showed the significance of openness and curiosity in embracing new encounters and seeking innovative solutions. Cross Border Knowledge pillar showed the importance of knowledge in understanding geopolitical contexts, hidden historical barriers, intercultural dynamics, and broader economic and legal frameworks. Finally, in Cross Border Skills, practical cross-border skills are spotlighted: conflict management, comparative thinking, and frame shifting as vital competencies to navigate diverse cultural landscapes and ensure successful cross-border interactions in business.

The pedagogical design of this curriculum leverages the unique border context to offer students a holistic and immersive learning experience. The course instructional design model encompassing four pillars (collaborative design, contextualized learning, immersive exposure and personalized learning) proved to be effective. The effective integration of curriculum within the local cross-border context, complemented by innovative models like experiential learning, offers students practical insights and enriching experiences that align with the complexities of contemporary business operations. Consequently, this Slovenian-Italian case study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the experiential pedagogical dimensions of cross-border business education. Research serves as a reminder of the role of higher educational institutions located in the border regions as “points of reference” for locally rooted intercultural business education.

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