



Globally Coordinated Projects through Virtual teams

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ABSTRACT

St. Joseph’s Institute of Management (India) has been successfully running a pedagogical innovation of globally coordinated projects through virtual teams for the last four years. Its partnering institute in the United States is the Albers School of Business and Economics (Seattle University). This initiative was conceived as a solution to solving three simultaneous problems, namely, (i) exposing students to the complexity of the global business field, (ii) consuming limited financial resources of the institutes, and (iii) retaining a Jesuit flavor and experience throughout the initiative. This initiative has now expanded to include other Jesuit institutions as well. While all the existing objectives of this initiative have been met so far, true to the Jesuit spirit of Magis, new objectives have been generated to drive this initiative even further. Lastly, through participation in initiative, students, international jury members, and the media are made aware of some of the serious societal issues that plague our generation, thereby meeting the calls-for-action sent out by the Pope every year through his encyclicals, speeches, and other messages to the global community.

CONTEXT

St. Joseph's Institute of Management (SJIM) is a well-established business school in the heart of Bangalore. SJIM has been catering to the needs of students in business education since 1968, with special emphasis on serving the needs of socially and financially disadvantaged students. As the world started becoming more globalized, there was desire from both students and the industry for a more 'global' business education. In developing a new pedagogical tool to cater to this desire, a triple challenge emerged: one, to capture the complexity of the global business field; two, to do so using limited financial resources; and three, to maintain a Jesuit character throughout the activity. In answer, SJIM started the initiative of students across two countries collaborating in virtual teams towards a project that caters to a current social concern.

In 2017, SJIM entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the Albers School of Business and Economics at Seattle University, USA. Both schools agreed to strengthen ties of friendship and to promote cultural, educational and scientific cooperation towards the mutual benefit of the students, faculty, and management at both institutes. The Albers School of Business and Economics (henceforth 'Albers') is located in the city of Seattle (USA) and, like SJIM, also runs post-graduate degree programs in management. The new initiative operated under this umbrella.

DESCRIPTION

This initiative is driven through an annual competition in which students from all participating schools work in virtual teams to complete a specific project while also competing with other teams who have the same goal. The teams' projects are judged and critiqued by two international multi-member juries, each consisting of eminent industry/governance professionals operating in the domain of the project theme. Such a format allows several advantages:

- Students gain the experience of working with people from other countries on a live project.

- Even students who do not have resources to participate in an international exchange program can get an opportunity to (virtually) interact and work with people from another country.
- Coordinating schools (i.e., SJIM and Albers in this case) gain the benefits of being able to serve the growing needs of a 'global' business education within the limits of their respective resources.
- The project theme is derived from the Pope's various messages to the community (like encyclicals, speeches, other messages/notes), and is thus based on finding solutions to global societal problems. As a Jesuit business school, SJIM's vision involves nurturing responsible business leaders with a concern for society and the environment; one of its mission statements is to be focused on social issues. An important program educational objective is to develop industry ready graduates with a sense of social responsibility. Therefore, this initiative addresses all these.

The people involved in the initiative from both business schools are as follows:

- **Core Team:** Dr. Caren Rodrigues (SJIM), Dr. Anup Krishnamurthy (SJIM), Ms. Amelia Marckworth (Albers), and Dr. Sue Oliver (Albers).
- **Advisory Committee:** Dr. Manoj D'Souza SJ (Director, SJIM) and Dr. Madhu Rao (Associate Dean, Albers).
- **Student Support:** this is provided by the Entrepreneurship Club Head at SJIM and by the Student Head at the Innovation & Entrepreneurship Center, Albers.

Web links for the material:

- 2017: <http://www.sjim.edu.in/2017-b-plan.php>
- 2018: <http://www.sjim.edu.in/2018-b-plan.php>
- 2019: <http://www.sjim.edu.in/2019-b-plan.php>
- 2020 (on-going): <http://www.sjim.edu.in/b-plan.php>

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

SJIM and Albers entered into an MoU in June 2017. Immediately thereafter followed a series of discussions through video conference calls and emails. During these discussions, SJIM proposed several joint activities that might be conducted by both schools. Among these proposals put forward by SJIM was the initiation of globally coordinated projects through virtual (student) teams. This proposal received a very positive response from our counterparts at Albers. Thereafter, the two schools collaborated on the process as outlined below.

The first step in moving this initiative forward was to establish clear objectives that we wanted to achieve from this endeavor. At this stage, the questions we sought to answer were: (i) how will this international collaboration add value to our respective students, and (ii) how can we use this initiative to facilitate the learning of group work, international collaboration and virtual collaboration among our respective students. By answering these questions through multiple discussions over phone, video conferencing and emails, the core team, guided by the advisory team, set the objectives for the initiative as listed below.

After participating in the globally coordinated projects initiative, students from both schools should learn to,

- Apply their theoretical business knowledge to real world problems and thus find solutions for these problems.
- Receive critical feedback from experts from a professional perspective and use this feedback to further improve their ideas.
- Engage with people from other (culturally different) countries towards meeting an objective as a team.
- Use online/virtual productivity tools/software to aid in developing content, coordinating and sharing information, and interacting with other team members irrespective of geographical location.

Although the objectives listed above were established in 2017, before the first project under this initiative started, every year, before the start of the project, the core team and advisory team discuss if any new objectives could be achieved through this initiative. Accordingly, in 2019, an additional objective was added to the list as follows:

After participating in the globally coordinated projects initiative, students from both schools should learn to,

- Collaborate with colleagues from other disciplines to develop sound interdisciplinary solutions

In the current 2020-21 edition of this initiative, there was a proposal to increase the number of 'participating' countries from India and USA to also include students from Taiwan (from the Fu Jen University with whom SJIM has recently signed an MoU). This proposal will be implemented in the 2021-22 edition of the initiative.

Project Theme

Every year, to determine the theme for the globally coordinated project, members of the core team speak to different stakeholders in both cities about issues facing societies in both cities/countries. Usually, information about an urgent developmental problem common to both cities/countries (or which is a global issue) is sought. The stakeholders include people from academia, industry, governance, and the younger population. Then the core team peruses the various messages given by the Pope during that year. The intersection(s) between these two pieces of information is then used as possible themes. Following this information gathering, the core team discusses the various possible themes and finalizes one theme which is proposed to the advisory committee for approval. These procedures above usually take around two months to complete.

The underlying rationale for the theme every year is that SJIM students are likely to have a keen understanding of the complexities of implementing solutions in the developing world, whereas Albers students are likely to have an understanding of the complexities of

implementing solutions in the developed world. Therefore, it is expected that, together, both sets of students would harness the two countries' technical and social expertise towards solving the developmental problem. The solutions that the students come up with are expected to be scalable while at the same time being economically, environmentally and socially profitable and sustainable.

Over the years, in line with the above thoughts and processes, different project themes have emerged like recycling in major IT cities, combating fake news, and reduction in food waste through redistribution.

Project Group Formation

After the project theme has been finalized in a particular year, the students in both schools are informed about the initiative and the project topic through notice boards, emails, student volunteers, student club coordinators, and so on. Furthermore, a dedicated webpage is also created on both schools' websites. Students are encouraged to form teams of two members within their school. Once this list is obtained in both schools, the teams in each school are randomly assigned to a team in the other school. Thus, each (virtual) project team usually consists of four members, that is, two students from SJIM and two students from Albers.

Today, this initiative has grown to include other schools in Seattle University and sister institutions to SJIM (in Bangalore). Thus, a similar procedure is followed to create teams keeping in mind a few perspectives of fairness: (i) every team must comprise of at least one student from every participating school, and (ii) team members from different schools should be randomly (instead of systemically) assigned to a team.

Project Participation Requirements

Since this initiative was not just a project by a single team, but rather a competitive process involving multiple teams, there was a need to have the solutions by all teams in the same

format in order to facilitate the judging process. Therefore, it was decided to have solutions presented in the form of a well-developed business plan that followed a specified structure. This structure was made known to the students at the time of group formation.

Participating students in both countries are also made aware of the large time difference between the two countries. All students are also provided access to virtual collaborative tools that are part of the schools' existing subscriptions. Apart from these subscribed software, students are also free (and encouraged) to use other collaborative tools that they might find useful.

Every year, all teams are given approximately two months to submit their solution under that year's project theme.

Pre-Project Support

Although the globally coordinated project initiative is open to all students of SJIM and Albers (and other participating schools), it is usually only the students of the first year in all schools that have the time to participate in this initiative. Consequently, students often do not have sufficient knowledge in certain areas of business including, but not limited to, business plan development.

To fill this gap, every year, SJIM organizes a workshop led by a well-known industry professional. This workshop is attended (in-person or virtually) by the students participating in the globally coordinated project initiative. In the past, some of the resource people for this workshop have included Mr. Roshan D'Silva, an IIT Bombay graduate and founder of Tripvillas, Asia's largest vacation rental website; Mr. Ashish Nichani, Cofounder & CEO of Place of Origin (and now Postcard), India's first brand of specialty local foods for the mass premium customer; Mr. Sandeep Das, Director at PwC, bestselling author and well-recognized newspaper/business magazine columnist.

Assessment of Projects

All submitted student projects are passed through two rounds of review by two different and highly qualified jury panels. These two panels vary from year to year depending on the expertise required to judge the project.

Perhaps more than the Americas and Asia, Europe has made great strides in sustainable solutions for their communities. It is therefore apt that the international jury for the first round of review consists of European experts from a spectrum of relevant disciplines. Previous jury members who have served on this panel include Dr. Florian Loebermann (a venture capitalist from Germany, and Head of Corporate Venturing at Altana AG); Fredrik Hagenius (an entrepreneur from Sweden, who is the founder of Young Entrepreneurs of Sweden, of Campusbokhandeln, and of Decarbonise); Pelle Lütken (a policy specialist from Denmark, working at the UNDP, and who focuses on corporate social responsibility in the private sector, in international organizations such as the UNDP and ILO, and in civil society projects); Emanuele Sapienza (a Global Policy Specialist in UNDP's Inclusive Political Processes Team); Thomas Kurmann (Fundraising Director for Doctors without Borders MSF).

Three virtual teams' projects are selected by the first panel for the second review. This second review consists of a live presentation by each finalist team to the second panel's jury members, followed by a Q&A session between the teams and the panel. Previous jury members who have served on this panel include Rev. Dr. Cyprian Tellis SJ (PhD, Boston College, USA and an expert in social ethics); Viswanathan S (an IIM-A alumnus and CEO of Kentree Business Advisory); Ashish Nichani (co-founder of PlaceofOrigin.in, India's first & largest marketplace for speciality Indian foods); Roshan D'Silva (founder of Tripvillas, Asia's largest vacation rental website); Samir Krishnamurti (Editor-in-chief at MetaFact and the Research Director at Global Security Centre in Delhi); Sujit John (Business Editor, The Times of India Bangalore); Ravi Andrews (serial entrepreneur); Rev. Fr. Joye James SJ (superior of Indian Social Institute Bangalore and Secretary for the Jesuit Higher Education Association

of South Asia). The core team consciously makes an effort to include a Jesuit father (with relevant expertise) in the final panel so that the Jesuit perspectives on business, environment and society are taken into account in the business plans.

Throughout the event of the second review, team members are allowed to interact virtually with their team members from other schools. Thus, there is real-time 'virtual participation' during this final round.

Including an interdisciplinary approach

Due to the tremendous success of the first two runs of this globally coordinated projects initiative in 2017 and 2018, the core team and advisory team decided to expand this initiative in 2019 to include students from other schools, which are from a different discipline. The expansion made the project submissions more comprehensive, and therefore more impactful. Furthermore, such an expansion allowed for business students to interact with students from other streams of education and thus gain experience in collaborating with colleagues from other disciplines; this, in turn, led to more successful interdisciplinary solutions.

Addressing challenges

The challenges faced during the execution of this initiative are primarily coordination-related due to the large geographical separation between schools. These issues can be further classified as internal and external coordination-related issues. The issues and their resolution are described below.

Internal Coordination-Related Issues. These are coordination issues within each school at both the organization and student level. For example, at the organization level, there is interference in pre-determined class schedules and curriculum in each school that have to be resolved, getting the involvement and support from various departments within each school takes effort, and so on. At the student level, for example, since their programs are not mandatory residential programs, team members from the same school itself must interact over the internet at times.

External Coordination-Related Issues. These are coordination issues between the schools, again at both the organization and student level. For example, at both levels, the time difference between Bangalore and Seattle make real-time interaction very difficult; differences in culture creates miscommunications during coordination; different semester time-frames (i.e., time-tables) makes interaction especially difficult for the student teams; and other similar issues.

Resolution of Issues. Since all issues so far among the participating students in this initiative have only been coordination-related, they are resolved through extensive (and sometimes excessive) dialog between the concerned parties. The core team members step in to mediate these dialogs as and when required.

Continuation of the initiative

In order to work towards the successful execution of this initiative every year, the core team meets (virtually or in-person) several times a year. Since there exists an annual student exchange program between SJIM and Albers, this exchange program is also used as an opportunity by the core team members to meet in-person to discuss issues and future plans of the initiative. In-person meetings are always attended by one or both advisory team members so that further value addition can be created.

RESULTS

A description of the extent to which each goal has been achieved over the years, is presented in the table below:

Objective	Result
Apply their theoretical business knowledge to real	This is measured by the average score awarded to the teams by the first-round jury members (i.e., the European

<p>world problems and thus find solutions for these problems.</p>	<p>jury). This score is an indication of the extent to which the students are able to apply their knowledge to developing a sound solution. This average is 5.06, 5.36, and 5.14 out of 10 respectively for the last three years of this initiative. Given the high expertise and qualification of the jury members, such a score indicates a fairly proficient level of knowledge application by the teams. Apart from the score out of 10, the jury members also provided qualitative feedback for each team that reflects the results discussed above.</p>
<p>Receive critical feedback from experts from a professional perspective and use this feedback to further improve their ideas.</p>	<p>Although all participating teams receive quantitative and qualitative feedback from the first-round European jury members, it is only the three finalist teams that need to improve their ideas based this feedback. Accordingly, a measure of success for this goal can be determined through the qualitative and action feedback provided by the jury members in the second-round of evaluation (i.e., during the live presentation). Every year, the jury member who is involved in the field of entrepreneurship is impressed with most of the finalist teams' ideas and invites these teams members to take the idea forward under their (the jury member's) mentorship.</p> <p>Apart from this, some team members of non-finalist teams have been motivated by the European jury members' feedback that they have used the feedback to start/improve their own business.</p>

<p>Engage with people from other (culturally different) countries towards meeting an objective as a team.</p>	<p>As a part of the post-event feedback every year so far, an average of 73.7% of the students who participated were able to actively engage with their international counterparts towards the competition of the project together.</p> <p>Despite this high level of achievement of this goal, it is still necessary to keep this goal active since the data for this issue is bimodal. This means that while 73.7% are able to engage successfully, the remaining 26.3% are not able to do so at all. Therefore, every year, there is still scope to improve the levels of achievement for this goal.</p>
<p>Use online/virtual productivity tools/software to aid in developing content, coordinating and sharing information, and interacting with other team members irrespective of geographical location.</p>	<p>Again, through the post-event feedback survey, students did not report any issues with the availability or access to online productivity tools. They also did not face any technical difficulty in using such tools because of the simplicity of the interfaces built into these software tools.</p>
<p>Collaborate with colleagues from other disciplines to develop sound interdisciplinary solutions</p>	<p>In the 2019 version of this initiative, students from the schools of Law associated with SJIM and Albers were invited to participate thereby bringing a legal perspective to the projects. Through post-event feedback, it was determined that neither the business students from SJIM/Albers nor the law students from the Law Schools faced any difficulty in collaborating towards completing their projects. In contrast, both sets of students actually</p>

	felt that they had learnt something new from their respective counterparts in the other discipline.
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IMPACT AND LESSONS LEARNT

The impact of our globally coordinated projects initiative can be classified into two areas, namely, internal and external impact. These are described below.

Internal Impact

- *SJIM*. For this institution, this initiative is the first international collaboration that has successfully run for several years. This initiative has allowed the institution to offer some international exposure to its entire student body, which was previously a lacuna in the institute’s curriculum.
- *Albers*. For this institution, this initiative has been one of their hallmark programs widely advertised to prospective students and used as a model for successful international collaboration. As a result, the core and advisory members from Albers received special funding in 2019 to visit SJIM (in-person) in order to further strengthen the ties of this initiative and to start new international collaborations with SJIM.
- *Virtual international collaboration*. Through this initiative, the students from all participating schools are exposed to the difficulties that virtual teams face in real-life in several workplaces. Thus, the students attain a practical understanding of how small issues even in just communication can have larger consequences due to geographic separation and the inability to speak in real-time to a colleague. Because the students work together for about two months, they are not only exposed to these issues, but also find ways to overcome them in order to collaboratively reach a desired goal. Furthermore, for some students, since they have never been outside their home country, such a global project gave them their first opportunity to interact with someone from another country.

External Impact

- *International critique.* The students from all participating schools get a chance to have their ideas, plans and decisions reviewed by distinguished industry/governance professionals who are from outside their home country (i.e., the first panel of European judges who provide detailed feedback to each team). The insights provided by these judges are unique and from a fresh perspective, thereby allowing the students to better understand not just the problem but also their own decision-making processes from another angle. This is something they would not be exposed to if the first-round jury is from India or America. Furthermore, since these jury members are often very impressed with this initiative, every year, one or two of them express their willingness and interest to be a jury member again for the next year.
- *Publicity and Awareness.* The second-round of project assessment is a live event hosted either at SJIM or at Albers. The press and other media outlets are invited to cover this event. As a result, over the years, SJIM has received publicity for this initiative in various local and national news outlets like the Indian Express and Kannada Prabha. In addition to the publicity received, coverage by media outlets also helps to bring awareness about the urgent societal issues that are chosen as the themes of this initiative, thereby meeting at some extent the call-for-action by the Pope on these various societal issues.
- *Recruiters.* Students participating in this initiative gain experience in collaborating, engaging, and working towards a goal through virtual tools and with international colleagues. These skills are sought by several recruiters during campus placements. Consequently, over the years, students of SJIM who participate in this initiative have 5% higher average salary than those who do not. Due to confidentiality reasons, we cannot provide similar values for the Albers students who participate. However, we have anecdotal evidence that they too benefit in job placements due to the international exposure they receive through this initiative.