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Learning without borders: Developing a COIL course in global health and sustainable development across three continents

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ABSTRACT

Promoting inclusivity and cultural diversity in education is essential to meet the challenges of a multicultural and globalised society. As digitalisation and globalisation accelerate, new challenges require innovative perspectives and cross-border solutions. Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) provides a model for universities to co-develop courses that foster international collaboration and enhance educational quality through culturally diverse learning environments. This manuscript presents a COIL project aimed at strengthening students' international and intercultural competencies through a jointly developed global health course at postgraduate level, as a case study. Implemented in partnership with universities from Sweden, India, and Namibia, the course enabled students to engage with peers worldwide. It prepared them for multicultural professional environments and supported academic outcomes, including development of health-related interventions aligned with Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals without requiring physical mobility. Findings underscore the potential of COIL as a sustainable, inclusive approach to internationalisation in higher education.

KEYWORDS

Collaborative international online learning; international classroom; postgraduate students; health -related field; un sustainable development goals

Introduction

In today's globalised world, higher education is increasingly expected to foster intercultural understanding and prepare students for international and multicultural contexts. As globalisation and digitalisation accelerate, they introduce complex challenges that require innovative, cross-border approaches to teaching and learning, while also necessitating new and complementary skills among students. One such approach is Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), which enables students to engage across geographical and cultural boundaries without the need for travel. This article presents a COIL course in global health, jointly developed and implemented by

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universities in Sweden, India, and Namibia, examining it as a case of how international and intercultural competencies can be fostered in a digitally mediated learning environment.

Collaborative online international learning

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is an emerging educational approach that has gained traction in recent years. Pedagogically, COIL aligns with student-centred and active learning approaches, where learners engage in authentic tasks with international peers (Rubin & Guth, 2022). The model supports constructive alignment through the integration of intercultural learning outcomes, collaborative and reflective activities. It connects students and educators from different countries and cultures to collaborate and learn together online (SUNY COIL Center [SUNY], 2025). It is a sustainable and cost-effective pedagogical model that enables more students to participate in international learning activities, in contrast to the limited group who can participate in physical mobility (Naicker et al., 2022). COIL is also a model that stimulates network-based knowledge exchange and interaction between students from different cultures, further developing a global perspective (SUNY, 2025). When COIL is successful, new relationships are formed through ongoing interaction, dialogue, and collaboration, and an understanding of other perspectives emerges (Rubin & Guth, 2022).

COIL originates from 2006 and has become a key model for international collaboration in higher education (Rubin, 2017). Although initial research on COIL was limited, interest in it has grown significantly. According to Rubin, what distinguishes a COIL course is that two or more universities from different countries develop a joint learning environment and collaborate in close dialogue to develop curriculum and learning activities, with an emphasis on virtual collaborative student learning. Importantly, COIL is not just a technological platform; it represents a paradigm shift in teaching and learning by promoting cross-cultural awareness within multicultural learning environments. As Rubin (2017) notes, the true essence of COIL lies in its emphasis on interaction and dialogue across institutions in different countries, highlighting its international educational significance.

The COIL project presented in this article was developed and conducted in joint collaboration between University West (UW) in Sweden, the Institute of Science and Technology (SRM) in India and the University of Namibia (UNAM) in Namibia. The project's overarching goal was to provide students with knowledge of global health, culminating in proposals for potential health interventions aligned with Agenda 2030 (United Nations (UN), n.d.). This framework outlines three interdependent dimensions of sustainable development, economic, environmental, and social. Its 17 goals and 169 targets aim to combat poverty and inequality, promote human rights and gender equality, and ensure long-term environmental sustainability.

The following section reviews relevant literature on COIL, organised around its role as an alternative to mobility, its potential for intercultural learning, and its contribution to new international connections and knowledge.

Coil as an alternative to mobility

COIL is increasingly considered a sustainable and inclusive alternative to traditional academic mobility, which has historically been the primary means for students to gain

international experience through physical exchange programmes (SUNY, 2025). While traditional mobility involves financial and safety barriers, COIL offers international collaboration at lower cost and without personal safety risks. It also provides a viable and accessible solution for higher education institutions of any size, location, or educational level (House et al., 2022). Thus, COIL can contribute to a more equitable education from a global perspective and is also a valuable model for promoting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (Membrillo-Hernández et al., 2023). Health care professions constitute a group for whom COIL may be particularly meaningful, as their work is increasingly shaped by global health challenges, transnational health systems, and culturally diverse patient populations (Mackavey et al., 2024; Young et al., 2024). Through collaborative online engagement with students and teachers in other geographical and socio-economic contexts, this can support the development of students' intercultural awareness, comparative perspectives on health and care practices, and broader understanding of global health and sustainable development (Jenssen et al., 2024; Niitsu et al., 2023; Woodley et al., 2023; Young et al., 2024).

Cultural exchange and intercultural learning

COIL is suggested to foster cultural diversity and enhance students' intercultural competence, self-efficacy, and professional confidence (Rubin, 2017; Vahed & Rodriguez, 2021). It has also been described to promotes critical and reflective thinking, supporting deeper understanding of global issues, innovative problem-solving, and evidence-based decision-making. Virtual exchange projects can also prompt perspective shifts that deepen subject-specific competence (Fritz & Marchewka, 2024). COIL enables students from diverse geographical backgrounds to engage meaningfully with global challenges and strengthen intercultural competence relevant to their future professions (House et al., 2022; Marcillo-Gómez & Desilus, 2016; Rubin, 2017). Participation prepares students to navigate multicultural professional environments and may strengthen personal qualities such as self-efficacy and proactive attitudes valuable for career development (de Castro et al., 2019; Hennings et al., 2024). Empirical studies highlight gains in professional awareness, including deeper understanding of international nursing practices and transferable skills (House et al., 2022; Jenssen et al., 2024). COIL may further support the expansion of disciplinary knowledge and stimulate interest in global career opportunities (Jung et al., 2022). A quasi-experimental study using the Cultural Intelligence Scale showed statistically significant improvements in intercultural competence, supported by qualitative student interviews (Hackett et al., 2023). Students also report increased cultural awareness, interest in international healthcare systems (Bragadóttir & Potter, 2019), openness to diverse religious beliefs and traditions (Naicker et al., 2022) and improved understanding of global social norms, alongside enhanced academic performance (West et al., 2024).

Drivers and challenges for coil implementation

The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted international mobility and exposed the vulnerability of traditional exchange models, prompting higher education institutions to seek sustainable alternatives for global academic engagement. As a result, digital learning

environments increasingly became a means to support international collaboration and intercultural exchange (Jung et al., 2022). Technological advancements have enabled internet-connected classrooms and interactive online courses that facilitate multicultural learning, student interaction, and intercultural dialogue, thereby expanding opportunities for knowledge sharing and global perspectives (Bauk, 2019; SUNY, 2025; Vahed & Rodriguez, 2021).

Successful implementation of COIL depends on several critical conditions. While supporting digital literacy through virtual exchanges it still faces challenges such as communication barriers, technical limitations, uneven participation, and unclear implementation (Chan, 2025). Reliable, high-speed internet is essential for maintaining student participation and collaboration in COIL settings (Chen et al., 2022). Low student motivation and poor connectivity can significantly hinder engagement and lead to delays, frustration, and academic disruptions (Chen et al., 2022; Naicker et al., 2022; Vahed & Rodriguez, 2021). Connectivity issues have been shown to result in delays in student responses, leading to frustration and disruptions in academic work (Vahed & Rodriguez, 2021). In addition, institutional learning management systems (LMS) can pose challenges, especially when they lack compatibility for international student access or effective collaboration tools (Katre, 2020; Marcillo-Gómez & Desilus, 2016). Even with structured platforms, instructor presence and feedback remain critical to promoting meaningful interaction. Supplementing LMS with familiar tools like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Skype has been found to enhance communication and help overcome limitations of single platforms, particularly when students receive peer support and form strong social connections (Naicker et al., 2022).

New international contacts and new knowledge

COIL fosters international education by enabling students to form cross-cultural connections and friendships, while promoting interdisciplinary collaboration and professional development among students and faculty (Bauk, 2019), with potential for broader academic and professional cooperation. Pedagogical, technical, and social support are all considered crucial to student success. Creating a supportive environment through trust-building activities, constructive feedback, and live sessions is deemed essential for fostering belonging and engagement (Altowairiki, 2021). Challenges in COIL projects often stem from differences in time zones, academic calendars, course content, assessment methods, and institutional support (Bauk, 2019). Successful collaboration requires early joint planning between institutions to establish strong foundations, clear communication, and aligned goals (de Castro et al., 2019). Teacher presence supports students in feeling secure, while social relationships may enhance collaboration. Strategies such as frequent communication, discussion groups, and availability for questions contribute to positive experiences. In addition, clear guidance on expectations and technology use is a key factor, as students enter with diverse digital backgrounds and collaboration skills (Altowairiki, 2021).

Overall, students have reported COIL as a valuable and effective learning experience, contributing to improved academic outcomes through diverse perspectives and teamwork (Appiah-Kubi & Annan, 2020). As an emerging approach in cross-border education, COIL offers substantial benefits but also presents technological, linguistic, and

institutional challenges, underscoring the importance of thoughtful implementation. Describing how higher education institutions can work to implement COIL as a pedagogical model could therefore be valuable.

Aim

This article aims to describe the development and implementation of a web-based course for postgraduate students in the health sciences, jointly created by three international partners and to share lessons learned from this case study. The course, grounded in the COIL model and guided by the principles of Agenda 2030, sought to promote global health competencies through virtual collaboration.

Planning and implementation of the pilot course

This project, forming the empirical basis of this case study, was initially funded by University West under the strategic initiative for internationalisation development (Project Number 2018/886 A32). It was launched in 2018 by an initiative of the teaching faculty at UW exploring the possibility of creating a COIL course on post-graduate level for registered nurses to increase international exchange. Contacts were established with international partners, and a shared interest emerged in promoting internationalisation without the need for physical mobility. These discussions led to the idea of focusing the course on Global Health, with the COIL model identified as a suitable pedagogical framework. A local project group was formed at UW to lead the initiative. The COIL project was subsequently developed in collaboration with UW's long-term strategic partners: the Institute of Science and Technology (SRM) in India, and the University of Namibia (UNAM) in Namibia. At the project's outset, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed to support sustained cooperation over time.

The next phase involved the joint development of a syllabus and study guide for a global health course on postgraduate level titled *Essentials of Global Health in an Era of the Sustainable Development Goals*. Planning included participation from vice-chancellors, pro vice-chancellors, and faculty from all three partner universities. The course was designed as a ten-week, part-time course awarding 7.5 ECTS credits (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation Systems). A pilot version, with fifteen students, five from each university, was launched to test and evaluate the course, with participants recruited and selected through standard application procedures at their respective universities. The evaluation was conducted through an online survey with open-ended questions on the COIL format, including what worked well and what needed improvement. The need to strengthen collaboration and develop shared solutions to course-related challenges was highlighted. In response, a joint steering group was formed in autumn 2022, comprising two faculty representatives from each partner university. The group held regular virtual meetings to prepare the course, determine lecture topics, review literature, plan student activities, and course development. One challenge identified during the pilot was students' difficulty navigating UW's learning platform, Canvas. To address this, steering group members were granted access to Canvas to assist students and participate in course seminars for additional support.

After the pilot, extensive student feedback led SRM and UNAM to propose adding a discussion forum, such as WhatsApp, to improve student interaction, alongside Canvas. This option was explored, and proved more effective for student discussions, primarily due to lower bandwidth requirements than the videoconferencing tool Zoom and, importantly, its familiarity to students. Additionally, WhatsApp provides end-to-end encryption, ensuring messages remain accessible only to the sender and recipient. This built-in security feature contributes to a safe and efficient learning environment (WhatsApp help center, 2024). Discussion groups are created that students access via a QR code posted on Canvas, ensuring the groups remain closed. Canvas remains available as an alternative, allowing to choose whether to use WhatsApp and share personal contact information, thereby balancing accessibility with privacy considerations.

Creation and implementation of the final course

Following the pilot, the course examined in this case study was established as a permanent stand-alone offering, delivered annually during the spring semester. Minor revisions were implemented to address feedback from the pilot evaluation. It was further decided that the course would admit bachelor's-level students in any health-related field. The course aimed to provide students with an understanding of contemporary global health challenges in relation to the UN SDGs. It offered an opportunity to deepen knowledge of health inequalities within and between countries, encouraging students to think and act within the context of complex global–local dynamics in response to both long- and short-term health issues and crises.

The collaborative admission procedure is formalised through a signed MoU. The course is advertised through each university's regular systems, and students apply through standard procedures. Each university may nominate up to ten students, for a total of up to thirty participants. Despite the absence of a minimum number of participants, demand has consistently exceeded available places. Students from all three universities participated in the pilot and subsequent yearly iterations of the course. All students accessed the same materials and information via the learning platform. The course consisted of pre-recorded lectures with lecturers representing all three partner universities and included two assignments: one mid-course and one at its conclusion (supplemental file 1). The students worked both independently and in groups. All lecturers brought Global Health expertise and country-specific knowledge. UW lecturers covered Global Health methods and Agenda 2030, while SRM and UNAM lecturers provided insights into national health inequalities and disease burdens.

Students were assigned to one of two mixed groups, each comprising students from all three universities, to facilitate intercultural learning through collaboration and discussion across different cultural and educational contexts. To stimulate discussion, two lecturers from UW participated in each group. Throughout the course, students engaged in ongoing asynchronous discussions in small WhatsApp groups, as part of the course activities, focusing on scientific articles and questions aligned with the course content. The course concluded with a synchronous examination seminar conducted via Zoom, where students presented their project plans to their peers.

The course includes two pass/fail assignments that serve as both key learning activities and assessments. Students must pass both assignments and actively

participate in the examination sessions to pass the course. The first assignment involves participation in group discussions and the presentation and analysis of articles related to Global Health. Each student selects a relevant article, analyzes its social and environmental health determinants, and shares a brief summary with critical reflections in their group. To support dialogue, students also prepare one discussion question. An individual written reflection is then submitted for assessment.

The second assignment requires students to develop a project plan for a potential intervention aligned with Agenda 2030. Students select and justify a local health challenge relevant to Global Health. They analyse health inequalities using key Global Health concepts, theories, and measures, including social and environmental determinants. Based on this analysis, they design a local intervention aligned with the SDGs and work-integrated learning, outlining expected short- and long-term effects. The plan must be theoretically grounded, contextually informed, and address sustainability, equity, and ethical, norm-critical, and human-rights perspectives. The intervention is presented in a joint seminar and elaborated in an individual report. As support, students were offered the opportunity to collaborate with Drivhuset ('the greenhouse'), an entrepreneurial support environment at UW fostering innovation and start-up development. Through this partnership, students received guidance and training in generating and planning sustainable interventions, using methods grounded in scientific principles.

To promote effective student interaction in the course, a well-established model for learning activities in a COIL course was used from the start of the project (The Office of Connected Learning, 2024). The model consists of four steps: *Icebreaker*, *Learning together*, *Producing a shared project/outcome*, and *Reflection/debriefing*.

Icebreaker, the first step of the model, is designed to help students get to know one another, build relationships, and become comfortable with digital communication. An introductory activity at the start of the course is considered essential for encouraging students to embrace diversity and develop intercultural awareness (Naicker et al., 2022), and students emphasise early connection as key to effective collaboration (Jenssen et al., 2024). Students have also expressed a desire for more communication and synchronous meetings to strengthen peer connections and enhance the sense of community (Altowairiki, 2021; Bragadóttir & Potter, 2019). In alignment with this step, during the first course activity, all students were encouraged, to introduce themselves and share their interests related to the course content, helping to build rapport and foster collaborative engagement with course assignments. To stimulate such interaction, WhatsApp was used as an optional communication platform. Rahmadi (2020) highlights WhatsApp's potential for group work, with students expressing positive attitudes towards its use for both teaching and learning. Rahmadi also notes a growing interest in integrating WhatsApp into higher education. However, it's emphasised that students may not yet be fully prepared to engage in active learning or independent collaboration within WhatsApp groups. As such, lecturer involvement is important, especially in the early stages of integration, to guide interaction and support student independence. Our experience aligns with these findings. At the beginning of the course, we observed a clear need for instructor presence in the WhatsApp groups to encourage student engagement. As the course progressed, this need diminished, suggesting that students became more confident and independent in their interactions.

The second step, *Learning together* centres on collaborative learning, with the aim of encouraging students to engage through a straightforward course task, such as discussing a shared article or lecture. Marcillo-Gómez and Desilus (2016)Marcillo-Gómez and Desilus (2016) emphasise the value of interaction around a common topic, noting that exploring similarities and differences between cultures and countries can lead to deeper insights and richer discussions, thereby fostering collaborative learning (Marcillo-Gómez & Desilus, 2016). In line with this step, students were divided into groups of four to five students, each including representatives from all three countries. These groups remained consistent until the last session of the course. Their primary focus was to collaborate on course assignments and engage in meaningful discussions. Early in the course, students were asked to reflect together on two questions related to Agenda 2030. Each student posted individual reflections in their group, followed by peer feedback and a group discussion activity. Lecturers were present in all groups to support the students and facilitate interaction, ensuring that the learning environment remained inclusive and collaborative.

The third step, *Producing a shared project/outcome*, involves students working collaboratively in small groups to solve a course-related task, which is shown to deepen students' understanding of the course content (West et al., 2024). In accordance with this step, students in our COIL course were expected to collaborate within their designated groups with their assignments. Clarifying what constitutes active collaboration is essential (Altowairiki, 2021). To support this, lecturers provided clear guidelines and specific expectations for each assignment to ensure that students could successfully meet the intended learning outcomes. As part of the collaborative process, students shared drafts of their proposed interventions with one another and engaged in peer feedback, offering and receiving insights to refine their work ahead of the final assessment.

The fourth and final step *Reflection* and *debriefing* emphasises the importance of student reflection in collaboration with lecturers. Active lecturer involvement, through consistent feedback and support, has been shown to positively influence student learning outcomes (West et al., 2024). In this step, students reflected together with the lecturers on the interventions they had designed aligning with the course's learning objectives.

For the final seminar, students were reorganised into new groups, each including participants from the three universities. In a concluding web conference, these groups presented their interventions, sparking engaged discussions around the health challenges and solutions proposed. One example of an intervention aligned with SDG 3.8 targeting Universal Health Coverage (UHC) was developed by a Swedish student: the concept of a mobile health clinic. This proposal aimed to reduce health inequalities by bringing care directly to where people live, work, and socialise. Such clinics could improve access for vulnerable populations, save time and resources, and foster trust between healthcare providers and patients. In the Swedish context, a mobile clinic could support immigrants, older adults, and low-income individuals through collaboration with local authorities and community organisations. Services might include preventive care, health screenings, dental services, and guidance on social issues.

Another proposal, developed by an Indian student, focused on SDG 3.5, which targets the prevention and treatment of substance abuse. Recognising alcohol and drug misuse as a global issue, particularly in vulnerable communities, the student emphasised the lack

of accessible rehabilitation services for young people, especially those from minority groups with limited education. These factors often contribute to a low awareness of the consequences of substance abuse. The proposed intervention involved deploying mobile rehabilitation and medical units to reach young individuals in their home environments, providing treatment and educational support. A pilot study was suggested in a disadvantaged area, with the goal of partnering with local organisations to build trust and facilitate implementation. The student described the model as cost-effective and scalable, with potential to reduce substance abuse within underserved populations.

At the end of the course, students evaluated the overall experience, including course content, peer interaction, seminars, assessments, and examinations. The anonymous survey combined multiple-choice items with open-ended questions, enabling students to provide both structured feedback and personal reflections.

Outcome and discussion of the project

Developed for students across health-related fields, this case study of a COIL course offers lessons that may inform COIL design in other disciplines. Regular checkpoints from project group and steering committee meetings, combined with oral and written student exit evaluations, form the foundation of the project's ongoing assessment. Since its inception in 2021, the COIL course has been offered five times, including the pilot with 15 students, and thereafter 30 students per iteration. Of the students admitted to the course, 66 have submitted the first assignment, and 44 had passed the course by the end of 2025. The anonymous and digital course evaluations revealed that the course supported the students' deeper understanding of global health and sustainable development within an international context. Interacting with peers from different countries enhanced their grasp of the complexities of sustainability in health, moving beyond purely theoretical knowledge. They also valued the opportunity to share and learn about each other's countries.

Previous research indicates that cultural diversity within student groups fosters critical and reflective thinking and encourages intervention, skills valuable for future professional practice (Marcillo-Gómez & Desilus, 2016). Participants in our COIL course noted that sharing knowledge and engaging in discussions gave them a more realistic understanding of challenges in their home countries and broadened their perspectives beyond their own universities and national contexts. This suggests that the course supported elements of reflective learning, as students reconsidered their perspectives in relation to global health challenges. Students also highlighted the value of gaining insights into these challenges without having to travel. Such knowledge and experience in international collaboration are recognised as essential competencies in the ICN Code of Ethics (International Council of Nurses, 2021).

During the implementation of the COIL project, several technical challenges were identified. A major obstacle was the use of the UWs digital tools, such as Zoom and Canvas. Many participants had limited experience using Zoom as a communication tool, and inconsistent internet connectivity further exacerbated these challenges. These difficulties caused delays and negatively affected student interactions, making it challenging for students to engage effectively in both large and small groups. Accessing Canvas required students to have a UW email address. Since students from partner universities

were not accustomed to using a specific student email account, communication was hindered, and not all information reached them. Additionally, students found Canvas restrictive, due to access difficulties and unstable internet connections, complicating collaboration. Issues also arose with uploading documents, participating in discussion forums, and accessing linked materials on the platform.

Following the pilot course evaluation, WhatsApp was introduced as an additional optional communication tool. Its user-friendly interface and stable connectivity contributed to a more efficient course experience, enhancing and stimulating interaction among student groups. While participation was voluntary and Canvas remained available as an alternative, the use of WhatsApp highlights the need to balance accessibility and inclusion with considerations regarding the sharing of personal contact information. Recent research has highlighted technical limitations as significant barriers to collaboration between higher education institutions across countries. As a result, exploring alternatives beyond existing university platforms has become essential for successful COIL implementation (Vahed & Rodriguez, 2021). More recent course evaluations has revealed a desire for greater instructor engagement on WhatsApp, which is planned for future iterations. This aligns with previous findings emphasising the importance of instructor guidance to provide clearer structure in international learning. Through instructor support and feedback, students are better equipped to work in a focused and goal-oriented manner (Naicker et al., 2022). Future plans include strengthening the collaboration by more actively involving lecturers from all partner universities in the student groups, facilitating discussions and ensuring participants stay informed about developments in the field. The concept of Planetary Health, a relatively new perspective, will also be integrated to broaden the discourse on Global Health.

This COIL course is unique in integrating entrepreneurial working methods within health science traditions. During the first four years, Drivhuset provided valuable support, and many students benefited from its resources. International students initially faced difficulties booking appointments due to not having a Swedish personal identification number. This was resolved by allowing them to schedule via email. When Drivhuset ended its collaboration with UW in 2025, the course introduced structured mentoring on intervention development facilitated by a UW lecturer.

Instructors also encountered challenges during project planning and course implementation. These included building mutual understanding of university cultures and teaching traditions, as well as developing a shared course structure. Language differences further complicated communication, despite English being the primary language for most instructors. Despite these challenges, the COIL project has proven to be a successful model for joint teaching and international learning with partner universities, combining synchronous sessions with flexible asynchronous interactions. Effective communication and interaction between partner universities were essential to course development and collaboration. Central to this success has been the steering group, which provided a platform for collective discussions and the ongoing course and partnership development.

Through diverse professional and cultural interactions, our COIL course has inspired the growth of international learning at UW and has become an established approach within the university. We recognise the value of expanding COIL-based courses, as they offer a structured yet flexible framework for

internationalisation without requiring physical mobility. This approach increases opportunities for students and faculty to gain international experience while remaining at their home university. Enhanced digital capabilities make internationalisation at home more accessible, promoting equitable opportunities for intercultural exchanges (Olaya Mesa, 2024). Building international relationships is vital, and COIL primarily enables students to foster global collaborations without travel (House et al., 2022). Research shows that Swedish nursing students participating in digital seminars with peers from Somalia developed deeper understanding, cultural awareness, and curiosity, qualities essential for their future profession (Örtlund et al., 2024). Similar findings emerged from our COIL course evaluation. Considering the costs and risks associated with travel, COIL offers a more equitable way for students to engage in international learning on equal terms, also highlighted previously (Woodley et al., 2023).

Through our engagement with COIL, we have been able to conceptualise and formalise collaborations and knowledge exchanges that previously existed but had not been explicitly recognised as COIL. This understanding has also supported the structured development of partnerships with established collaborators. This COIL project has served as catalyst for further COIL-related development and new pedagogical approaches, across the participating institutions. To date it has resulted in the creation and implementation of several new COIL modules at UW, including modules in child health care and diabetes within the specialist nursing programme, all of which have received positive evaluations from the participants. Additionally, the project has prompted discussions and planning for future COIL initiatives at the remaining partner institutions, indicating its broader potential for long-term pedagogical impact.

Conclusion

This case study indicates that COIL fosters meaningful international collaboration and may support reflective learning within professional education. The findings indicate that students gain not only academic knowledge but also essential intercultural and collaborative competencies, skills increasingly required in today's globalised healthcare environments. By engaging in cross-cultural dialogue and project-based learning, students deepened their understanding of sustainability in health and developed practical insights into global health challenges.

The course design, which combined synchronous and asynchronous learning supported by accessible digital platforms, contributed to a positive learning experience despite some technical and structural challenges. These included differences in institutional systems, limited digital literacy, and unstable internet connectivity, particularly for students unfamiliar with the primary learning management platform. Addressing these issues through flexible tools like WhatsApp and consistent instructor presence significantly improved student engagement and collaboration.

Importantly, the present case highlights the value of COIL as a sustainable and equitable alternative to traditional mobility. It expands access to international learning opportunities without requiring physical travel, thereby reducing financial, logistical, and environmental barriers. This aligns with the broader goals of Agenda 2030, particularly in promoting inclusive, quality education and global partnerships. Experiences from the

present project, involving partners from three continents, indicate that COIL can be successfully implemented worldwide.

Future research should further explore how COIL-based education can support a more coherent and integrated approach to sustainability within health education. It would also be valuable to assess its impact across a broader range of disciplines and educational levels. As higher education institutions continue to internationalise, COIL offers a flexible, scalable model that facilitates global engagement, fosters cultural awareness, and prepares students for work in diverse professional settings.

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Åsa Rejnö is a registered nurse and docent in nursing. Her nursing focus includes stroke and palliative care, and her research interests also include ethics in care and pedagogical issues related to nursing education. Additionally, she is interested in norms and equity in both care and education.

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Ethical considerations

This manuscript reports on a COIL project conducted at University West in Sweden, in collaboration with partner universities: the Institute of Science and Technology (SRM) in India and the University of Namibia (UNAM) in Namibia. Anonymous course evaluations were used to report students' experiences of participating in the course. Since the data was anonymous and contained no personal or sensitive information, no formal ethical approval was required. According to 'The Act concerning the ethical review of research involving humans. SFS 2003:460, Swedish Statue Book' 2003:460) §3 no review by the Regional Ethics Review Board was necessary for this type of non-interventional study that does not involve sensitive personal data. No ethical review was conducted, as the study falls outside the scope of the law. The research adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the*Declaration of Helsinki* (World Medical Association [WMA], 2024).

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author [ÅR]. The data are not publicly available due to restrictions e.g. their containing information that could potentially compromise the privacy of research participants.

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