

Collaborative Online International Learning In Brics Countries- A Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

With the advent of globalization, internationalization has attained high significance amidst countries, in different industries and sectors, one of them being the higher education sector. This paper examines an emerging mode of internationalization of higher education viz., Collaborative Online International Learning and studies its adaptation in BRICS countries, the consequences of the same whether this mode is efficient or deficient in each of these countries. Consequently, this paper compares these countries to determine which of them have a comparative advantage with respect to adaptation of COIL and some of the areas in which the remaining countries can bring about improvements. Said comparison has been done on the basis of four parameters, viz., (i) policy backing; (ii) financial viability; (iii) linguistic barriers; and (iv) readiness to undertake COIL projects. Through this analysis, the paper posits that: Brazil is much ahead than its contemporaries with respect to the first parameter; India and South Africa lag as far as the second parameter is concerned; China and South Africa are not as linguistically prepared as their contemporaries; and lastly, that Russia shows the higher reluctance among its contemporaries with respect to undertaking COIL projects. Lastly, the paper recommends that COIL as a method for developing cooperation and collaboration between BRICS countries, be among the central foci in upcoming BRICS summits.

Keywords: Internationalization, Collaborative Online International Learning, Intercultural Communication, Digital learning, Global Citizenship

1. INTRODUCTION

Internationalization of higher education (“IHE”) has become increasingly prominent in the recent decades, owing to an increase in the level of globalization (Rensburg et al, 2015). This growth is of such magnitude that it is not possible to inhibit it now and it is therefore essential that the myriad of opportunities posed by internationalization is used wisely and to the benefit of all (Rensburg et al, 2015).

One of the ways in which the benefits of internationalization have been harnessed in today’s world is through the pedagogy of Collaborative Online International Learning or

COIL. The key feature of this method of teaching is that it seeks to develop the intercultural competency of students of different countries, by enabling them to interact with one another by means of a virtual classroom which can be accessible by students from various geographical locations (Kubi, 2020). Although ‘intercultural competence’ cannot be defined in exact terms, it can be understood to indicate the ability to be able to perceive and understand various points of view pertaining to different cultures than one’s own; to be able to build relationships in that respect, maintain them through effective and non-distorted communication (Esche, 2018).

Significantly, COIL is one of the types of Virtual Exchanges or VEs. VEs use computer resources to facilitate interaction between people of different nationalities or cultures, in order to build global awareness among students (Hilliker et al, 2020). This paper focuses specifically on COIL, which can be used irrespective of the academic discipline involved, even though a common syllabus is prepared by the home and international faculty (Ward, 2016).

Pertinently, different nations across the world are taking different approaches with respect to internationalization of their higher education institutes. This paper specifically focuses on a bloc of five countries of the world viz., Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, who in 2001 jointly formed the BRIC, with South Africa joining the bloc in 2006 (O'Neil, 2001).

In an empirical study conducted in 2015, it was discovered that students in BRICS nations themselves did not find the countries in the bloc as an attractive destination for pursuing their higher education and the study further enlists other nations which students from BRICS seek to travel to for their higher education (Rensburg et al, 2015). In the six years since the publication of the aforementioned study, COIL and VEs have attained more prominence among nations. In such a context, it is imperative to study whether or not BRICS countries have been able to adapt to these new advents and if so, whether there are any improvements which could be undertaken, to achieve better student participation in COIL and VEs. If not, then it would still be useful to study potential areas of concerns and ways in which these concerns can be mitigated.

This study seeks to comparatively analyze the functioning of both COIL and VEs in BRICS nations, in order to understand the working of these systems in the different demographics of these nations, as well as to highlight potential areas of concerns and to suggest viable measures to tackle the same.

1.1 Methodology

This paper uses the “secondary research” or “desk research” methodology, as per which sources used in the research are of already existing literature and data. The sources used in

this research have been duly cited in accordance with the rules provided under the Harvard Citation Style.

2. COIL IN BRICS COUNTRIES

In addition to enabling students to build their intercultural competency, COIL projects are also helpful to students in honing their digital technology skills, given that they would be working with other students through an online medium and therefore would have to learn more about various applications (Kunjuthamby et al, 2021).

With the advent of the COVID pandemic, students and educators all across had been compelled to venture into online teaching and collaborating. However, online teaching has been looked down as deficient by many teachers, who find it difficult to maintain class participation and ensure that all students are able to interact with one another, while ensuring that there is no discrimination when activities are asynchronous (Dyer & Harris, 2020). In such a context, it becomes impossible to harness some of the significant benefits of on-campus international learning, one of which is the ability of higher educational institutes to conduct field trips to ensure that foreign students travel to places within the country they have moved and learn more about the prevalent culture there. However, a viable alternative to this model has been provided by Kunjuthamby et al, 2021 who recommend that field trips can be conducted virtually for the time being, whereby students can be provided with information covering linguistic, cultural and geopolitical aspects of the foreign country, following which interactions can be held between students of the home and partner universities.

This section of the paper seeks to study how the higher educational institutions in BRICS countries specifically have managed to adopt to the practices related to COIL and whether or not they have managed to improve their overall situation with respect to international collaborations for higher education.

Accordingly, this section of this paper examines the scope and effectiveness of COIL in each of the BRICS countries individually.

2.1 COIL in Brazil

Brazil's Higher Education Institutions have only recently begun to focus more on their internationalization. Even public programs such as Science Without Borders or Languages without borders or CAPES PrInt Call, have only emerged recently in Brazil (Guimarães et al, 2019).

Interestingly, upon going through a summarized version of the CAPES PrInt call (CAPES, 2017), it can be inferred that Brazil is relatively new to IHE itself and is yet to step into the venture of COIL and other such online modes of IHE. This is also substantiated by the fact that there is only one mention of usage of online resources, that too only for creating an online repository of lectures delivered by Brazilian grantees under the scheme of the call (CAPES, 2017).

Furthermore, the call seeks to set up 40 institutional internationalization projects, subject to availability of its budget, which amounts to 300 million reais (roughly 54 million USD) and in case of budgetary constraints, project managers are expected to adjust to the new budget. Even the requirements to be met with by institutions seeking selection under the call, are limited to creating higher councils or making strategies in relation to academic and language-related aspects.

Therefore, it can be seen that Brazil's focus with respect to IHE is more restricted towards increasing student mobility, both inward and outward, as opposed to facilitating students to interact via other alternatives available in the virtual medium.

However, Brazil has made efforts in the past with respect to enabling interaction between international students through the virtual medium. The Teletandem Brasil program of the Universidade Estadual Paulista (UNESP) was introduced in as early as 2006 and it uses computer-mediated-communication to facilitate interaction between students (Cavalari & Aranha, 2016). After each session, the students

are also given an opportunity to reflect on what they learnt, through mediation sessions along with the instructors (Cavalari & Aranha, 2016). But again, this program was limited to enhancing the language skills of its participants and was not as comprehensive as COIL and other modes of VEs.

Therefore, it can be seen that although IHE is still in nascent stages in Brazil, there have been programs in the past which are similar to VEs and COIL. It has been argued that only a few Brazilian students would be able to afford the expensive costs involved in international academic mobility and therefore propose COIL as a viable alternative to meet the objectives of IHE in Brazil (Guimarães et al, 2019).

2.2 COIL in Russia

Russia's educational system is conservative in nature, as is discernable from the fact that educational ventures in Russia (then USSR) were either such that self-based or were carried out through literary circles, mainly in the 20th Century (Tatyana, 2008).

This situation saw a subsequent shift towards the 1990s with a major shift in the Russian economy to that of a competitive market economy, which therefore also increased the scope of distance learning in Russia. Consequently, the focus of education in Russia shifted to preparing students to become qualified personnel to help sustain the development of the economy, following which Distance Education was brought into existence in May, 1997 (Tatyana, 2008).

Moreover, in recent years, Russia has seen an increase in MOOCs or massive open online courses, which seek to increase virtual academic mobility, accessibility to education and reduce the costs involved in educational services (Larionova, 2018).

However, although the objectives of MOOC are to some extent similar to those of COIL, MOOCs are very restrictive in nature, in that they fail to provide for the type of interactions which students have in COIL projects. Of the five main models of MOOC, the one which is closest to COIL in terms of similarity is "Exclusive online learning using MOOC", but this model merely

enables universities to contract with other universities to exchange their course materials (Larionova, 2018), whereas COIL enables universities to partner with each other and also build sustained relationships through these projects.

MOOCs are also prevalent in the United States of America, which also has seen COIL projects come into existence as early as 2012 (Duranczyk & Pishcherskaia, 2018). Although there is scant literature which depicts the prevalence of COIL projects in Russia, certain empirical studies conducted over the recent years are helpful in determining the attitude of Russian students and teachers alike with respect to the effectiveness of COIL projects.

Of these studies, a study conducted by Kayumova & Sadykova, 2016 is particularly interesting, as it shows that Russian students have a positive attitude towards COIL projects. The study was conducted through a six-week long COIL project which involved students from three countries viz. USA, Lithuania and Russia. In all of the questions, which mainly revolved around the students' perception of the effectiveness of COIL projects and their interest to re-attend such a learning experience in the future, the responses of the Russian students were largely positive. For instance, when asked to describe the project, majority of the Russian students replied that they found it either interesting, or useful. To ensure accuracy of the results, the authors of the study had also interviewed a Russian student, who answered that she enjoyed the experience overall.

A more comprehensive study was conducted by Duranczyk & Pishcherskaia, 2018 involving students from the USA, China and Russia. The study focused not only on the overall experiences of the faculty and students involved in the COIL projects, but also took various other factors into consideration. One such factor was the "privilege" issue, whereby American students would be privileged when international dialogues are held in English just because Russian and Chinese students had English as their second language. The study recommends that the UN model be used to tackle this issue, as it would ensure that all the students are placed at an equal standing. Significantly, the study also highlights

how the COIL project culminated in the Russian and American universities entering into future collaborations as well, such as a movie club project and even the creation of a new course in the Russian university Asia-Pacific Transnational Economic Cooperation, which also seeks to include Chinese contributions.

Therefore, although the literature as to the direct significance of COIL in Russia is scant, the abovementioned empirical studies indicate an overall positive perception of COIL in Russian HEIs.

2.3 COIL in India

One of the major objectives of internationalization is to increase the international mobility of college students, whereby students from a university in one country moves to a university in a foreign nation. However, Misra et al. point out that achieving higher mobility is very difficult in a country like India, which is a growing economy (Misra et al, 2020). They also posit that increasing international student mobility in India would be further hindered given the fact that India has a substantial portion of middle-class families. In this context, COIL would be a much more economic and viable alternative in India, due to the economic constraints.

Significantly, point 12 of India's National Education Policy, which was released by the Ministry of Human Resource Development in July, 2020 makes recommendations for "Optimal Learning Environments and Support for Students", as a part of which is a framework pertaining to "Internationalization" (MHRD, 2020).

Interestingly, neither the proposed framework nor the entire education policy itself envisage about online learning in the international context. This limitation aside, the objectives set in the policy are well-founded, as they look to retain India's role as a "Vishwa Guru" or teacher to the universe, by enabling provision of premium education at affordable rates.

Although there has been no recognition by the policymakers of COIL in India, COIL projects have been undertaken in the country in the recent

past, either for the purposes of an empirical study, or for genuinely enabling students to develop their intercultural competencies, while also getting a chance to interact with their counterparts from different countries.

For instance, Misra et al, 2020 had carried out a COIL collaboration between an Indian and an American university. The course to be covered in the project was 'Microeconomics' and took five-weeks to complete, though the minimum duration was set to four weeks. The overall responses of the students involved in the collaboration was positive, with a substantial number of them describing it to be beneficial to their careers as well as professional lives. Students also found the intercultural interactions to be interesting as they were able to learn more about the other country's culture. The only major issue was pertaining to the difference in the time zones, which it is opined is exclusive to this particular collaboration, given the difference in the time between India and USA is nine-and-a-half hours.

Another such COIL collaboration was conducted across a span of 14 weeks between a university in India and another in Connecticut (PPDU 2020). The response of the students involved in this collaboration was similar to the one recorded in the aforementioned collaboration.

Therefore, it is opined that COIL in India would increase inclusiveness of students into international collaboration learning irrespective of their income class, further the objectives of the Education Policy and also ensure that students develop their intercultural competencies. It is therefore imperative that more and more universities across the nation are made aware of this pedagogy which would give their students an international exposure, without involving high costs for the same.

2.4 COIL in China

In China, English has attained significance as part of education curricula, as is evident from the fact that "College English" has been made a mandatory course in Chinese HEIs (Li, 2019). In an empirical study, Chinese and U.S. students were made to interact through COIL and the resultant findings were that although students of both countries' universities had found the

experience positive, there were issues with respect to the time difference and also that the Chinese students were not able to interact confidently with their American counterparts. This could perhaps be attributed to the scant development of Computer-supported collaborative learning (Yang et al, 2014).

This attribution was in fact replicated in another in another COIL project conducted between an American and Chinese university (Katre, 2020). It was reported as part of the findings, that one of the students felt that their Chinese counterparts laid more emphasis on subjects including mathematics and science, as opposed to other creative subjects such as photography.

In light of the aforementioned findings and in the absence of other substantial literature pertaining to COIL in China, a reasonable assumption can be made that Chinese HEIs' intention behind including 'College English' as part of the mandatory subjects, is due to English not particularly being a language which Chinese college students are comfortable interacting in.

In this context, it is imperative that Chinese HEIs attempt to teach courses such as "College English" through COIL projects. At the outset, this would not involve a lot of costs, because of COIL collaborations being economic in nature. Furthermore, by enabling Chinese students to interact with students from different countries and cultures, institutes would be able to ensure that students' communication skills and confidence to speak in English would increase.

Another significance is that the students from the partnering university would also be able to learn more about the subjects which their Chinese counterparts have a stronghold on. Furthermore, given developing intercultural competencies is one of the key objectives of COIL, cultural interactions between both Chinese students and their counterparts from foreign universities would also be facilitated.

2.5 COIL in South Africa

South Africa is considered to be one of the more technologically advanced countries in the African continent (Kajee & Balfour, 2011). However, when it comes to digital education, there is a clear

divide between the haves and have-nots in the country, as it is only the richer and elite sections of society who are capable of accessing the required resources for digital education, as was pointed out by Kajee & Balfour, 2011. Pertinently, although the aforementioned study was conducted in 2006, its findings were reflected in another study in 2021, which did not contend the divide among classes of students in South Africa (Naicker et al, 2021).

Significantly, the Department of Higher Education and Training had released the Draft Policy Framework for the Internationalisation of Higher Education in South Africa (DET, 2017). Although this policy does not expressly mention COIL, it recognizes collaboration between international HEIs as well as such collaboration being online. The same is evident from recommendation 6.2.9, which mandates institutions seeking to offer online teaching programs in South Africa have to adhere to the legislation on open learning. Furthermore, under Chapter 9.7, it is recommended that South African students be given the obligation to choose the accreditation status of the programs they opt for in case of collaborations.

The benefits of COIL in South Africa were recorded in an empirical study conducted through the mixed-methods approach (Naicker et al, 2021). The findings of the study indicate that there were technological and linguistic barriers, which hindered the South African students from being able to communicate directly with their foreign counterparts. Instead, South African students stated that they preferred WhatsApp chatting as it was more feasible. Despite these barriers, the finding indicate that overall, South African students were greatly benefitted from the collaboration. The findings also indicate an increase in the confidence of South African students to interact freely with their foreign counterparts, before and after the study.

Therefore, it can be understood that despite financial factors causing a divide between the

accessibility of online learning in South Africa, internationalisation is a recognized phenomena in the country and its benefits have proved positive for students of South African HEIs.

3. RESEARCH GAP

In order to comparatively the situation with respect to COIL in BRICS countries, it is imperative to understand what COIL is and what some of its key tenets are. Therefore, key articles in that respect have been reviewed, along with articles which also examine COIL during the COVID pandemic (Liu & Shirley, 2021).

It is essential to highlight the situation in each country. The literature which has been reviewed for this paper consists of not just research papers and articles pertaining to COIL in each of the BRICS countries, but also includes policy documents and other key empirical studies, in order to obtain as clear a picture as possible for the comparative analysis. All of the literature reviewed in this paper have been cited in the reference section.

Of the literature reviewed, it is imperative to note that most articles and also policy documents, depict the situation in either one or more of the BRICS countries, but does not consolidate and comparatively analyze this information, as is sought to be done through this study. Furthermore, some of the articles reviewed also highlight the outdated status of affairs in their respective countries and this identification is significant when the conclusion and recommendations of this study are taken into account.

4. DISCUSSION

This paper being based on secondary research, has been done on the basis of the following articles, whose findings have been summarized hereunder.

<i>Learning mobility and internationalisation of higher education: Economic and policy implications for BRICS nations.</i>	This article contains key information on Internationalization of Higher Education and studies its economic and legislative implications on the same, while providing an overview of the development of IHE as a
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	pedagogic strategy and its growth and recent trends.
<i>A Review of Collaborative Online International Learning.</i>	This article contains an expansive explanation of COIL and also encapsulates its growth and its effectiveness, in the form of a review. It posits that students of COIL projects have an added advantage over their other counterparts.
<i>Incorporating Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) into Study Abroad Courses: A Training Design.</i>	One of the main focuses of COIL projects is the development of intercultural competencies of its participants. This paper mainly focuses on this facet of COIL and provides a training module for COIL projects, based on adult learning theory, experiential education and input from onsite administrators and faculty.
<i>Utilizing Virtual Exchange as an Alternative to Study Abroad</i>	This book-chapter posits that VEs are a better alternative to conventional abroad studies and shows that COIL is one of the more effective forms of VEs.
<i>Connecting Classrooms: Using Online Technology to Deliver Global Learning.</i>	This article summarizes various modes of online education and its impacts, including COIL and provides a model for initiating COIL projects.
<i>Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) in UK Higher Education: Reloaded.</i>	This article posits that business simulation and virtual field trips are two elements which would enhance the effectiveness of COIL projects.
<i>Let's take the remote out of online learning.</i>	This blog article contains an effective summary of the post-covid significance of online learning and how online teaching can be integrated through asynchronous activities while ensuring minimal discrimination.
<i>Internationalization at Home, COIL and Intercomprehension: For More Inclusive Activities in the Global South.</i>	This article focuses on integrating multilingualism and inclusiveness with different methods of IAH and recommends various approaches in furtherance of the same.
<i>Program for Institutional Internationalization of the Higher Education Institutions and Research Institutions of Brazil Capes-PrInt.</i>	This is one of Brazil's most significant IHE policy documents which lays down the procedure and eligibilities for Brazilians to undergo IHE projects
<i>Teletandem: integrating e-learning into the foreign language classroom.</i>	It posits that modifications in teletandem systems have been made to bring about institutional integration in Brazil.
<i>Open and Distance Education in Russia: Thoughts About Russian Distance Education from the American Perspective.</i>	This article studies the implementation of education reforms in Russia in the changed economic and political backgrounds and therefore contains historical significance.
<i>Russian perspectives of online learning technologies in higher education: An empirical study of a MOOC.</i>	This article proves that MOOC courses have gained popularity in Russia and also highlights their effectiveness.

<i>Bridging Countries and Cultures through Accessible Global Collaborations.</i>	It relies on past observations to propose that COIL would be beneficial to Russia.
<i>Online Collaborative Cross-Cultural Learning: Students' Perspectives.</i>	This article proves through empirically backed research that Russian students have a positive attitude towards COIL projects.
<i>Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) in Teaching-Learning: Bridging the Student Mobility Gap in Internationalization of Higher Education.</i>	This article identifies key issues in the implementation of IHE in India, including economic disparities, low mobility, etc.
<i>National Education Policy 2020.</i>	Contents of this policy document contain insights into India's perception with respect to IHE.
<i>Collaborative Online International Learning: A Pilot Study in Intercultural Communicative Competence in Chinese Higher Education Background.</i>	This study is backed by empirical research which highlights the benefits and concerns of implementing COIL in China.
<i>Strategies for Smooth and Effective Cross-Cultural Online Collaborative Learning.</i>	This article identifies language barriers as a key concern in China with respect to IHEs and suggests strategies to tackle the same.
<i>Creative Economy Teaching and Learning—A Collaborative Online International Learning Case.</i>	This article highlights perceptions of Chinese students on COIL projects.
<i>Students' access to digital literacy at a South African university: Privilege and marginalization.</i>	This article proves that economic disparities and higher poverty rates are key concerns with respect to IHE in South Africa, through empirical as well as secondary research.
<i>Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL): Preparedness and experiences of South African students.</i>	It proves through empirical research that South African students have a positive attitude towards COIL projects.
<i>Without Crossing A Border: Exploring the Impact of Shifting Study Abroad Online on Students' Learning and Intercultural Competence during the COVID-19 Pandemic.</i>	It proves through empirical studies that COIL has a positive impact on intercultural competencies of students.

CONCLUSION

Based on the literature reviewed and analysis made, some key comparisons which can be made have been enlisted hereunder. However, one similarity which is clearly evident in all the aforementioned COIL projects in the BRICS countries is that the students in these projects found the COIL experience to be fruitful.

The similarities and differences between the BRICS countries with respect to COIL can be ascertained through parameters including: (i) policy backing; (ii) financial viability; (iii)

linguistic barriers; and (iv) readiness to undertake COIL projects

Regarding the first parameter, it is opined that of all the BRICS countries, COIL has stronger policy backing in Brazil. Although India's education policy does include internationalization as an objective, it does not provide for COIL. While South Africa's policy does recognize teaching manners similar to COIL, its effective implementation is doubtful, given the financial and technological issues prevalent there.

With respect to the second parameter, both India and South Africa have a clear divide between financially backward and well-off families. This restriction puts into question the number of HEIs and students who would have access to such experiences. The same cannot be said about the remaining three countries, as the literature reviewed does not highlight financial concerns to be an issue.

The third parameter is more clearly a point of concern for China and South Africa, than when compared to other nations. Although China is taking steps to make HEI students well-versed with English, it is essential to understand that COIL projects need not just be conducted in English. To tackle this issue, it is imperative that before a COIL project is undertaken in a language other than English, (or even in English) students be intimated of the same. This is so that students having a problem with the language may voice their concerns and a special arrangement (such as use of translators) be made.

The last parameter is not a point of concern as far as Brazil, India, China and South Africa are concerned. In fact, these countries are attempting to evolve newer methods to conduct COIL projects, as is evident from the literature reviewed. The main issue arises with respect to Russia, whose education system is shifting towards internationalization at a slower pace than its contemporaries.

Therefore, the analysis of existing literature shows that BRICS stand on a negligibly different footing with COIL projects, with some of them having a better scenario with respect to COIL, in comparison to others.

To iron out these differences, it is imperative that future BRICS summits see discussions on IHEs through COIL, not just in each individual country, but by way of a cooperative mechanism which would also shift the influx of COIL projects from those involving a BRICS country and the USA or the UK, to COIL projects among these countries itself, which would also be rewarding from an intercultural competency point of view. Through this move, issues arising in respect of time differences also can be resolved because time differences between BRICS nations

are not as substantial as the between them and western countries.

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